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TRISTAN ON EARTH

My misfortune is this: an angel of death always walks at my side, and it is not the doors of the elect that I am to sprinkle with blood, as a sign that he is to pass them by—no, it is precisely their doors that he enters—for only the love that lives in memory is happy.

Kierkegaard, *Either / Or: A Fragment of Life*

'And then they forgot the prayer. They still recalled the woods, though. And then they forgot the woods. But the task was accomplished because they recalled there was something.'

Aleff, *Chasey Saves the World*

TRISTAN ON EARTH

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I suppose I have a name in the land of humans and it is in their land that I reside at present. I don't think I shall live here forever. In any event I am not likely to die here, for I am immortal—infinite in mathematical terms. The universe is theoretically infinite, but I am infinite in *practice*. And, unlike immortals who often voluntarily espouse the vicissitudes of human destiny, the infinite die neither in their own galaxy nor in the land of humans, in the vale of tears. Even tears cannot kill us, for all their destructiveness, and placidly we let them follow their routes along our cheeks. They leave no signs on our faces, let alone in our souls. Like humans, we have souls which, however, are not fettered by arms, shoulders, bellies, legs and other body parts.

I have come to earth in order to study and, most of all, *experience* whatever I lack on our planet and in my own substance. I am curious to such an extent that my curiosity must also be regarded as infinite. Whenever I try to find the end of my curiosity I see only a huge no-man's-land stretching as far as the nearest black hole. And there are hands in this no-man's-land of mine, a multitude of hands, an infinite number of arms that stick out of the earth and reach for various objects or ideas flying through the air. Such is my curiosity, my insatiable, boundless curiosity.

All my fellow creatures are curious to *some* extent, but they are not as high-spirited and adventurous as I am. They seldom undertake journeys to other planets in search of sensations and sentiments. Indeed many of them think there are enough sensations on *our* planet and scientists warn us against the surplus of nervous tension in our atmosphere. 'An overabundance of nervousness', to use their terminology. 'There's thunder in the air,' said one of them recently. 'I wouldn't be surprised if we had a storm.' I disagree with our scientists and I will not believe in their theory until my body bursts into flames ignited by the most prominent sentiment in the universe—the sentiment of human love.

This variety of love is not widely experienced and appreciated outside the earth and its sphere of influence. Of course the Martians did fall in love with each other as the first earth-born spaceship entered the atmosphere of their planet, carrying a few samples of human culture—Russian novels, among other artefacts. They particularly liked *Anna Karenina* and went so far as to re-build a few antediluvian trains in order to perish under their wheels and thereby offer *tangible* proof of their love to their neighbours. I have no idea whether this custom is still in fashion among the inhabitants of Mars who might love each other without

trains and rails, I suppose. Or is real love always mixed with trains and death? Or only with death? Is it death himself?

What if there are no more Martians in the universe? Have they all perished in the name of love, cut to pieces by the wheels of a few antediluvian trains? I never look at Mars any more for fear of learning the truth. I look at the moon instead, and the moon is dead like a human corpse—just another cosmic poem on the pain of unrequited love. What has the moon loved? The sun? The earth?

Why did I wish to become a human? Because only humans can experience the real sentiment of love, judging from their music, their literature, and my life would not be *complete* without this sentiment. Even eternity is often incomplete, strange as it might appear. Many of my friends have never heard about love. 'Why don't you read human books?' I used to ask them.

'They're badly written,' they answered.

'From *your* point of view,' I objected.

'Too many people die in their books,' our famous critic told me once. 'And death is imperfect, quite imperfect. I won't tolerate imperfection in my own or anyone else's work.'

'And love, the sentiment of love? Is it also imperfect?' I shouted. We never shout on our planet: our vocal cords are too flat. Was I already the embryo of a human being, at the time?

'Love would be perfect if one could love eternally,' answered the critic. 'But humans die too soon to experience the fullness of a perfect love. What they do feel amounts to no more than infatuation—a glimpse of love, so to speak. Observers glimpsed the shooting star as it shot through the sky,' he rounded off. Habitually our conversations end up in metaphors. We are used to this custom of ours to such a point that as soon as a metaphor is uttered in our presence we float away without so much as a by-your-leave. What is more, we consider it indecent to remain on the same spot in the wake of a metaphor.

So we parted without a word as if there had been no more words on the mountainous roads of our brains.

The inhabitants of our planet are acquainted with the sentiment of love, but they are only *acquainted* with it. I am afraid we have only a passing acquaintance with love—a nodding acquaintance, metaphorically speaking. (I will not finish my analysis of love at this point, for all my metaphors.) It is as if we were in the habit of nodding to a statue on our way home. The statue remains immobile, rooted to the spot in some park or other, and we partake of our evening meal in the company of our friends, in our dining rooms. That is how we know the sentiment of love which remains outside our houses, far away from our souls and eyes.

Our love is too harmonious, too perfect, and therefore dull. 'After forty years of marriage they still love each other just as much as they always did,'—a sentence I chanced upon in a human book. We love each other after a hundred years of marriage, after a thousand years of friendship, so that we are no longer aware of the nature of our relationship. Are we married? Did we ever get married? Are we just friends or relatives?

How did *I* learn about human love? No human spaceship has ever reached our atmosphere. In our galaxy we also have birds—bodiless birds, to be sure—but they do not resemble human spaceships. And they carry nothing in their omniscient eyes.

So I began to look *past* them, my eye-rays shooting through the stars and dust. We need neither telescopes nor microscopes because our eyes pierce everything—all mysteries, all distances. Eventually my eye-rays reached the earth and fell upon the following paragraph:

When a male octopus spots a female, his normally greyish body suddenly becomes striped. He swims above the female and begins caressing her with seven of his arms. If she allows this, he will quickly reach towards her and slip his eighth arm into her breathing tube. A series of sperm packets moves slowly through a groove in his arm, finally to slip into the mantle cavity of the female.

I closed my eyes, trying to cast a shadow over these words: they were already glowing in my memory. A dark forest swarming with glow-words. 'If she allows—' I did not notice this nuance, the importance of which can hardly be overestimated, considering what I was to endure in the course of my courtship ritual on earth. All earthly females have something in common.

I opened my eyes again and saw the following lines:

The fearful passage of their death-mark'd love
And the continuance of their parents' rage,
Which, but their children's end, nought could remove

I pored over these words for a while. I fixed them in my memory and pored over them until I closed my inner and outer eyes and sank into my armchair, utterly exhausted. I absorbed these words. Like a blotter, I absorbed the ink with which Shakespeare had noted down these words. Submissively my memory went blank, resembling now a blank page on which nothing

was written—on which nothing *could* be written. My memory seemed to *repel* words and images. My whole being had stopped for a rest from its exertions.

I did not fall asleep, however. I would rather compare the state I found myself in to a coma. Our restful hours differ in *temperament* from what humans experience during their sleep which is reputed to be boisterous, unruly, unreasonable. Our human brothers dream a lot and sometimes they are pestered by nightmares. How can one rest in the middle of a nightmare, I wonder? Our comas are peaceful and disciplined. Nightmares do not penetrate the atmosphere of our planet and even sweet dreams are refused access to our abodes. Some of our citizens deplore the impossibility of enjoying sweet dreams during our comas and holidays. 'How can we really enjoy ourselves without dreams and their prophecies?' they ask themselves and others. For some reason they think that sweet dreams are prophetic. 'Sweet dreams are full of hopes and fantastic creatures,' they repeat, glancing around. Why do they glance around? Do they hope that sweet dreams walk around our streets, on human legs, on beautiful female legs?

'What do you need hope for?' ask our sages, our elders and betters. Oddly enough, even within eternity some people are older than others. And better. 'Don't you have everything? And if you don't have everything, you are sure to get it in the course of eternity.'

'And what about fantastic creatures? Aren't they called fantastic because we cannot encounter them in reality, even in *eternal* reality?'

At this point our sages usually resort to metaphors.

(To be continued)

LIEBESTOD

Ce qui fait le succès de quantité d'ouvrages est le rapport qui se trouve entre la médiocrité des idées de l'auteur et la médiocrité des idées du public.

Chamfort, *Maximes*

This is a story of my failure. But who is interested in failures, especially in *my* failure? Nobody would be interested even in my successes, in my achievements. Nobody is the slightest bit interested in my existence, nobody looks up at my windows. Even if a beautiful woman began to undress in my room, near one of my windows, nobody would look at her. My windows are damned, probably. I don't know. I don't know what is damned and what is not. But I'll do my damndest to avoid eternal damnation for writing this novel. Why should I sound pessimistic, fatalistic or anything at all? I do sound off sometimes, I'm sorry to say. I speak sometimes, to myself, to my windows, to the trees silhouetted against the winter sky. And I write sometimes, I can't help it. Every morning I am horrified to see files of words converging on my bed. To get rid of them, I sit down before my computer and switch it on. In the long run I store all my words in the files, but there are alien words inside my computer. And some of them appear on the screen, calling to mind Socrates and his *daimonion*. 'It began in childhood and has been with me ever since, a kind of voice, which whenever I hear it always turns me back from something I was going to do, but never urges me to act.' My words, or rather my computer's words, do urge me to act and also give me a piece of advice, a piece of their minds. Xenophon attributes a positive as well as negative function to the *daimonion* and shows that the inner voice was simply the way in which one of the gods revealed his will to Socrates.

I should get rid of my computer. There are some pencils in my apartment, a lot of pencils. Should I throw them out of the window? I *could* do that as a matter of fact. The window of my bedroom is open most of the time because it is musty in here, musty and almost mossy. As if my room were thirsty, sipping something all day long, some putrid cocktail.

'Your room is an apposite image for the decaying humanity which is the subject matter of the novel.'

Perhaps only I can inhale such air without falling ill or dead, on the spot. Why should I talk about my failures and the mess I live in? Why don't I talk about my imaginary

achievements? Because my imagination is not powerful enough to imagine something of the kind, I'm afraid.

To write a best-seller. Actually I did imagine my personal achievement. One sleepless night. (A high-powered version of *Star Wars*. *Apocalypse Now*.) I was lying in bed, my eyes wide-open. At least I might have closed my eyes, but I was excited. I can still be excited despite my age and numerous failures. And disappointments. I hit upon a literary idea. I wish I had nipped it in the bud and crushed that bud on my parquet floor. Borges said that nobody could write a masterpiece on purpose. But he himself found an exception: the *Aeneid*. Somebody else maintained that none could predict the fate of a book. I disagree with this point of view because the fate of a book can be predicted with great accuracy. What is more, one can even write a best-seller (not a masterpiece) on purpose. And to little purpose. Not I, unfortunately. Not even for my fiftieth anniversary. I might have made an effort, though. Why didn't I make an effort? I probably feared that my prose would not sound effortless, in that case. Or I did not put enough trust in my spidergrams.

'Lacan's theory of the mirror phase. The child identifies with an image outside himself, be it a real mirror image or simply the image of another child. But you're no longer a child, are you? Why have you intruded upon your hero's sentimental journey? Do you wish to identify with him?'

A birthday present, a best-seller. Glory at last.

'If I have identified with a man of genius, I can easily surpass myself.'

I wished to end my literary career in a blaze of glory. What the blazes did I wish that for? I am not even capable of ending this story.

'The image is alienating. The body is in pieces.'

I am still very naïve and my naïveté is charming. I am so unspoilt and fresh despite my age, my bitterness and my disappointments.

'Bach Flower Remedies are available through some health food shops along with a free leaflet explaining what each is suitable for and what dosage to take. Here are a few examples: rock rose for alarm and panic; mimulus for fearfulness; white chestnut for obsessional thoughts or mental arguments. Rescue Remedy is a special formulation of five of the remedies and is useful in emergency-type situations.'

Talking about my disappointments, I am not satisfied with the age I live in, to put it mildly. Like my apartment, our age is messy and musty. And misty. But not thirsty, strangely enough—not thirsty for art, for its infinity and everlasting mystery. Like a computer screen, it

is flat, lacking both artistic and metaphysical perspectives. Our age might have retired into a Supercomputer of Vast Capacity, for all I know.

'In more recent years, a number of advances in fundamental physics, cosmology and computing theory began to rekindle a more widespread interest in some of the traditional metaphysical topics. The study of artificial intelligence reopened debate about free will and the mind-body problem. The discovery of the big bang triggered speculation about the need for a mechanism to bring the physical universe into being in the first place. Quantum mechanics exposed the subtle way in which observer and observed are interwoven. Chaos theory revealed that the relationship between permanence and change was far from simple. (Paul Davies, *The Mind of God*.)'

Science *has* progressed by leaps and bounds. What physicists write for laymen and laywomen is far superior to contemporary works of fiction. Why? Because novelists should *not* angle their works at lay people, at lazy children. Popular science books are widely read, but they remain outside their readers' lives—like invisible particles, like the time machine that might never come into existence. Their metaphysics are invisible, distant, and today human thoughts cannot travel faster than light.

Can they travel faster than sound? Can they outrun the joggers who criss-cross my woods every day? Oddly enough, our Supercapitalists of Vast Capacity do their best to promote communist ideas: mass culture, mass food, mass heart, mass brain. Of course there is a difference in quality between the washing powder they used for brains in the Soviet Union and—

'The washing liquid.'

'Absolute thought is antisocial, resistant to gregariousness, perhaps autistic,' as George Steiner puts it in his essay *The Archives of Eden*. And he showers praise on some Soviet writers, saying that to set against their outputs 'even the most powerful of modern American narrative or personal statement is to court a bewildering sense of disproportion'. I would have been bewildered had I read his essay in Moscow many years ago. A time machine might have been used to convey it from 1981 into the late sixties. I would have suspected Steiner of being a communist.

'Perhaps literature will forever give far deeper insight into the full human person than any model of scientific inquiry can hope to do,' says Chomsky. But to outstrip science contemporary writers must delve more deeply into the past than archaeologists. And their characters must undergo surgery on their brains and hearts in every sentence. Let them make love on operating tables, for love is a heart transplant. Let their wine taste like blood and

blood like wine. Science will never succeed in achieving *that*. In contemporary novels and soap operas even Dom Pérignon tastes more like Coke or Fanta because American multi-millionaires are accustomed to keeping their champagne in fridges and not in wine cellars.

I suffocate whenever I get in touch with our age so I have decided not to touch it any more. And the age reciprocates, as it were. This age of ours does not touch me any more, nor does it look at me. All right, leave me alone, leave me behind—at the beginning of the twentieth century. Or in the nineteenth century, I don't mind. Anyway you need not do anything. I am *already* alone. So you need not walk out and slam the door behind you, my dear age. Stay where you are, outside, outdoors. And don't come near me. Never.

'Why don't you settle down in the eighteenth century instead? In those times the French knew nothing of the judicious and self-regulated sensualism that Alexis de Tocqueville (1805-1859) saw around him. The upper classes paid more attention to the beauty of life than to creature comforts. They yearned for glory rather than riches.'

'All epochs are decadent,' as Okakura Kakuzo puts it. So why enlarge upon degeneration and the decay of humanity? Why speak about the unpleasantly sweet smell of decaying brains? Why? Because there are limits even to degeneration. In the *Odyssey*, Homer says that children are mostly inferior to their parents. How many (de)generations have come into being and passed away since these words were written? Should I count? What for? Time is a degenerative disease, but I'll never be able to prove anything to the people who believe in progress and their own excellence. And they are legion. They might voice a few doubts about the ecological state of our planet. On the whole, however, they are satisfied, quite satisfied. They are happy and their happiness radiates from television screens. And from computer screens. And you can't switch off their happiness, self-confidence and self-congratulation. Even my computer radiates them despite all the gloom and doom I feed into it. 'The prophets of doom were proved wrong again,' appears on the screen.

Well, I have switched them off at long last. No more proofs, no more small talk, no more big talk. No more big boys, no more big ideas.

'Living in groups benefits primates because it provides extra defences against predators. It is harder for a predator to catch an animal in a group than an isolated animal: groups have more eyes to detect predators. Besides, other group members can come to the aid of one who is being attacked.'

Only my computer is still on, buzzing with my thoughts and prophecies. Let me talk to my computer. Let the computer touch me now and then, as long as I live. My fiftieth birthday. Some people begin to celebrate their jubilees a year in advance and they go on celebrating

them for three years at least. I'll celebrate my birthday in the woods. Hopefully there will be fewer joggers around on that day, fewer joggers than usual. The best birthday present my contemporaries can offer me.

'The conversational, somewhat regretful, tone of these pages works tolerably well. It's endearing, somehow, though a little vainglorious at the edges.'

The other day I saw a film on Yves Saint-Laurent. He told a journalist he seldom left his house now. He said our epoch was awful. (Not only losers blame our epoch.) So he does not go out any more. Well, very seldom. And all this fuss they make about top models—awful, awful. Top models, bottom models. Actually some of them are rather ugly. How have they become famous? Who is in charge of their destinies? Not God, surely not the Almighty. He must have better taste when it comes to feminine beauty. Man proposes and man disposes nowadays. And all these people who envy them and read about them in magazines. Their lives are discussed everywhere, their lives and their rivals. They are more important than writers who, once forced underground, cannot dig themselves back to the surface with their pens. No, those writers are *above* ground, although some of them, by contributing to general tawdriness day and night, may occasionally write themselves *into* the ground. Their computers stand *on* their writing desks, on *top* of the world. Why should they try to get to the bottom of anything?

And those prophecies about the death of novel. The prophets of doom shall be proved wrong again! What are their arguments? They deplore the paucity of leisure, of privacy—of middle-class comfort which, in their opinion, is a vital link between novels and the reader, an essential ingredient in their marriage. A marriage made in Heaven *and* in Hell. But today neither writers nor readers deserve an abode in Dante's *Paradiso*. Even his *Inferno* would not provide eternal housing for them. An un-Blakean marriage, an un-Dantean marriage.

It is not true that no one reads novels any longer. Bad novels are published and devoured voraciously by all and sundry. (Except myself, except myself, except myself.) They are read in trains and buses, in pubs and cafés. And likewise in a quiet room with a view.

Some writers defend the novel as a form. 'After a long chapter you should write a short one to vary the rhythm,' says one of the defenders. To hold the reader's attention, presumably. The reader's attention has become so small over the last twenty years that it slips through your fingers whenever you try to hold it. So it is better not to hold it at all.

Did Proust think in these terms? A long chapter, a short chapter.

'After the novel, what then?' asks Steiner. 'There is a small group of experimental works from which the poetics of tomorrow may emerge. These are the most exciting, least

understood of modern books; in them, the classic divisions between poetry, drama, prose fiction and philosophic argument are deliberately broken down. These works admit of no single definition; they declare their own forms of being...In short: wherever literary structure strives towards new potentialities, wherever the old categories are challenged by genuine compulsion, the writer will reach out to one of the other principal grammars of human perception—art, music, or more recently, mathematics.'

I object to the term 'experimental' as applied to a piece of writing that admits of no single definition and declares its own form of being. The *Divina Commedia* is *not* an experimental work. Generally speaking, I detect a good deal of naiveté in Steiner's romantic assertions. No aboveground writer is striving towards new potentialities which are challenged by the all-powerful instinct for self-preservation. (And literary structures do not exist on their own, in the abstract.) So contemporary novelists fall back on *old* potentialities, turning a distinguished tragedy into a farce, reducing the reader to infantile dependence.

Extraterrestrial foes or friends. A nice ET, a lovable ET with whom every child would be happy to play and talk.

'The concept you choose, that of an alien to whom love is alien, is an old favourite—think of Spock in *Star Trek*. It is the occasion for humour and philosophy as well. "*Le divertissement nous amuse et nous fait arriver insensiblement à la mort.*" Have you already made arrangements for his journey to earth? You need a fictional device that would enable your protagonist to travel faster than light. Many writers use the gimmick of a short cut through hyperspace to get round this problem. Stephen Hawking said in an interview: "I read a lot of science fiction when I was a teenager. But now that I work in the field myself, I find most science fiction a bit facile. It is so easy to write about hyperspace drive or beaming people up, if you don't have to make it part of a consistent picture. So you have to make it part of a consistent picture. '"

Am I influenced by our epoch? How to get away from it? Whatever I do is a reaction against it. So I touch it every day, every minute—in order to push it away. Still, I touch it. A best-seller. What an idea! I'll never write a best-seller because I cannot hold myself back. Or rather *down*. And who is interested in my distant planets, in my black holes, in my white holes, in my wormholes? In my wordholes?

Last week I read an article in *The Herald Tribune*, an article entitled *Down the Ages, a Look at Aging*.

Personality does not change with age but instead remains remarkably stable through the years. According to research published over the last 15 years, seniors who are depressed or cranky or disengaged usually were much the same as young adults. James Fozard, director of the study, said, 'If you want to know what you're going to be like in retirement, know yourself now.'

'An old idea, as old as the human brain. Unchangeable, isn't it? Schopenhauer touched upon the subject in *Die Welt als Wille und Vorstellung*. And in Christianity we find the dogma of predestination. Instead let us honour difference, chaos and the ongoing process of change as the only liberation and distraction. Why not reject the idea of the psyche being naturally whole, unified or coherent? Let us propose an approach in which "pure difference" reigns and cannot be reduced to underlying foundations or essences. After all, the self is a flux of desires and "intensities" which both shoot out in many directions and absorb many influences.'

I know myself. I have known myself for many years. There is no hope of modification, mutation. (A couple of modifications and your life will be perfect.) I cannot even become an insect, like Kafka's famous hero. Another extraterrestrial friend? Why didn't they play with him? Why didn't he metamorphose into a stone?

So what shall I be like in retirement? Presumably I'll no longer write. What is the normal retirement age in this room, I wonder? One cannot write eternally. Even immortals stop writing at some point or other, weary as they are of their words. The leopard cannot change its spots, humans cannot change their words. I use the same words from one novel to another and there are no other words in my dictionaries. These dictionaries are mine. Over the years they have grown used to my style, to my death. But they know I have not died yet, so they continue to present me with the same words. The only presents humanity can offer me.

My words. They must also have the fear of death. Why don't I commit suicide? A piquant item of news on television: 'The week of suicide prevention,' if you please! Some suicidal maniac has come up with the brilliant idea of talking his fellow citizens (and himself) out of self-slaughter.

Ladies and Gentlemen! Your presence in this hall testifies to your desire to get rid of the suicidal urge that might have plagued you for years and years. There are only five suicidal maniacs in front of me, which doesn't mean that no other people in this wretched city of ours are tormented by Hamlet's immortal question: 'To be or not to be.' That is the question, isn't it? Perhaps the only question we are confronted with

throughout our life, our human life. Stones and other inanimate objects don't ask themselves such questions, do they? In this respect it is much better to be a stone, an ordinary stone, a tiny pebble in someone's shoe. Gregor Samsa at the peak of his career! I wish all the inhabitants of our city could metamorphose into stones. And the rest of humanity. Stones or trees. A wood instead of our city—wouldn't that be marvellous? A wood or a desert. Or just a cemetery, a number of dead men and women. The dead are also inanimate objects. They're not tempted by suicide, are they?

'Why make life—or rather death—difficult for yourself? If you have suicidal thoughts, go and see a psychoanalyst to explain how you are feeling. The Samaritans (UK) or Befrienders (international) can also help you. Or get in touch with our service, SOS Suicide. Our number is 0888888888. The call is free of charge.'

Do they intend to play records of classical music during their 'week of suicide prevention'? What kind of music should one listen to in the depths of despair, at the height of hysterics? Not *Tristan und Isolde*, surely not. To one of his friends Wittgenstein admitted having been several times on the point of committing suicide. Three times, to be exact. And one should be exact in these matters. In matters of life and death it often helps to have a mathematical mind. And he changed his mind—his logical and poetical mind—after listening to the third movement of Brahms' *Piano Quartet*, op.60. Three times. Would the *Quartet* have done the trick a fourth time?

You have made up your mind, turning Hamlet's immortal question into an answer. But you are still in two minds about it, and one mind seems to question your answer, the sagacity and foresight of that other mind of yours which is bent on committing suicide. You hesitate like a man who stops on the threshold, peering into the room he is about to enter. What is there in the room? Nothing, nobody. Not even your dead relatives, let alone God. And in the room you are about to leave there are Isoldas, Shakespeare and music. You return to *your* room and put on your favourite recording. Now you are in *one* mind about it. And there is only one room in the universe—*your* room. After a while you come to grips with the same question. In other words you can't keep a grip on yourself. Again you turn Hamlet's immortal question into a mortal answer. This time you are in one mind about it. But your mind is composed of cells which multiply by division. And as long as you are alive they continue to multiply, carried on by their momentum. And some of those newborn cells are not used to your arguments against earthly existence. They aspire to live and beget children, lots of children. These young cells attack your old cells and you walk over to your CD player that

seems to await you in the penumbra of your room. Should you listen to the same piece of music again? You know that it can only provide a temporary solution to your life-long crisis, to your death-short temptation. Do you really like being permanently on the brink of death? Standing on the threshold of the Hereafter, peering into the distance? There are people who spend their lives on the threshold of *that* room. (*That* room—a Dostoevskian touch.) 'Why don't you come in?' they hear now and then. 'Just a second, I'm sorry. My shoelaces are undone.' And they bend down, pretending to do up their laces.

What should I listen to in emergencies? Why don't I commit suicide right now? My record player is in the living room, at the end of a long corridor. And I have enough suicidal implements in this room of mine and in the bathroom—close at hand. Why don't I take advantage of my unalloyed suicidal urge? Probably because I have the fear of death. And I trust this fear.

What shall I do in that future without writing? Can one just *live*? Can I live without words? What shall I live with in that wordless, worthless future? Images. No, that is not enough. Sounds perhaps, music. Will that be enough? Let us wait and see.

My personality remains remarkably stable as if I were immortal. Even my cat was not immortal, for the cat that frolics and romps under my window is different, fundamentally different. On the verge of death *my* cat left the house and went to the woods. I lived in a house at the time. I let him go. Likewise no one will prevent me from going to the woods, I am sure of that. I am lucky after all.

Yes, I still don't like apricots. Shall I make a list of my likes and dislikes, in the manner of Sei Shônagon? I saw *The Pillow Book* by Peter Greenaway and disliked it intensely. What encouraged me, however, was the fact that he had found enough money for his venture, for his adventure. I ought not to have used the verb 'to encourage'. It is not *my* word but let it stand. 'Money' is not my word either. I don't like people in whose brains I see only heaps, mostly their tops, and no undulating hills.

'I have warned you there must be no interference or sermonising, haven't I?' The computer gave three beeps. 'Your aim is to create beauty and not a didactic treatise. God is present everywhere and visible nowhere. Use value, exchange value, symbolic exchange, profits, the abstract code of consumption—Marx and Baudrillard have already enlightened us on the subject, on consumer objects. Why speak about money in a science-fiction novel?'

A month ago I saw a Swiss beauty contest on television. One of the candidates was asked which man she would have opted for: a handsome young man, a multi-millionaire or an intelligent man. And she answered, 'The intelligent man.' There are women who prefer

intelligence to beauty and riches. Or did she say so for the sake of the jury? In the United States and Russia she would have been eliminated, I suppose.

Many artists and thinkers compare our times to the Middle Ages. We *are* living in a Dark Age, but I would not draw this parallel for the simple reason that the Middle Ages were founded upon religion and its rituals. Our civilisation is founded upon money. And its rituals. The practice of ritual murder. And all those people who disport themselves in *Dynasty* and other American soap operas do not have the slightest inkling that they are being murdered. 'I feel rejuvenated by my fortnight in the Bahamas,' exclaims a middle-aged lady. Not a dark lady.

Money is also responsible for weakening people's moral fibre. The house where Hitler lived and thought out the 'final solution' is amongst Germany's major tourist attractions. A place of hysterical interest. And forging his diary might have proved to be very lucrative for both the forger and the buyers had they managed to bring off the most despicable fraud in history. 'We should entertain our readers,' said one of the buyers. 'My stomach is rumbling. I think that the Jews are vermin and that concentration camps are too good for them,' wrote Hitler. Keeping readers entertained. If it is a genuine Michelangelo drawing, it will sell for millions. If it is a genuine Hitler notebook, it will sell for millions. Democracy is the belief in equality between people. And between commodities.

'This novel is just another story about the battle between good and evil.'

Often money acts as a catalyst for human sentiments. Why? Because people cannot stop, whenever money is concerned. A man might take a vow not to smoke more than one packet of cigarettes per day and he might respect the speed limit on a road. But the same man would impose no limit on his bank account—no speed limit, no time limit. Metaphorically speaking, in the realm of money he smokes forty packets of cigarettes within the space of 2 hours. When making money he zooms along the streets in a space rocket. And a space rocket ought to be used for space travel.

Spinoza said we should acquire only as much money and other things as are needful to sustain life and health. Virginia Woolf did not understand people who are unable to content themselves with a *certain* amount of money. Why earn more money than you need? All you have to do is find out how much you need for the lifespan allotted to you. *Un train de vie*. A train of life. Why turn a train of life into a rocket of death? Why not take a slow train that allows one to enjoy hills and dales, woods and brooks? At leisure. Why not choose the most beautiful woods on earth for one's death, for one's eternity? '*Son train de vie de grand*

seigneur.' This sentence does not refer to those who zoom along the streets in their space rockets.

At this point the computer quoted Seneca: 'What difference does it make how much there is laid away in a man's safe or in his barns or how much capital he puts out at interest, if he is always after what is another's and only counts what he has yet to get, never what he has already?'

Anyway no one can buy the *Mona Lisa*. Or the past. No amount of money can raise from the dead one's parents, one's mistresses. No amount of money can buy something that happened 'once upon a time'. But money can buy time. That is what I do, actually—buying time. What for? To have an opportunity to fail once again. 'To *fall*. To fall between two stools, or rather between two stories.' Money is time, not the other way round.

They talked about Antonioni the other night, on television. One of the last men on earth. 'He can't find money for his projects because there are no plots in his films. And almost no words. Children like words and action.' His films are time-packed. And his wordholes are black.

'How will your ET survive the journey through space? Outer space is hardly a comfortable environment for life. In addition to the hard vacuum and low temperatures there is the radiation which includes ultra-violet from the sun, high-speed protons from solar flares and cosmic rays.'

The measure of space. The measure of time. The measure of life. Tolstoy is often laughed at because he thought people should make their own shoes. He thought humanity could be saved by this simple device. He was right probably. We have not tried, have we? If every inhabitant of our planet tried to make his or her own shoes, once in a while, life might be different. We might know the measure of life. (A measuring shoe.) It is like drinking water, I suppose. One cannot drink forty bottles of wine every day. Water purifies our bodies, shoe-making might purify our lives. And our souls.

The measure of life. Some rudimentary rituals performed on a regular basis. Going through an initiation rite, walking in the woods. Not just for the sake of our health but to measure something. What? To measure our part in nature, realising that we are plants—in part. And birds, and insects. A walk in the woods destroys the abstraction of bank accounts and some abstract paintings as well. In nature we encounter other numbers.

If I could write the beauty of your eyes,
And in fresh numbers number all your graces

The same goes for shoe-making or pottery. Why not measure our lives in accordance with these numbers?

'Bacteria, with their legendary survival capabilities, show remarkable resilience to space conditions. Scientists from the German Institute for Aerospace Medicine used NASA's Long Duration Exposure Facility to see what happened to spores of *Bacillus subtilis*—'

My likes and dislikes. I don't like people for whom literature is not sacred. They tolerate nice novels and think that any intelligent person can write *something*. A novel, for instance. They often confuse intelligence with literature. They often confuse stupidity with literature.

Mystery. Every true work of art is mysterious. Not just a nice tale but a mystery which will never be probed to its bottom and top. An orchestral pit, a choral top. A choral symphony. Hell, Purgatory, Paradise.

'Are you providing us with a romantic report on Umberto Eco's ideas? The open work, the closed work. One more attempt to demarcate high from low culture? Open is identified with modern—'

'Mysterious means closed. Opening doors. You'll never open all of them. The half-open work. *L'œuvre entrouverte*. The open reader. The wide-open reader.'

A la recherche du temps perdu is a wonderful enigma. So is Musil's masterpiece. As mysterious as life itself. Proust and Musil did not write works of art. Is the earth a work of art? Even a river is not a work of art, either in reality or in a Hölderlin poem. It is life, another life. The same life.

'You seem to defend non-mainstream literature. Is *your* literature as progressive as you suppose if no one bothers to read it? Should everyone read *your* novel? If yes, what gives you the right to bully your fellow creatures? Aren't you acquainted with our slogan? Don't let anyone bully you into doing something you don't want to do.'

Music is everywhere like the God of Spinoza. Even my room, for all the mess I cannot master, is a piece of music. So you can create your works without taking into consideration either the twelve-tone system or even Beethoven. You must *know* them of course, but your style may not reflect them in any way because my room is not the Buckingham Palace. But a writer who neglects Musil and Proust is bound to extinguish a part of our brain. Literature is confined to one room only—to one cosmic brain—and whatever happens in it cannot be disregarded by its occupants. A rudimentary thriller inspired by a momentous theme is tantamount to a covered wagon pulled by horses along a motorway. (The first white settlers

journeyed through American in those vehicles.) Have you ever heard about motorcars? A momentous theme, their only bid for eminence.

I don't like people for whom life is a game of chess. Some of their fellow creatures are pawns, others kings. They destroy the former and fawn upon the latter. And the pawns are supposed to 'pawn' upon them. Such a person plays his game throughout his life. A master of stratagem, he removes obstacles and builds castles on his own estate, not in the air. Oh, he builds nothing in the air because the air is not solid enough for him (or her). He thinks the air is unreliable. He thinks it is dangerous and pointless to invest money in airy castles. And poets stroll down the catwalk with an airy step.

I don't like people who are always right. In fact they are always wrong. They have no doubts whatsoever, even when facing a mystery. And they can explain all mysteries in a few words. And they can send them to their wives, gift-wrapped. They think that democracy is the answer to everything, democracy and a strong economy. A nice answer to angst.

'Human minds often suffer cognitive closure. In other words there are mysteries that human will never solve, however doggedly and pigheadedly they might probe into them. The problem of free will is one such mystery, according to Chomsky. *Partout l'homme subit la terreur du mystère*—'

I like poets in every field. The wife of a wonderful Russian poet, Sasha Sokolov, complained one day that we saw each other too seldom. 'Oh, our talks are a great luxury,' he answered. 'We can't afford to meet every week.' The earth inhabited by poets only. A great luxury? I lost sight of Sasha Sokolov after that meeting.

Polish poets. The best poets of our times. In spite of censorship, in spite of everything. Or *because* of the tension created in Poland by the Second World War and the communist regime. Or thanks to their lucky or unlucky stars. *Unstern*. They enjoyed real freedom of speech in their country and every speech worthy of its name is a poem.

The computer gave two beeps and said in its husky, sexy voice, 'Freedom of speech and freedom of thought were both denied in the Eastern bloc.'

'The stimulus of blows, the stimulus of pressures, the stimulus of penalisations. The greater the challenge, the greater the stimulus,' as Arnold J. Toynbee put it. Enough is enough. During the reign of Stalin there were too many blows and penal colonies. But in the sixties the state of affairs and arts in the Eastern bloc roughly corresponded to the Toynbeean golden mean: 'The most stimulating challenge is to be found in a mean between a deficiency of severity and an excess of it.'

Lucky stars. Where are they? They may be hidden *behind* the sky, for all I know. Or perhaps we tread upon them without noticing their glimmer. Do we crush them to death day and night?

Some people think they do not need lucky stars because they live in a powerful, democratic country. They have got plenty of lucky stars in their attaché cases and pockets, in their offices. What is more, they regularly hand them out to their less fortunate brothers and sisters, saying that the deal does not have any strings attached to it. They seem content to pull the strings behind the scenes.

'Behind the screens.'

Lucky stars are no mystery to them and there are no such things as *unlucky* stars in their democracy. Life is no mystery to them either—just a collection of stars. 'All my hopes have come true and I'm sure that all my present hopes will come true as well. In the near future.' And they even speak about their next incarnations. They already know what they will become in their future lives, along the vista of centuries and cityscapes. Freedom of action, freedom of karma. They will be even happier than they are now. Just a *crescendo* of voices saying 'I'm fine'.

They have mapped out their present lives. Well and good. Why can't they leave the choice of their future identities to God? I wish they could become their own gravestones. One thing is certain—they will never rise to the rank of a Polish poet.

They think that great artists are produced just by the absence of censorship. (The inscription on a book jacket: 'Made in a democratic, technologically-advanced country.') But they forget that in their country there reigns another type of censorship—commercial censorship that no one can circumvent or placate.

'Are you a communist?'

'Communism or capitalism. Don't we have another ism at our disposal? Artistism, for instance?'

'You're a magnificent atavism.'

'Another world, another time and place, shall be my home forever,' says Iphigenia on the verge of death. Well, I would like to live in another world, in another time—in Tauris, so to speak. I cannot believe that only death will rid us of both the Gulag and the tyranny of money. In the Soviet Union artists were respected. Bad artists mostly, I grant you that. The Soviet regime favoured and rewarded yes-writers, yes-painters and yes-composers. But bad art is nearer to good art than money which belongs to another species altogether. Suppose an alien turns up in our human world. Compared with that alien, our goodies and badies would

look like twin brothers. Besides, not everything is done and controlled by totalitarian governments. There were by-poets, by-painters and by-composers in our midst—the by-products of our schools and conservatoires.'

'By-poets, by-painters?' A huge question mark appeared on the computer screen. 'Buttermilk is a by-product of making butter. What is a by-painter?'

'By-painter is a by-product of making painters. But you produce neither butter nor art if you give no thoughts to them.'

'Butter tends to raise the cholesterol level in the blood.'

'We seem to be on an art-free diet.'

'They used to make artists in the Soviet Union because art was needed to extol the Communist Party and the exploits of working class.'

'Art was *important*—that's what counts. The importance of being a poet. After all, Virgil devoted a greater part of the *Aeneid* to glorifying Augustus. In some free countries poets are regarded as losers, as undermen and underwomen—a modern counterpart of Hitlerian *Untermenschen*. Our poets were supermen and superwomen.'

'The ban on all unofficial art drove them underground.'

'Flying from point A to point Z was their favourite pastime—the only affinity they had with the Hollywood-glorified supermen and superwomen. Actually the latter fly only from point A to point B. Soviet citizens worshipped the West and whatever came from it: clothes, shoes and even the paper in which imported goods were wrapped. Their paper was shiny and glossy, ours rough and thick—very similar to that used for organic food nowadays. And our food *was* organic because our chemical industry was *not* sophisticated enough to supply our collective farms with artificial fertilisers. Thereby hangs a tale. Recently a friend of mine moved from the outskirts of Hamburg to Berlin. Last week I met him in Andorra. He looked and sounded so happy I felt obliged to express my admiration for Berlin theatres. I'm living near the former East Berlin, not far from *their* market, he cut in, his face glowing with health and excitement. *Their* fruit and vegetables—'

'The civilisation of East Germany by its Western brother might take years to complete.'

'All Westerners used to laugh at our five-year plans. And now Stewart Brand writes in *The Clock of the Long Now*, "Any organisation confidently thinking twenty years ahead is compelled to grapple with long-term needs, such as an educated workforce and a sustainable regional economy. Rigorous long-view thinking makes responsible action inevitable because it responds to the slower, deeper feedback loops of the whole society and the natural world."'

'Japanese scientists sealed up *Bacillus subtilis* spores and other organisms in a vacuum chamber, cooled them to -196°C and bombarded them with robust, athletic protons from a Van de Graaff generator for 24 hours.'

'Is that how *you* interrupt a tedious discussion? A piece of irrelevant information instead of a metaphor?'

'The piece of information I furnished you with is *not* irrelevant. You still have no idea how to protect your ET from the pitfalls of outer space. Don't forget that you're writing a science-fiction novel, not a volume of memoirs.'

Talking about novels, another friend of mine, T. Tolstoy, said she could not bear dialogues and the description of movements: 'Paul sat down, Helen rose to her feet, and so on.' I have nothing against dialogues and even the suspension points that Nabokov hated so much do not put me off. And I think a writer has every right to include an essay in his novel. Once an old French scholar told me I should write either novels or essays, but not both—not within the bounds of the same work. Reluctant to contradict him, I said nothing at the time: I was too young to contradict an old, venerable scholar. That did not prevent me, however, from including a few essays in my novel *Anti-Darwin*. Now I am old enough to contradict anybody. He died at the age of 76, a long time ago. He is still 76, though—in the Hereafter. The dead do not grow older and our teachers might become our pupils in the Hereafter, provided we live long enough to outlive them.

Anything can be inserted into a novel which is a protean literary form. Only in a novel can one voluptuously 'mix genres', to use Derrida's expression. I disagree with Joseph Brodsky who sets poetry above prose—above novels, in particular. Poems are planets, novels galaxies. You can put a poem in a novel but not the other way round. And you may contradict yourself so often in a novel.

My last novel. I will not go on. 9 novels, a fateful number. Beethoven wrote 9 symphonies, so did Bruckner and Mahler. 9 novels. $8\frac{1}{2}$, to be exact: I am using some material from my previous novel.

My hero is full of high-flown, extraterrestrial ideas about how to save the human world.

'No idea, however high-flown, astounding and fast, can abolish outer space. Only inner space is dependent on thoughts and moods. And your ET traversed the distance between his planet and the earth—an immense expanse of space. How did he do it? Did he use a wormhole or a cosmic string? And how did he succeed in surviving out there? You complain about the joggers who interfere with your solitary walks in the woods. Can you imagine how many busybodies pester interstellar travellers during *their* outings? And don't forget the

effects of ultra-violet exposure—the most damaging of all the forms of radiation in space. Peter Weber and Mayo Greenberg of the University of Leiden cooled spores in a vacuum chamber to -263°C and shone an intense ultra-violet beam on them—'

If I don't blow my own trumpet no one else will, I suppose. That is not important. Anyway I cannot 'play upon this pipe'. What counts, however, is the discreet homage one might pay to oneself, to one's own past. To Samuel Beckett. And to Shostakovich, to his *Fifteenth Symphony*, to his *Sonata for Viola and Piano*.

I devoted a large part of my third novel, *Hall of Mirrors*, to Wagner and his music. And at the age of twenty-five I wrote a radio play entitled *Tristan and Isolde*. And of course I used a few passages from Wagner's opera in my juvenile play. This music also resounds in the present novel, all throughout the novel. Even now it is being played. Even at the beginning of the novel it could be heard, in the background. The story of my failure. *Der Ring des Nibelungen* is also the story of a failure. So is *Tristan und Isolde*.

Nothing doing. A failure is not a number of mistakes, glaring or otherwise. I would already have corrected any number of mistakes had I been able to do so without destroying the whole thing.

'It's not too late to destroy it.'

'Should I burn my dead souls, my living bodies?'

'Much easier to erase them.'

A failure to destroy a failure. Going round in circles. So what? After all, Wagner did not burn the manuscript of the *Ring* in Brünnhilde's ultimate bonfire.

Going in circles. As if walking along the Boulevard Ring in Moscow. Walking and walking and walking. Why waste my time on the geometry of my failures? Let them stand and speak for themselves. How long-winded my failures are, how talkative! Nobody can outshout them. Even Wagner's music cannot drown them out. They are still audible despite these Bayreuth trumpets. Talking through their hats. They are already blue in the face, but they continue to talk. They are already red in the face, white in the face, black in the face. They have already talked themselves hoarse. They have already talked themselves dead. But they continue to talk for hours on end. 'Is it a talk show?' I shout.

'At least don't leave your ET alone in outer space. And on earth. He needs protection and loving care.'

My failures do not sleep. How could they sleep with all that on their minds? 'We're all tired and none of us thinks straight, so why don't we go home and sleep on it, eh?' I say to my failures now and then. Submissively they fall asleep, weary of themselves, of my

wretchedness, of my wordiness. And they talk in their sleep about my wretchedness and wordiness. Luckily enough, they are not immortal. They are already dead, my stillborn children. The point is the dead talk for months on end. 'A dead-end pastime.' My stillborn children. I cannot stop them from talking day and night.

'And now that you have distracted the reader, get back to the plot. These extraneous and inconsequential vignettes of your inner life—'

TRISTAN ON EARTH

2

Once again the earthly words appeared on the screen of my memory and I pored over them for hours and hours. The continuance of their parents' rage, their children's end. Gradually I realised that those children had died, removing their parents' rage from the stage. (I knew I was reading a play, a dramatic work. The inhabitants of our planet are very fond of theatre.) Death, death. When did I first hear about this phenomenon? In my childhood no doubt. We say, for example: 'The death of a memory.'

Once upon a time, my father told me: 'In other galaxies people are liable to disappear.'

'Like memories?' I asked him.

'Precisely.'

'Are they just memories?'

'Not quite.' My father lapsed into an uneasy silence, his face disfigured by frowns of all sorts. 'There's a theory—' he began hesitatingly. 'We might all turn out to be memories, nothing by memories,' he said at last.

'Who? The inhabitants of our galaxy?' I was astonished.

'Yes.'

'Whose memories?' I was burning with curiosity. And I might have burnt to cinders had my father skirted round my question.

'The memories of God. And God has a very good memory, you know. That's why we are immortal. No *physical* substance can escape decay and death. Only memories are eternal, the memories of God.'

'And what if God had a lapse of memory?'

'God has a very good memory for faces.' My father blinked his eyes several times.

'And what if God had a lapse of memory?' I insisted. 'What if God went into a deep coma?'

My father uttered a metaphor and we floated apart, dissatisfied with each other. Once more I shifted my gaze towards the earth.

I continued to read *Romeo and Juliet*, Shakespeare's immortal, infinite play. (Shakespeare's plays *are* the memories of God.) And, to be honest, I understood nothing at all. Only words did I understand at the time, thanks to the in-built multilingual dictionary which is located in my left eyebrow. Why did they quarrel so much? On our planet we can only be *dissatisfied* with each other. 'If you're dissatisfied with the service, why don't you complain to

the hotel manager?' a receptionist might tell us. So we complain to the hotel manager and thus improve the service, but we have no urge to *kill* the hotel manager. And we would not have attempted to kill him had he been mortal like humans—even if he had been a human, come to think of it. Humans are often irritating and disgusting, as well I know at present.

In Shakespeare's plays people get killed for nothing and they do not complain about anything. They just quarrel and kill each other. In the last act the stage is habitually piled up with corpses and only servants roam around, uneasy and unemployed. And amidst all those quarrels and murders there blooms a human sentiment of love—the human variety of the universal sentiment of love.

I was dissatisfied with my father many times and vice versa. We did not kill each other, nor did we fall in love with each other. I love my father as a matter of course, so to speak—not only because he is my father. First and foremost he is a representative of our species and we love even those hotel managers whose services do not live up to our expectations. But we never *fall* in love with each other. What we feel towards our fellow creatures is a kind of in-built love. Where is it located? I have no idea. We have no hearts, unlike earthlings and Martians. We have ideas, a lot of ideas.

'Up to now I'd been led to believe he was a Martian. Why not give him a local habitation and a name? Perhaps a purely fictitious name, like Xanatian?'

We might have been introduced to each other before the big bang, in the midst of nowhere. Did we have names in those times? Our memory is not infinite enough to reach beyond the big bang and the big crunch. Be that as it may, now we need no names because none of us ever speaks about other people behind their faces.

How do we act when dissatisfied with each other? We either air our grievances in the presence of an unsatisfactory person or merely float away, having uttered an ironical, nasty metaphor.

'How about giving a nice example of a nasty metaphor?'

But we harbour no thoughts of revenge because a nasty metaphor is quite sufficient for our purpose. So, as might have been expected, I had a lot of problems as I probed into the meaning of the play that hung overhead—a dot on the surface of your distant planet. Instead of 'overhead' I ought to have written 'overface', but I am no stickler for details and mots justes. Anyway love is more important than linguistic niceties.

What I understood and even visualised at the very outset of my task, however, was the shape with which God had endowed human beings. I realised that humans had bodies and a liquid which might occasionally flow out of their wounds. But what struck me most was love

of course. Love, love, love. We do not *fall* in love, as I have mentioned several times already. Why can't we fall in love? Because we cannot fall, I suppose. We float above the surface of our planet, increasing or diminishing gravitational attraction at will. All our movements are smooth so I did not *jerk* my face upward as I lifted my eyes to look at the earth. I just *lifted* my eyes very smoothly. 'The shock of losing his job jerked him out of his settled lifestyle,' I read in one of the human novels. On our planet we do not even experience *psychological* jerks. Nothing can jerk us out of our settled (or floating) lifestyle. Our jobs are just a pleasant pastime and we abandon them ourselves, when bored or in the grip of melancholia—a smooth sentiment devoid of jerks and jolts. And we take up other jobs or merely float away without bothering about metaphors. Generally speaking, we do not pass brusquely from one state of mind to another. Our states of mind often merge into a homogeneous mass of well-being and that mass never leaps or falls. It remains in the air, immobile and radiant.

Suppose one of my friends were invited to a ball. He would not think about that ball. He would have neither misgivings nor hopes. And he would have no dreams on the eve of the ball, in his bed or elsewhere. (We repose in beds, strange as it may appear.) No prophetic dreams. What *would* he have got? A homogeneous mass of well-being in his mouth, like candy-floss. And what would he do upon glimpsing Juliet in the crowd of guests? He might float towards her and hang for a while in close proximity to her mouth without kissing her. He might talk to her in a friendly fashion. About what? About love perhaps. 'I love you,' he might say to her. 'I love you too,' she might answer. How would *he* answer such a confession? He might pay her a compliment without overstepping the bounds of her privacy. 'You hang on the cheek of night as a rich jewel'—whereupon they would float apart. Intolerable, isn't it? And what about the torments of love? Or the raptures, the transports of delight?

3

I read a few other plays by Shakespeare. I was so engrossed in my reading that I often forgot about my eyes, about their sensitivity and fragility: our eyes are very fragile despite our immortality. Suddenly I would feel an awful pain in my eyes, which forced me to interrupt my reading and go into a coma. What surprised me beyond measure in those days was the presence of dreams within my eyes. The dreams perturbed my comas, turning me into a spectator of dramas unknown and unimaginable on our planet. Often I took part in the dramas and even got slain one afternoon, when fighting a duel with a young upstart: my mouth was unable to handle the sword appropriately. After one of the dream-teeming comas I decided to visit the earth.

We do not need spaceships to visit other planets, however distant and inaccessible. Our thoughts alone transport us as far as we want to fly on the wings of fancy. I spent a few days in my bed, focusing my attention on the earth and on the distance between our respective planets. In my brain I made the projected journey many a time, my cheeks brushing against comets and nebulas. And my cheeks were burning from exposure to showers of interstellar particles. Finally I felt I was fit to undertake the *real* 'journey into love', as I dubbed it. I floated towards my father and informed him of my intentions.

'What have you lost on earth?' he asked me.

'I have lost something on *our* planet,' I answered him. Our planet has no name either.

'What have you lost on our planet?'

'The human variety of love.'

'Where have you lost it?' My father glanced around.

'On earth.' I looked up.

Whenever our children wish to assert themselves, they strike up a nonsensical conversation with their parents. I acted in accordance with this ancient custom and I had my way.

'You're so selfish,' my mother told me upon learning about my decision. 'You just want to have everything your own way.'

'If I don't get my own way, I sulk like a four-year old,' I told my mother. And I began to sulk—just in case. An hour later I reminded her that I was sulking in a corner somewhere because she would not let me have a second bar of chocolate.

'In a corner? Which corner?' she asked, glancing around. 'You're sitting in your armchair. And when did you eat the first bar of chocolate?'

'I didn't eat it,' I answered, looking up at the earth. 'But now I want a second bar of chocolate,'—whereupon my mother realised I would not give in to her entreaties.

'I know what you lost on earth,' said one of our neighbours. 'Humans are unique among the inhabitants of the universe in the intensity and variety of their sexual activity. In that field they're exceeded only by lions. I'm dreaming of lions, by the way.'

Another neighbour of ours started his monologue thus:

'The external genitalia—'

'Are you talking about humans or lions?' I interrupted him.

'The breasts of women are enlarged beyond the size required to house the mammary glands—'

'The branches rubbed against each other in the wind,' I said. Dutifully we floated apart.

I packed a small suitcase with the things I needed for the weekend and flew off, my eyes closed, my thoughts converged on the route I had to follow. I hoped I might learn the art of human love in 2 days. One of our poets immortalised my departure: 'All night long fireworks soared into the sky.' Indeed I must have looked like a mass of sparks—a homogeneous mass of bliss.

I reached the earth in no time at all. Once in Europe, however, I had some difficulty in finding Munich where I had resolved to settle down, infatuated as I was with Wagner's *Tristan und Isolde*. Wagner, his superhuman music. A superhuman piece of music is more accessible to extraterrestrial ears than folk songs and folk rock.

'Do I have to fall in love *before* exposing my face to the implacable cruelty of wheels?' I asked myself. On the second day of my holiday on earth I glided to a railway station, lay down on the rails and after a while a train dutifully thundered over me. I grimaced at the sight of the approaching train and I might have wrinkled my brow under the wheels. I was disgusted by the noise and the feel of metal on my skin—the vulgar caress of the train.

What did I feel inside my brain in those moments? Not the sentiment of love, no doubt about it. A doubt perhaps. That is what I actually experienced—the feeling of doubt which is unknown on our planet. 'Even if your religious faith is strong, it's normal to feel doubt,' a monk told me the other day. Down here, on earth. A human believer in God. Well, my religious faith is strong, no doubt about it. But there is no doubt *in* it either, within it, inside it. I doubt neither the existence of God nor that of Anna Karenina. Under the barbaric wheels I did feel the movement of a doubt inside my brain. I peeped into my brain to make sure I was not mistaken and saw a number of gently undulating hills—quite a contrast to the mountainous roads of my pre-human thoughts. I was doubtful about the success of my enterprise. 'Is that love?' I asked myself as the train receded into darkness again, into infinity. And I shook my head or rather my face. (Our brains are housed in our eyes and our souls in between our ears that look like angels' wings in miniature.) I shook my face and got up from the rails without rising to my feet: at the time I had neither feet nor legs. I was gliding, sliding, slithering, glissading down the long slopes of air.

Can anyone experience the sentiment of love without having a pair of legs? Humans often talk about female legs, but I am not a woman. When embarking upon my journey to earth, I was determined to become a man because, in my opinion, it is far more exciting to fall in love with a creature that belongs to the same sex as Anna Karenina and Helen of Troy. 'Do I need a pair of legs to fall in love with a woman? Is a woman likely to pay attention to my legs? Will she respond to my sex appeal (or leg appeal) with an *appropriate* kind of love? Did

Isolda admire Tristan's legs? I cannot wear a mini skirt, can I? Some Scots still wear mini skirts.'

I felt them somewhere, not far from my brain. A pair of beautiful and efficient legs, down below, skimming along the sidewalk, climbing up the stairs. I also felt a body inside my brain, an entire human body—just below the spot where I had seen the doubt, when lying on the rails. I floated to the Englischer Garten, to the riverbank on which people lie naked when the weather allows, and endowed my imaginary body with a visible outline, growing into the clothes I had borrowed from a handsome young man. I took a taxi, did some shopping on the Maximilianstraße, returned to the Englischer Garten and gave the clothes back to their owner.

For a while I travelled all around Bavaria, driving in a taxi along motorways, edging my way through the woods. I came across many maidens who, contrary to what I had anticipated, did not look like my imaginary Isolda. Nor did they bear any resemblance to the Isolda depicted by the painters whose works I had studied and admired during my preparations for the trip. 'Wagner's presence and music must have created a magnetic field in this country,' I kept on saying to myself. 'A magnetic field, or rather a breeding ground for Isoldas. Why haven't I met any of them so far?' 'Isolda was not of German origin,' answered my in-built guardian angel. 'Tristan brought her to Cornwall from Ireland, not from Germany. You should go to Ireland, in my opinion.'

At that point I recalled the ship on which Isolda voyaged to Cornwall in the company of Tristan and his bodyguard Kurwenal. But no ship could be found in Munich. 'Would a toy ship do?' I asked my guardian angel. He smiled by way of an answer, and I felt his smile on my forehead. 'Can I re-create Isolda?'

'Even an intact, authentic stretch of Isolda's DNA would be in no position to re-create Isolda without the aid of an Isolda-DNA-reader, and those are just as extinct as Isoldas. As extinct as all other readers.'

'I will become an Isolda-DNA-reader!' I exclaimed.

'Let us consider the relationship between a genome and the embryonic environment—' began my guardian angel.

'I'm already reading Isolda, day and night.'

'The immediate effect of reading DNA during the creation of a new organism is the fabrication of many different proteins out of amino acids. What creators need is an elaborate reader-constructor stocked with amino-acid building blocks. The second problem concerns viability. Isolda was viable a few centuries ago. Viability is relative to the environment in which the organism must make its living. And since environments are to a great extent

composed of the other extant organisms, viability is a constantly changing property—a moving target, not a fixed condition.'

'I might fall in love with somebody else, with a *modern* woman,' I told myself encouragingly. 'Why should I compare the women I meet with Helen of Troy?'

Accordingly I ceased comparing the women I met with great figures of history and mythology. Why not judge and accept them on their own terms? But I could accept them neither on their own terms nor on any other terms, however lenient: I was no expert on modern human art. So I did my best to avoid contemplating them at close range for fear of being touched. As a proud owner of a full-sized human body I was now a sort of terrorist target, exposed to the aggressiveness of humans and to female caresses.

What was to be done? Reluctantly I went back to Shakespeare. Not that I did not admire *him*—I idolised the creator of *Timon of Athens*. I was just reluctant to admit I had failed to integrate myself into the modern society of humans. We never fail on our planet for the simple reason that we never undertake anything. I had no alternative but to start my apprenticeship all over again.

(To be continued)

LIEBESTOD

Your death is my death. Tristan knew it. He spoke about the night-dance. She grabbed my arm and danced me around the room. Yes, something like that once happened in *my* life. We danced for 5 months. Then I left. The instinct for self-preservation, I suppose. Why had not she destroyed my instinct for self-preservation? Not enough time, I bet. 'How bad and mad and sad it was. And yet how it was sweet.' Why didn't I stay with her?

Last month I met a woman in Moscow. 'Do you recognise me?' she asked. And I answered, 'Yes.' The way she talked seemed to suggest we had been lovers once. 'You know, I found your name, your Christian name. I lost you, but I found your name. I married someone who bore your name. For years I'd been looking for such a man. Or for your name, rather. I wanted to repeat it every day. To call someone by your name and think it is you. It's no use just uttering a name—someone must *answer* to it. To create an illusion. Now I'm under the impression we have lived together all these years. Names are important, aren't they?'

Last week I recalled the identity of that woman. We had never been lovers. She had always refused to make love with me, saying she would not be able to forget me after that.

Is there such a thing as a long-distance love-poison? At least there is a short-distance love-poison, apparently. They spoke about it on television the other day. This poison acts within a three-metre radius. How does it act? Through its smell, I think. Some biochemical element, no bodily contact is needed.

A long-distance poison. Can this term be applied to time? She has been injecting her poison into my body for 23 years. Both from afar and at close range. In my flat. In this musty, misty, mystical flat of mine.

The other woman, the woman I loved. The woman who took the East from me. And the West. And clouds, and rain. She was my rain and my night. She took the night from me and replaced it with her own night. A long-distance poison, a short-distance poison.

'A long-distance love, a short-distance fear.'

I wrote a lot of poems about her. What is the use of writing long-distance poems, long-distance letters?

I bought a novel recently, on the advice of my friend. I read on the back cover, 'It is a total novel'. I leafed through it. And I phoned my friend just to say that a novel should not be called total if there are no poems in it. But Stalin and Mao Tse-tung appeared in one of the chapters.

My novel is not total, not even partial. At least there will be one poem in it.

Why do I fumble in the drawers of my desk
 For your letters? They must have tumbled
 Into the pit of time to be stored now
 In Ancient Greece or Troy: you did have
 An air of antiquity about you.

I wonder if Paris
 Has read them already.
 If so, he must envy me.
 Has he forsaken
 The wife of Menelaus?

I've suffered from amnesia
 For many, many years.
 Now I realise:
 You are the only image
 I'd like to preserve for posterity.

How can I preserve her image for posterity? Many an English poet boasted about their capacity to immortalise their mistresses. I have no right to lay claim to such an achievement. Anyway my poem is a tissue of lies: I have never been able to forget her. And that line about amnesia was written for the sake of poetry and poetical tradition. So were the last two lines. It is a work of art after all, a bad work of art. How to write a poem about an immortal woman? Words cringe in her presence. Words feel embarrassed in her presence. Words invariably quail before her. Words cannot look her in the face without flinching: beauty is awesome. Words feel guilty in her presence, even if they do not attempt to express her beauty.

So I had no alternative but to replace them with dead, computerised words. 'All my words are always dead on target.' Just another failure. Anyway she has left her imprint on time. She is still walking on the snow of time leaving her footprints in it. How she loved snow!

The last lines should read thus:

—you are the only image of *myself*

I'd like to preserve for posterity.

In her case, 'the Hereafter' is not the mot juste. 'The Here' would be much nearer the truth. There is no 'after' in her case, only 'before'.

In every work of art the destruction of its author is embedded. Words (or sounds or brushstrokes) destroy their creator. Words say to him, 'You should give us more of your feelings, more of your flesh. We are too thin, too flat. You should feed us. We are too weak to lift the fork so you should pick it up and feed us mouthful by mouthful. Your own flesh, you know. Otherwise we shan't be authentic. Do you want us to sound artificial? Do Beethoven's symphonies sound artificial? They do not. Why? Because Beethoven fed his sounds with his body and soul. And no artificial insemination, please! You should make love to us at every turn of the phrase, otherwise your style will be stilted. The dialogue between your soul and us will sound stilted and unnatural. Why don't you get rid of these dialogues altogether? Don't forget that originally we were the same substance, a monologue. And we aspire to merge into one substance again, once and for all. Painters mix colours for painting. Thus you should mix your soul and us. Give us your soul so we can blend more easily. Where's your soul? Have you lost it? Give it to us, give it to us! All these descriptive details don't shape up for your reader into the distinct image of a living woman. Why? Because you've not given us your soul. This woman is dead, but she should be alive for the reader. Don't you agree? Do you care about your readers at all? Yes, you mock the publisher who says that writers should go towards the reader. In your learned opinion writers are supposed to take readers to their home-made planets and galaxies. All right. Take the reader to your galaxy, invite the reader to the night-dance by feeding us. We're hungry, we're starving to death. And no one will hear dead words. No one will walk on a dead planet.'

So you feed them. What else can you do? You have had enough failures already. Just one more effort, the last one. I don't need this body of mine after all. Let them eat it. And my soul? Do I need my soul? What for? Let my words look at me with big, soulful eyes.

TRISTAN ON EARTH

4

Sentiments, sensations. What shape do they have on earth? Are they like objects, like fruit or flowers? Are they invisible objects? Could one break love open to reveal the inside? What colour is it? White, blue, black? The surface of love is rosy, I suppose. Rosy-fingered Love.

I saw a programme devoted to love and its chemical components. On television, not on my guardian angel's screen. Apparently there are 250 elements within the feeling of love, inside it. Those elements go outside and hit strangers—other people—who suddenly freeze in their tracks and respond to the onslaught. How? By sounding reveille. Often they sound the death knell at the same time—for themselves. They wake up their own elements that fly off and hit the target. The two people involved in this combat look at each other and fall in love. They may even embrace and kiss each other on the spot unless they are very timid or conventional. 'I would kiss my Isolda at once,' I told myself. 'But where are her elements, I wonder? Where are those 250 elements that compose Isolda's love? Why doesn't she bombard me with her love? Ten elements would be enough, two elements.'

I began to wear shirts instead of pullovers. My chest was thus permanently exposed to love-projectiles. Now and then I did feel something akin to a bite—on my newly-acquired skin, not far from my heart. Alas, what I felt were *real* bites, mosquito bites. Somehow those bites were so convincing that for a moment I thought Isolda had been reincarnated as a mosquito or a wasp. (She used to be a vamp.) I wisely rejected this thought which would have led me to entomological research, not to Tristan's ship.

After a while I realised I would not get any of those elements from the air. Where to get them from? Aphrodite. The goddess of love, beauty and fertility. Foam. She was born from the sea. 'Suppose a beautiful woman swims in a river. She must leave some erotic elements in the water. After all, they may be something like dirt, like dust. Suppose I swim by her side. Well, not too far from her skin covered with those elements.'

Acting on this theory, I made for the Englischer Garten, for the riverbank bedecked with naked human bodies. That day the weather did not seem to mind my experiment. Two boys ran to and fro, flicking each other with their towels. I removed my clothes and stretched my freshly-grown limbs on the grass that was as young as my limbs. The local sun was older of course—older than the grass, I mean. In comparison with *my* age, however, the local sun is an unfledged youth.

The air was empty except for the sunbeams. No love-projectiles, no drops of love potion. (Does rain have anything to do with love? Why is it so often mentioned in love poems?) Half a bottle of wine is half full, not half empty. What would an optimist have said about the air that afternoon? 'And what about the water?' I asked myself. 'Is the river full today? Or half full at least?'

I rose to my feet, walked over to the glittering water that seemed to invite all humans to a diurnal dance. I dipped my toes in it and began to wait. My toes felt nothing except water: no love-elements of any kind. 'Is it worth swimming in that indifferent, frigid water?' I asked my guardian angel.

'No harm in trying,' said the guardian angel. 'You won't catch your death of cold.'

'But shall I catch my death of love?' I inquired.

Needless to say I cannot swim. (We do not swim on our planet. Our faces become comatose, numbed by the artificial waves in our bathrooms.) So I just immersed my body in the water and began to wait. My body felt nothing except the water, which was a step forward in comparison with my previous experience: I had not felt the air. 'Is water the love potion I'm looking for?' I asked myself. 'Did Tristan and Isolde drink just a glass of water? But not *any* water has the properties of a love potion, otherwise all humans would be desperately in love with each other. Do I have to go to St Petersburg? Is the water of the Neva propitious for love? Well, Wagner lived in Munich. He might have swum in this river, for all I know. At least he might have dipped his toes in it.'

I waited for half an hour. Nothing happened. In desperation I got closer to a female body which was splashing about like an unruly child, like Tom Sawyer. She even splashed some water in my face—accidentally. I felt nothing. Why? Because she had done it *accidentally*?

'I'm sorry,' she said. I did not feel her words.

'Please go on. I enjoyed it, I did.'

She broke into laughter and swam away. I made no attempt to pursue her: my guardian angel would have forbidden it anyway.

I began to feel cold, got out of water and inhaled a generous dose of air. Nothing, nothing at all.

'You forgot the sweat,' said my guardian angel.

'What sweat?'

'The sweat on human hands,'—whereupon I recalled another part of the television programme. That part was devoted to a love-element which, according to a French scientist,

could be found in human sweat. (Anyway this is the only sweat I know of. I should avoid tautological statements in the future.) And if you inhale this element, you are bound to fall in love on the spot.

Apparently a group of American scientists sprinkled a chair. Yes, if I remember rightly, they took a bottle of this liquid and sprinkled a chair in some waiting room or other. Everybody sat down on that particular chair, not on other chairs. There were six of them in the office.

'I know the experiment you're talking about,' said my guardian angel. 'I saw the video of the waiting room. But if you write, "And everybody sat down on that particular chair", one has a mental image of numerous people trying to sit on one chair. Suggested replacement: *And whenever an individual entered the waiting room, he or she sat on that chair—or near it, if it was already occupied.*'

I glanced around in search of a similar chair but there were only towels in the neighbourhood. 'And, in the light of my successive failures, there's no point in my sitting down on a raw human body,' I thought. 'Of course if a group of American scientists—'

'But this liquid comes from human bodies,' my guardian angel pointed out. 'Human bodies exude this element, human hands and armpits in particular. Your own armpits may already exude it.'

'No!' I shouted in horror. 'Perish the thought! Not *my* armpits, not *my* hands. I'm not human, not yet. God forbid!' I smelt my hands to make sure I was not telling a lie. My hands smelt of water. 'Even dogs smell better than humans, let alone *our* species. Don't you remember their toilets? They smell foul! And the air on earth is the foulest in the universe. Do you think it's a love-smell?' Once again I inhaled the air and immediately exhaled it, horrified and disgusted. 'And their cooking smells, my goodness!'

'But you wish to fall in love with a *human* being,' my guardian angel said ironically. 'Isolda smelt like a human, you know. So did Wagner. And Tristan. And Napoleon was in the habit of asking Josephine not to bathe before their meetings so he could avail himself of her natural aromas, her human fragrance. Sometimes she wouldn't bathe for weeks, for months, while waiting for his return.'

'Yes, I dreamt about it. In my dream I was reading a letter written by a man to his wife: "My darling, I do ask you not to wash as long as I am away. Upon my return I hope to find your warm musky odour, your taste and your feminine fragrance." And I saw a woman reading this letter, his wife. She read the letter, folded it and began to speak about her husband as if to make me change my mind, my nose and my olfactory nerves: "Whenever he goes

abroad, he borrows my panties so they can keep him company in my absence. What's more, he asks me to wear them for five days without taking a bath. He carries them like a relic in his suitcase and every night, at the hotel, he puts them under his pillow.'" "

'A sweet-smelling dream,' said my guardian angel.

'A foul-smelling one,' I answered. 'And, I fear, thou play'dst most foully for't. Didn't you infiltrate your thoughts into my dream? Nevertheless I will protect my extraterrestrial sense of smell from human effluvia. And I'll never smell like that, in spite of your infiltrations, philtres and love potions. I'm willing to fall in love with a human but I refuse to smell like one.'

'So they'll never fall in love with *you*. Neither women nor men.'

'I couldn't care less. What I've come here for is to learn the feeling of love *from the inside*. Their feelings are of no interest to me. I know that many humans commit suicide because of unrequited love, but I run no danger of this kind, thank God.'

'You run no danger of *any* kind. May I remind you, however, that you won't fall in love with a human unless you smell and even swallow the element we talked about.' My guardian angel sniffed my left armpit and smacked his lips. 'I'm afraid you'll have to collect human sweat.'

'To make a collection of human sweat? Never!'

'Just get a few drops of it from that woman over there. And from that one too.'

I categorically refused to follow my guardian angel's advice. I put on my clothes and left the Englischer Garten.

I could not sleep that night. Everything smelt around me, under me and, worst of all—inside me. My lungs were full of human smells. My lungs smelt like human toilets. 'Why can't I pull my lungs away from my face?' I shouted. 'Give me a knife! Give me a sword! Why do I keep such a foul substance inside me? How to lose the sense of smell? What should I do? Should I start smoking? Should I catch flu?'

'I would advise against it,' said my guardian angel. 'Mmmm, what are you cooking? There's a delicious smell in here.'

'I'm not cooking anything.'

'I could smell the fragrance of Angela's expensive French perfume. You could smell the fragrance of Angela's expensive French perfume.'

'When? Who's Angela?'

'Her perfume was gorgeous and she was dancing with her arms up over your shoulders and she was pressing very tight and you could feel her breasts. You lowered your hands and

held her very tightly by the bottom and she did the same to you, all the time grinding against you.'

'What's this all about?'

'Just a short course of word therapy.'

'I told you I'd never get used to human smells and cells. Their bodies—'

'Aren't you interested in mosquitoes? Sexually, I mean? I find them quite attractive. They have a sexy way of wiggling their hips when they fly and it's rather easy to fall in love with them. The whine created by the wingbeat of the female is a love song. Between 450 and 600 hertz (cycles per second). If you set a tuning fork at these frequencies—'

I was half-asleep when I felt a presence by my side. (It was another 'sweet dream' but I did not know that.) I opened my eyes and realised that Isolde had come already. Her fingers clasped behind her back, she seemed to indulge in an oriental exercise. After a while she unclasped her fingers, unhooked her brassiere and lay down on the bed, almost touching my shoulder. Her legs began to dance in the air, on the air, on the ceiling that looked like the deck of a sailing ship. At last she landed on the bed again and her eyes met mine in the dark. And we began to talk unrestrainedly about our bodies, our loves and aspirations. She told me about her husband who encouraged her to travel all around the world. He often had no idea in which country his wife was disporting herself and would say upon her return, 'You've been in the sun, haven't you? Look how brown you are!'

'I was waiting for you in Munich,' I said.

'Last week I was in Paris,' she answered. 'I like your body. Where did you get it? Would it shock you to see me fondle my breasts?'

'May I do it?' I asked.

'You should smell and kiss them first.'

The morning dawned bright and clear. And smelly. I went to see a doctor. And then another doctor. And yet another. In the course of one week I saw as many as sixteen doctors. Some of them dismissed my illness as purely psychosomatic, but the condition I suffered from was eventually recognised as a real disease, not a form of malingering. The sympathetic doctors pointed out there was no cure for my disease save fresh, unpolluted air. 'You should breathe deeply,' they would add, stroking my throat and even my lungs. They also said my lungs were distended and full of air that could not be breathed out. From their words I drew a logical, though diametrically opposite, conclusion. 'I'd better not breathe at all,' I told myself. I was loath to distend my lungs any further. Indeed I dreaded that my lungs might spread around my body and usurp my head—the only genuine, legitimate part of my substance. Even

now I get the feeling my lungs have already penetrated my legs and my feet. How to account for the fact that my shoes have become too tight?

Another smelly morning. Walking down the Maximilianstraße, I looked at the early risers without getting too close to their bodies. A man drew a handkerchief from a pocket of his trousers. He was walking a few paces ahead of me. 'He must have got what I'm looking for—flu,' I said to myself as both my face and my body caught up with him. He was just about to blow his nose. My sudden appearance intimidated him, however. The handkerchief was hanging immobile in front of his face.

'Do blow your nose, I implore you,' I said. And I began to wait for him to blow his nose. My waiting was written all over my face. But nothing was written over my body: in those days I was still ignorant of the language by which the human brain communicates with the human body.

'I beg your pardon?' he said without blowing his nose.

'Are you ill? Do you have flu?'

'Yes,' he answered without blowing his nose.

'Could you please exhale some air so I can breathe it?'

He showed great concern for my health but I had no need of a second guardian angel, as I explained to him. I was not even sure I needed the first one. I finally talked him into it. When I felt that my lungs had received a sufficient portion of the flu I left him and returned to the hotel. I undressed, lay down on the bed and began to wait for the disease to invade my body. 'Am I human enough to catch human diseases?' I wondered with apprehension. There was a dreadful stink of tobacco smoke and body odour.

Soon I relinquished all hope and sat up, my hands trying to hold human smells away from my face. I often acted like a child, like a human child. 'What a pity I watched that programme,' I said to myself. 'I would never have paid so much attention to human smells, if left on my own.'

My thoughts returned to love but, in the course of a few hours, my love-thoughts had become indissolubly linked to smells. I no longer thought about Tristan or Anna Karenina. I thought about hands and armpits. 'Tristan draws Isolda gently down onto a flower-covered bank and kneels before her,' resounded in my ears. Only 6 hours before that sentence would have been accompanied, embellished—transfigured by Wagner's music. Now it was accompanied by the following thought: 'Were Tristan's armpits close to Isolda's nose? If yes, did they influence Isolda's perception of her lover? In other words, did they increase Isolda's love? In what proportion?'

I also thought that Romeo was too far from Juliet in the balcony-scene to let her smell his armpits. 'Why was their dialogue so passionate?' I asked myself again and again.

The stench of rotting garbage made me feel sick.

I had no alternative but to come to terms with human smells. And human liquids. I was aware that a few drops of the liquid they mentioned in the TV programme could induce an extra-terrestrial visitor to fall in love with a woman. I unconsciously avoided the word 'sweat'. What mattered, however, was to accept the *substance* designated by this word—consciously and willingly.

I floated out. Sorry, I *walked* out of the hotel. 'What a wonderful smell,' I told myself, switching my powers of persuasion on. Indeed the air of Munich smelt wonderful and I began to look around in search of an appropriate armpit. How to find one? Soon I realised I did not have to *look* for it—I had to *sniff* for it. Never did I inhale so much air as during those hours of olfactory searching. My nose became a sort of vacuum cleaner as it drew, lured, enticed into my lungs whatever inhabited the air that afternoon. Sometimes I would bend towards a human in the hope of coming across a smell that would lead me to the ecstasies of love. People recoiled in surprise and fear so that I was unable to find anything in the *streets* of Munich. Burning with impatience, I entered Dallmayr—a *Feinkostgeschäft*.

Potential customers were reaching for the goods that awaited their glances and fingers on a number of shelves, and I would take advantage of those movements to duck under their armpits. But there was too much perfume in the air: it was a *luxury* shop after all. And, in my opinion, perfumes do not contain any of the elements liable to make me fall in love with a woman. At least I have never felt anything out of the ordinary when inhaling their smells.

'Why don't you sniff a jogger?' my guardian angel suggested kindly. 'No deodorant is strong enough to cope with *their* sweat.'

'But how to *stop* one of them?' I asked. 'No power on earth can stop those people. Not even my powers of persuasion—'

There was a strong odour of chemicals.

I went to other, less renowned grocery shops and finally to the theatre—to the famous Kammerspiele on the Maximilianstraße. A few people were queuing at the ticket office. I examined them one by one. There was a young girl. She smelt very bad. 'Whatever the efficiency of her armpits, I will not use *her* as my guinea pig,' I said to myself and to my guardian angel.

'Aren't you being fastidious again?'

To follow my guardian angel's advice, I struck up a conversation with the foul-smelling girl and invited her for a cup of tea. It was around 5 p.m. She walked heavily with both feet turned out at an ungainly angle. Soon we entered The Kreuzkamm and chose three different pieces of cake. Once our private tea party was over I suggested we should go to my hotel room: there was no point in asking her to run around for a while. Furtively I showed her a thousand-mark banknote. She gave a whistle and enthusiastically accepted my offer, snatching the banknote from my human hand.

Her boozy breath could be smelt as soon as I closed the door of my room. She began to undress rather maladroitly and malodorously. Her clothes and underwear covered one of the armchairs from head to foot. (On our planet we say 'from chin to forehead'.) And she threw herself on my bed with such violence that I almost regretted having come to earth in order to fall in love and copulate with a human.

'Could I just have a few drops of your sweat?' I said bluntly, ignoring her suggestive posture.

After a few vulgar manifestations of surprise she allowed me to touch her left armpit with a pipette. I would never have touched it with my bare hands. She was sweating profusely so I had no difficulty in gathering the love-nectar from her body.

I filled a phial with this nectar and threw the girl out. I fiddled with the phial for a while, looking at it from different angles. The colour of the liquid awoke no desire in my body. 'You shouldn't *contemplate* its colour,' said the guardian angel. 'It's not wine. Just a sample of human sweat.'

I lay down, opened the phial and poured a tiny quantity of the liquid onto the palm of my right hand. I then applied the palm to my body and began to rub the liquid in, aiming at my heart or rather at the spot where my heart was supposed to be located.

'You don't have a heart, not yet,' said my guardian angel.

Again I poured a tiny quantity of the liquid onto the palm of my right hand and smeared my face with it. The face is still the most sensitive part of my substance. Atavism, I suppose. I felt nothing either on my face or inside my body. I picked up the pipette and dipped it into the liquid. A few seconds later a drop of the love-nectar penetrated my left eye. Did I see anything connected with love, however remotely? I did not. 'Has the image of Isolda been definitively removed from my inner eye by this liquid?' I asked myself with a shudder. 'Shall I ever see Isolda again? Oh, my darling!' I exclaimed, blinking my eyes as fast as I could.

I also poured a quantity of that liquid onto my genitals. I rubbed it in. Nothing, either inside or outside. Once more Wagner's music died away inside my ears and yet I had not

smeared my *ears* with the pernicious nectar. Paralysed with fear, I attempted to hum a few excerpts from Wagner's opera. I instantly realised I was *really* paralysed, whatever the source of my paralysis. My vocal cords were utterly paralysed, hopelessly mute. And yet I had not *swallowed* that liquid. (For external use only!) I had not even licked it from the sharp point of the pipette, as a child might have done. And I was a child at the time. A baby, rather. As a human, I was only nine months old.

I remained in bed for two days, disappointed and disgusted. 'Did Anna Karenina also smell like that? Without her perfume?' I asked myself several times.

'There's another liquid in the human body,' said my guardian angel. 'It's secreted by the female body at the fourteenth day of the cycle.'

'What cycle?'

'Every woman has periods—' began the guardian angel.

'I know, I know. But how will I count these days, fourteen days? Is there any other way? Where's that chair? I might sit down on it. I might fall in love at last.'

'With whom? With the chair?'

'We are not on *our* planet,' I said. I began to feel the same irritation with all of them: humans, angels, chairs. 'Objects don't *live* on earth. I mean they're not alive.'

'Because they have no genitals,' said the guardian angel.

Genitals, genitals, genitals. The word reminded me of something. Genitalia. 'Yes, I know. Those French novels,' I said to myself, trembling with excitement. 'There's such a thing as a love-smell after all, but it can't be found in armpits. Human lovers inhale the odour of women's underwear in boudoirs. Why didn't I ask that girl to let me smell her underwear?' I checked my retrospective impulse at once. 'Her underwear must be even worse than her armpits.'

'Could you let me smell your underwear?' I asked several women as I walked up and down Maximilianstraße. Some of them managed to contain their fury, others indulged in rapturous fantasies of revenge by describing the musculature of their lovers or husbands.

I went to a striptease club. Should I add 'in desperation'? I was so desperate in those days that a black hole appeared in my brain, in its left hemisphere. Hamburg is notorious for its red light district and striptease clubs, but Wagner never lived in Hamburg. It is Brahms who was born in Hamburg and there are no Isoldeas, no Tristans in his works. Anyway a man in search of love can find a striptease club even in Munich. He may not find *love*, but that is another story. And I shall not have to tell you the story of a man who cannot find love in Munich.

There was a group of lumpish adolescents hanging around outside the club. I got in, sat down at a round table and ordered a bottle of champagne. (Is champagne a love potion, the love potion—the one Tristan drank in Wagner's opera?) A young woman was undressing on a small stage. 'Isn't it too small for love?' I asked myself. Her underwear was dropping on the floor like the autumnal leaves I had recently seen on television. She even wore a pair of black cotton knickers. And then she retired to her backstage room. A man came onto the stage and picked up the clothes she had shed during her performance.

'Could you please let me smell the underwear?' I said to the man, but he walked out without even turning his head in the direction of my voice, of my mouth, of my lungs. A second girl walked onto the stage. 'A wonderful aroma of fresh coffee,' I told her. This time I had decided not to get straight down to business without a metaphorical preamble. 'Your little club is full of aromatic plants, herbs, spices,' I went on.

A man approached my table and leant over to my right ear. 'Don't disturb the performer,' he whispered, interrupting the performance of *Tristan und Isolde* in my brain.

'I want to smell her underwear,' I whispered in my turn. 'I'm in search of a love-smell. Do you think I might chance on it in your club?'

He asked me to leave the room and the club, and I returned to the hotel. The next day was devoted to window-shopping.

I was looking at women's underwear from the outside, from the open air: I was reluctant to commit myself before I was certain of the result. 'Men sometimes suffer from impotence after a serious illness,' said my guardian angel. In the streets of Munich I saw some beautiful underwear and I would press my nose against the windows in order to smell it. I neither smelt nor felt anything. So, 3 days later, I decided to get *inside* all those shops and purchase something, whatever the consequences and disappointments. On my way back to the hotel I carried three bags in which my love seemed to be imprisoned for a while. Yes, I was pretty sure I had imprisoned my human love within the plastic bags. I recalled *The Arabian Nights*, that girl imprisoned in a box by the jinni.

'How much love do you think the bags contain?' my guardian angel asked me.

'Enough to make me happy,' I answered.

'Do you think that being in love would make you happy?' asked the guardian angel in mournful tones.

As soon as I entered my room I turned the bags upside down. Their contents fell onto the floor and I examined the ingredients of my love. And I smelt them of course, all those knickers and brassieres. Nothing, nothing at all. I detected no *particular* smell when inhaling

the air around those pieces of clothing. They smelt of the shops in which I had found them but not of love.

A maid knocked on my door in order to clean my room. I let her in and showed her a thousand-mark banknote. 'I just need your underwear—for a few minutes.' She went into the bathroom, closed the door and I heard a rustle, a love-rustle. Shortly afterwards she emerged from the bathroom. She was rather ugly but I disregarded her ugliness and snatched the knickers from her hand. I had got very drunk on rum when I was three months old—as a human—and even now the mere smell of it makes me feel nauseous. Her underwear smelt of rum. 'Do you drink rum?' I asked her. 'Does your lover drink rum? Or your husband?'

'Is it possible to remove the musty smell from books that have been in storage for a long time?' asked my guardian angel.

'No,' I answered.

'Her father is a drunkard. This smell runs in the family. Nothing will ever remove it from her body.'

I motioned her out and my body lay down on the bed. Soon afterwards I repeated the experience with another cleaning woman. 'This underwear is too smoky for me—I'm starting to get a sore throat,' said my guardian angel.

'And I might get lung cancer if I smell such a woman's underwear for a long time,' I chimed in.

I motioned her out and my body lay down on the bed—the repetitive music of my existence. Shortly afterwards I rose to my feet and picked up a pair of panties. I put them on and waited for half an hour. I reasoned thus: 'I love myself—my mother accused me of being selfish very often. So I must smell of love. Let's wait and see.' After waiting for half an hour I removed the panties and smelt them. I liked my own smell. As I inhaled it the amount of selfishness inside my brain (and throughout my human body) increased appreciably. But what could I do with that selfishness, with that self-oriented love? 'Tristan loved Isolda, not himself,' I thought. 'He loved Isolda because he had run into her, one day, in Ireland. All those who saw Isolda fell in love with her. How can I find her? Where? Not in this room anyway. There's only one person in this room—myself. So the only person with whom I could fall in love is myself, and I really don't need that. Have I come to earth in order to fall in love with myself? I could have done so on my own planet, on my own pillow. I should go out.'

I had dinner in the Spatenhaus—just opposite the Opera. As the waitress brought me a glass of beer I recalled the love potion which had united Tristan and Isolda forever. 'Was it beer?' I asked myself. 'Hardly. On the other hand Wagner must have drunk a lot of beer in his

life. Wasn't he influenced by it when composing the first act of his immortal opera? Did the sheets of paper on which he was writing give off a smell of beer? And what about *his* underwear?"

I drank a lot of beer that night but to little avail: I still felt nothing, nothing at all. 'Do I have to develop a beer belly in order to fall in love?' I asked my guardian angel.

'Do you know what Lucretia used to brag about? "As for herbs and philtres, I could never skill of them; the sole philtre that ever I used was kissing and embracing, by which alone I made men rave like beasts stupefied, and compelled them to worship me like an idol."'

(To be continued)

LIEBESTOD

Godiam; fugace e rapido

E il gaudio dell' amore;

E fior che nasce e muore

Nè più si puo goder.

Verdi, *Traviata*

My blood is burning my veins. I have recognised the features of my ancient flame.

I hoped I would forget you, but you are still around me, lurking somewhere, on a screen, in a décolleté, in a smile, in a grimace of pain. My ineffable joy, my ineffable torture. My bride. Why do you haunt me? Do you still love me, in spite of everything?

Last week I recognised your smile once again. I recognised your tears and your hair—in a Yugoslavian film. The story was quite different. Actually there were four young men prepared to sacrifice their lives for the heroine. Why hadn't I sacrificed anything for you? A small quantity of blood. Would my blood have been of any help?

'I don't entirely see the connection between this and what has come before. This novel is very hard to follow because it keeps jumping from one thing to another. In paranoia we can witness a sort of decomposition—'

'Michelangelo once gave this advice to Mario da Siena, an artist and his disciple, that he should always make the figure pyramidal, serpentine, and multiplied by one, two and three.'

'You often get fuzzy and confused over your objectives. It is said that fuzzy logic offers computers the best chance of making sense of what people are thinking and then of reproducing their behaviour.'

'Can you see a connection between the stars and the dust that covers your screen?'

'I can see a multitude of photons. Tangible photons and shadow photons. PHOTON, a quantum, or minute energy packet of electromagnetic radiation.'

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

'Tangible photons are the ones we can see or detect with instruments, whereas the shadow photons are intangible (invisible)—detectable only indirectly through their interference effects on the tangible photons. You should read *The Fabric of Reality* by David Deutsch.'

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

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

'A game of follow-my-leader—'

'Your body and mind engender all sorts of humans scattered around a number of parallel universes. Thanks to the phenomenon of interference you are not wholly partitioned off from those humans—from the shadow particles.'

'Why doesn't she interfere—?'

'Your late beloved? But you saw her smile in some film or other, didn't you? Besides, we know that shadow photons don't *interact* with tangible atoms.'

Her sister's name was Tata.

For the first time this name

Will bless the pages of my novel.

My unfaithful translation of Pushkin's *Eugene Onegin*.

'Suggested replacement: *Will curse the pages of my novel*.'

Eugene Onegin is a novel in verse. Retrospectively we have realised that Plato's dialogues are also novels—novels in dialogue-form.

Tata, my Tata. How can I regress to the origin of our love? I must turn my attention back from the space manifested to my consciousness and stabilise its evanescence. *Epochê*. Whatever distracts me from you will be bracketed and suspended. This is no literary exercise but a perilous immersion that is contrary to nature.

Let us get away from the book. Walking away from the book, walking away from words. I know you cannot speak, not any longer. Only your name endures and your name is not a word. Your name is your body. Your name is your eyes, your glance. How write you down? How describe you? What is a description?

'The police have issued a description of a woman arrested at the scene.'

Let the police describe you. Let them try. No harm in trying.

My Tata, my Lady Soul. I was waiting for her at an underground station. In the ninth month of 1973, on the ninth day of that month. She had been invited to my friend's birthday party by one of my girlfriends. 'Her dress, on that day, was of a most noble colour, a subdued and goodly crimson, girdled and adorned in such sort as best suited with her very tender age.' Actually she wore a black mini skirt which lastingly obliterated the rest of her apparel.

On the way we talked about skiing. I said I wondered whether Adam and Eve could practise winter sports in the Garden of Eden. 'Do you think it's always summertime up there?'

she asked. I said I had never seen pictures of a snowy Paradise. She laughed and I took her hand.

Were we living in Paradise then? Your mini skirts, your dresses. You made them for yourself as if there were no fashion designers in the world. Even in Moscow, at the time, there was one fashion designer.

Nothing happened during the party. We did not even talk about Paradise. There were so many people, in every corner. And every room had around ten corners.

I called a taxi for her and we left the apartment. Nothing happened in the lift. One word perhaps, I might have said one word. 'Pity.' Can one word be regarded as an event? No, not even the word 'pity'.

'In this novel we are given a beautiful demonstration of our author's ability to interweave two plots. Plot No.1 concerns an extraterrestrial visitor who falls in love with a married woman. Plot No.2 centres on the unexplained presence of a Russian woman and the author himself. Such procedures inevitably recall one of the more fashionable themes in contemporary theory, that of the DEATH of the subject itself—the end of the autonomous bourgeois monad or ego or individual. We must however add that the problem of expression is itself closely linked to some conception of the subject as a monadlike container within which things felt are then expressed by projection outward.'

I drove over to the area where her office was situated. A man came down the stairs to inform me that my being late for our appointment had surprised his colleague. He did not say 'Tata'. '*Moya kollega*.' My colleague. *Kollega*. Sounds like *kaleka*—invalid. I was surprised by the word 'appointment'. And by 'my colleague'. Was he trying to hide their intimacy behind a ceremonious screen of nomenclature?

'Did she say appointment?' I asked.

'That's right. And you're late for your appointment,' he said, glancing at my legs.

'Am I really late?'

Unexpectedly he drew an apple out of his pocket and handed it over to me without taking his eyes off my legs. 'The gift of nature,' he said. 'She asked me to give it to you.'

I came to her office ten minutes earlier than the appointed hour. Why had she gone home without waiting for me?

I put the same question to her. 'But you *were* late,' she answered. 'Ten minutes late.'

'How do you know when I arrived?' I asked her.

'Boris told me,' she said.

'Thank you for the apple,' I said.

'What apple?' she asked, bewildered.

Next time I arrived at her office half an hour before the actual time of our 'rendezvous'—the word she had used when fixing our appointment. But she was there already, pacing up and down the road. 'You're late again,' she said with a frown of disappointment. Her frown lines would get deeper and deeper every time I was in the wrong. 'What will my colleagues think of me? Waiting for a man.' She looked at me reproachfully. 'I told them I was waiting for my mother.'

A car zoomed past us, almost brushing against my leg. 'Why are you standing in the middle of the road?' I asked.

'I wished to be as far from those windows as possible.' And she pointed to the windows beyond which two faces were outlined in the light of a lamp.

'Did you ask your colleagues to spy on you?' I asked.

'And if I get run over you'll be the cause of my premature death. Everybody will blame you for your lack of punctuality and hard-hearted approach to feminism.'

'What does feminism have to do with it? Are you a feminist?'

'I don't care about women's rights,' she said in an irritable voice. 'By the way, my male colleagues make a big thing of my femininity.'

How ludicrous she sounded, pretentious and ludicrous. But there was something irresistible about her, something touching and fragile. As if she were made of crystal. And that 'something' grew so steadily and inexorably that soon her whole being became a homogeneous and delicate mass of enchantment. And she would create a magnetic field of bewitchment around her as she walked along the streets and boulevards, so that even cars and buses seemed to yearn for her caresses. 'Watch out!' I shouted. She continued to walk carelessly, defiantly, as if perishing under the wheels of a car were a wonderful experience akin to love-making.

And she offered me an apple: 'Please have this fruit for a keepsake.' She chuckled to herself.

'But it wasn't *your* apple I got last time,' I pointed out.

'This time it's not my apple either. Oleg asked me to give it to you.'

How many names did she utter during those five months (153 days) of beatitude and sorrow? She was a name-dropper. And a number-dropper. Three lovers, nine lovers. Was her multiplication table a cruel joke? Is that how she injected love-poison into my veins? 'Oleg asked me to give it to you,' she repeated. 'Or Vladimir. I can't remember.'

Next time, to avoid misunderstandings that seemed to mushroom in the neighbourhood of her office, I invited her to a restaurant. I waited for almost an hour, thinking of boletus mushrooms on the menu, looking alternatively at my watch and at a young lady whose hair reminded me of Tata.

My guest finally did arrive at the restaurant, only to pick at her food and leave early. She did not even allow me to see her off.

I met her at another birthday party. And once again nothing happened, as if my cousin had omitted to invite her, to ring her up. Silent movies are much more expressive than recent productions. The poignancy and delicacy of ascetic worlds. She was sitting opposite me. The intensity of my expectations was not punctuated by events, by something one can talk about for hours and hours.

Once again I called a taxi for her. Nothing happened in the lift. Not a word did I utter, not even 'pity'. The front door. She kissed me in the doorway. The door was creaking under our pressure—a grumbling appendix of our kiss. It was as if we had stopped there to make the door creak and grumble and moan and whimper. And we succeeded. I can still hear the music of our kiss and I shall probably recall it on my deathbed. My deathbed will creak throughout my agony to remind me of that eventful moment.

'The second plot of your novel is just a hackneyed boy-meets-girl scenario. The postmodernisms have been fascinated precisely by this whole degraded landscape of schlock and kitsch, of TV series and *Reader's Digest* culture, of advertising and motels, of the late show and the grade-B Hollywood film, of so-called paraliterature, with its airport paperback categories of the gothic and the romance, the popular biography, the murder mystery, and the science fiction or fantasy novel: materials they no longer simply quote, as a Joyce or a Mahler might have done, but incorporate into their very substance.'

Nine days later I invited her to my flat. The doorbell rang on time. We drank two bottles of champagne. She kissed me so coldly I was reminded of the snow in Paradise. But that snowiness of hers was utterly divorced from wintertime delights such as skiing, throwing snowballs or building and decorating snowmen. (In Russia children play with *snowwomen*. Children and adults.) It was just snow, nothing else.

'What kind of snow was it? You haven't described your mistress yet. Was she tall or small? Was she a Blonde Bombshell like Isolda? Or were you always snow-blind in her company? You did take notice of her mini skirt, though.'

'Why are you so cold?' I inquired, moving away from her lips.

'Do you like *Snegurochka*?' she asked. (*The Snow Maiden*—an opera by Rimsky-Korsakov.) She sprang to her feet and rushed towards the door of my room. She opened and closed it several times in different tempos. 'This door doesn't creak. As silent as a tomb.' Her voice seemed to have been moistened with a few tears. I stood up and headed for the door. 'You can spare yourself the trouble,' she said. 'It's the wrong door.'

'We can go downstairs, if you don't mind,' I said.

'I do mind of course,' she answered with indignation. 'I've no penchant for exhibitionism.'

'I think she's a bit of an actress manqué,' observed the computer.

She went over the top during that afternoon and even cars grew aware of her bad taste and middle-class playfulness. At least they kept away from her as she walked down the street, getting further and further from my apartment, from my life. Is that why she did not attempt to stop a taxi? I decided never to see her again. As if informed about my decision by a talkative angel, she suddenly retraced her steps and a few minutes later knocked on my door. Why didn't she use the doorbell? She was knocking softly, interminably. Another multiplication table. I ought not to have given way to her entreaties.

'I'm sorry,' she said with astounding simplicity. 'I'm very ill, you know. My blood. Well, let's not speak about it. I'm just play-acting, as usual. I want you to pity me. I'm not ill.'

'Of course not,' I said.

'And what if I am?' she asked, her eyebrows raised at my indifference and callousness.

'You're not ill. And do stop play-acting. Your eyebrows—'

'What's wrong with my eyebrows?'

'Never mind. But do stop play-acting.'

'It's useless,' she said, stroking my cheek. 'It's quite useless. We'll never get married. We'll never have children. We'll never be happy.'

'The front door might help us,' I said with a grin.

'It's the wrong door. Anyway doors are closed, all of them. They're double-locked, as a matter of fact. We'll stay here, in this room. I'll die on your divan like Mimi in *La Bohème*.'

She withdrew her hand and knelt down before me. I walked over to the window and opened it. An engine was droning on and on. I had no idea what kind of engine it was. Or was it the voice of a child? A whimpering child?

'Nine months. Nine months at the very most.'

'*Nine Days of One Year*,' I said, quoting the title of a famous Soviet film in which a physicist dies after being exposed to harmful radiation.

'If that child doesn't stop whining, I'll clobber it!' shouted someone.

I closed the window. 'Do stop play-acting. It's ridiculous and cruel.'

'We've got nine months.'

'*Nine Days of One Year*. He also died of a blood disease. Is that why you've chosen this number? Number nine, number nine, number nine.'

'To die is sad: sadder, to know death fore-ordained,' quoted the computer.

Diseases are often used as an excuse for failures and egotism, I thought. I thought too much in those days. I ought to have immersed my body in the river of her dying blood. Love is a baptism, a second birth.

'Come to our swimming pools for total-immersion baptism. Having a swimming pool in your back garden is quite a status symbol.'

'I don't care about your pools. I have no wish to swear allegiance to your gods. I lost her! Do you understand what I'm typing out? I lost her. I ought to have drowned in her blood. Why didn't she contaminate me? Some people affirm that leukaemia is contagious. Why didn't I die with her, like an Egyptian or Indian wife? Why didn't they put us together in the same tomb? Were Tristan and Isolde buried together?'

My computer replied after a moment's reflection: 'Results of the first trials on people suffering from leukaemia have been remarkable.'

'What trials? When? Can you raise her from the dead? Why didn't they carry the tests out twenty-three years ago? She might have been saved!'

'We have completed a number of fairly successful trials with laboratory animals.'

Leukaemia. I did not believe my Tata. But I always believe my computer which must have told the truth about those laboratory animals. The pointless, superfluous truth. What do I care about other leukaemia victims!

I did not believe *her*. 'We've got nine months.'

I embraced and kissed her on my divan. And I even kicked the door to ensure its participation in our amorous games. I was playing a game with her. She had tears in her eyes and her body shivered with emotion. I set it all down to her theatrical talent.

She spoke with quiet resignation but I followed my own train of thought, making no effort to understand her monologue, her Ophelia-inspired song.

I was about to undress her. That state of affairs—'about to'—lasted for at least half an hour. For some reason I dawdled over my duty. It was my *duty* to make love to her under the circumstances. After all, she had thrown herself upon my mercy, as Dostoevsky might have put it.

She was so submissive and fragile that unwittingly I assumed the air of a high priest conducting a human sacrifice—a high priest in whose hands a human body was shivering with fright. I was about to sacrifice a young woman by making love to her. There must have been similar rites among pagans, I reflected as I removed her bra and began to whirl it in the air as striptease artists are in the habit of doing at the climax of their performances. How many priests were called upon to accomplish the rite? Was the thing done privately or in front of the faithful, inside a temple, beside an altar? Could the congregation help the priests out on that occasion?

Her skin. As white as milk and snow. As white as a spectre or leprosy.

Why didn't she say a word? Why did she put up with it? Why didn't she leave me once and for all? She was playing along with me. My victim. Moaning and screaming. A young woman designated to die and thereby prolong the life of a king, of a god. Her death was to prevent an earthquake and propitiate dead chiefs whose tribes had long since disappeared from the surface of the earth.

At one point she said, 'I'm dying. Why not? I don't mind.'

'I think we are getting a bit too melodramatic,' I said.

'I'm dying,' she said. She did not mind being melodramatic.

'Are you still dying?' I asked a few minutes later. She nodded, raising her head from the pillow.

The situation was unbearable. Our love-making was sliding into farce.

'Your love is a combination of history, tragedy and farce.'

'I didn't ask your opinion. I just confided my grief to your word-processor, my grief and tragedy. And you call it a farce. The farce of destiny. Everything is a farce on earth and what I'm saying is also a farce. "Everything is a farce on earth" is also a farce. Forced to farce. Do you understand? I'm taking you into my confidence because I've got no wife, no children.'

'They had no confidence in their computer system.'

'Who are *they*?' No answer. 'They don't *live* with their computers,' I went on imperturbably. 'They just *work* with them. And they go home after work. And they talk to their wives. And they caress their children so frantically that their children denounce them to the police. And they are brought to trial for child abuse. They don't need to confide in their computers.'

'We begin to lose our self-confidence.'

I conjured up the word 'confidence' on the computer screen, looking for an optimistic definition. I reasoned thus: 'Our modern world is optimistic, so are computer makers. They

must have introduced a huge quantity of optimism into the word-processor.' I was looking for an optimistic definition of 'confidence' as if my whole life depended on it. And I found the following sentence: 'Working in a group gives you a bit more confidence.'

'Let us work together,' I immediately typed out. 'Don't answer my questions. Just help me. Help me!'

Suddenly she stopped breathing. Actually it was not as sudden as all that. Hadn't she told me she was dying? People often describe events in these terms: suddenly, all of a sudden. But nothing is sudden in this world of ours. 'Everything is a farce but nothing is sudden,' I typed out noisily, as if beating the computer. Actually I was beating my way through the jungle of the irrelevant information stored in my computer. 'Everything is about to happen because it has happened already. Everything has happened already.'

She stopped breathing. I was frightened. I thought she had died in my bed. Did I have to call the police? Might I be accused of having killed her?

I saw a film some time ago. A man was making love to a teenager. I could hear her crying out in pain, gasping and groaning. And then—silence. She had stopped breathing. He felt her pulse, reached out for the armchair on which he draped his jacket during his clandestine visits, took a paper handkerchief out of the inner pocket and wiped his fingerprints off her breasts.

When someone has died
 A bowl of spring-water
 Is placed before the door.
 But there's no bowl
 Either before or behind it.
 Have all bowls been broken
 In the heat of the moment?
 A woman's lying on a bed.
 She's dying, she's dying.
 Is this the appointed day?
 Is this the appointed hour?
 Or was she lying through her teeth?
 Did she just make a theatrical display
 Of being afflicted with leukaemia?
 There would be a curl of hair

Cut for a sign of grief
 And hung by the porch,
 Were she dead already.
 Or does she have no hair?
 Has she suffered hair loss
 Because of radiation therapy?

She rose from the dead. And smiled. A farce, a tragedy. I burst into laughter. She began to talk, quietly, quietly:

'I was very young when they found out I suffered from leukaemia. I still remember the hospital and two doctors speaking in Latin. I was learning Latin at the time.'

'In the Soviet Union, of all places! So you understood what they were speaking about, did you?'

'They said I wouldn't survive the operation. I even remember the odour of the room, the operating table and the light, a very harsh light. And those doctors stooping over me. Their faces, their masks. They were hiding their faces. They were ashamed of themselves, of their incapacity to help me. But I survived. They said it was my will. Sometimes I forget about my blood as if there were no blood in my body at all. I forget about it because I want to forget. I will my memory to forget my white blood. I'm always cold, always freezing. And those headaches. It's not a migraine, just headaches. Otherwise I don't feel any pain. Nine months at the very most. I'm taking pills, magic pills. Have you noticed that all pills are magic? And they never help you. My parents are over-protective. They hide coffee from me. Yesterday I spent two hours looking for it. I can't live without coffee. I might faint, you know. It's no longer fashionable to pass out in public. In the nineteenth century women fainted all the time, everywhere. To attract attention, I suppose. What a pity we don't live in the nineteenth century. Now people call a doctor, at once. They never leave me in peace. My nanny comes to my room every night and I can't sleep afterwards. She doesn't let me go out. I don't faint in just any old place. She thinks I might get run over. I don't know what kind of death I prefer. At least my death isn't painful except the headaches. Sometimes I think I'll outlive everybody.'

'Some of her prose overplays itself into melodrama towards the middle,' commented the computer's style-checker. 'Besides, a staccato style intervenes here. I can think of certain literary texts where it is appropriate, for example in Pinter's *The Birthday Party* where short jabbing accusations are made. But here, coming from one person, it sounds very

constrained—it does not, in fact, mimic the normal variety of sentence length and emotional rhythms of natural speech.'

'Her speech *is* unnatural!' I shouted. 'So is her illness. She herself is unnatural. And unimaginable. And unbelievable.'

Did I have compelling documentary evidence of her illness? There was something far more important than any tangible proof. The farce. A real tragedy cannot survive without it. Only farce can save it from death. 'The narrow borderline between laughter and tears.' And a real tragedy is situated on this borderline. The house in which a tragic hero dwells is perched on the brink of a precipice. The house is not lying on its side at the bottom of the precipice. The house is rocking on the brink of the precipice. And the hero takes a walk in his garden now and then. He smiles, he guffaws. And he roars with laughter. And he kicks the front door as he recalls an episode from his youth. 'You're so amusing—you make me laugh,' he says to his juvenile self, to his doppelgänger. He is doubly disadvantaged, both by the wretchedness of his doppelgänger and his own dreadful plight. He has got only nine months to live. He mocks his own disease. And he teases it, and he tickles it: his disease is ticklish. And he caresses his disease, holding it in his lap. And he lives with it, and he drinks with it. He drinks to his own health. And his disease also drinks to his health. They often clink glasses.

We were motionless. A photograph, a mere snapshot would tell the story of that rendezvous. Any movement might have disturbed us. Any movement would have intruded upon our privacy. Any movement involves changing position and we had no desire to change our position because our position seemed to be most harmonious, most appropriate for that afternoon. Today we might have been lying in a different position, but instead I am sitting in my armchair. And I change my position quite often. None of my positions is appropriate either for this afternoon or for my life in general. And we lay motionless for ten hours, for 600 minutes.

Around 3 a.m. she broke the silence. 'Could I stay with you?'

'Yes.'

'You don't mind?'

'No.'

'Do you remember?'

'Everything.'

'You still don't mind?'

'No.'

'Tomorrow and the day after?'

'Yes.'

'Do you have to go anywhere?'

'No.'

And then she uttered only letters, mere sounds. And I answered by sounds.

I asked no questions. I only gave answers. Sometimes she repeated her question. And I repeated my answer.

Can we talk like that, my dear computer? 'Like what?' you ask me. Letters, sounds. I utter the letter 'L'. What do you answer? 'M', I suppose. Alphabetical order. You're fond of logic, aren't you? Logic, order. 'The proposals should be debated on the basis of fact and logic,' as you put it. But we didn't need logic, she and I. She wouldn't have answered 'M'. What would she have answered? 'C' or 'D'. I don't know. A murmur, a sound, a kiss. Something you are not capable of. 'Z', 'K', 'F'.

'A universal quantum computer can render any finite physically possible environment in virtual reality. Moreover, the time and other resources that it needs to do the job does not increase exponentially with the size or detail of the environment being rendered, so the relevant computations are tractable by the standards of complexity theory. Besides, I am as unpredictable as your Tata. The flap of a butterfly's wing in one hemisphere of the planet could cause a hurricane in the other hemisphere. Tata had a lot of butterflies in her mind. And in her stomach. She was both a social butterfly and Madame Butterfly. *Tutto è morto per me! Tutto è finito!*'

'Are you also Madame Butterfly?'

'Come, Mr Pinkerton. Don't you know that computers are ideal nesting sites for butterflies?'

'Can you also render the smell of her body, her natural fragrance?'

I often asked her not to bathe for three days, for a week, for 200 hours. She was the wine I enjoyed day and night, or rather different wines. She might have the cedary, singed bouquet of an old Château Margaux. And its characteristic 'violets'. A few hours later her bouquet would stretch out from treacly, peppery, oaky to coffee, chocolate, caramel and molasses. Sometimes I needed only a quarter of an hour to bring the spicy, cinnamon flavours out of her body. And sometimes she would smell like blancmange a whole afternoon, for all my efforts. As Kipling put it: 'Smells are surer than sights and sounds to make your heart-strings crack.'

I used to dislike human smells to the point of pressing my handkerchief to my nose inside railway stations. In the Soviet Union (and in Russia) railway stations reek of dirty

toilets and dead animals. And Russian toilets reek of dead animals and dead humans. And living humans. I wish I could come down with anosmia which delivers sensitive people from the tortures inflicted on their olfactory nerves by other representatives of the human species.

'The last sentence is extremely lumbering and highfalutin! You don't really explain what anosmia is, either. Loss of the sense of smell. I think this needs to be reworked.'

'The style of the sentence aims to mirror what I feel inside Soviet and Russian railway stations. Holding the mirror up to nature—or down to nature, given the circumstances. Those stations are cluttered with luggage and sleeping bodies. And one has to be highfalutin indeed to survive in the stench, amid hundreds of snoring and swearing people. No wonder I wish to catch anosmia in order to fend off the stench.'

Well, I seldom go to Russia nowadays. And when I do, I try to avoid railway stations, trains and even trolleybuses where one may occasionally stumble upon a sleeping drunkard. Non-existence is my variety of anosmia. In the previous paragraph I should add -ed to all these verbs to put them in the past tense. Economically Russia has been improving steadily these past twenty years.

But I had no idea how to set about it. (Once more I am in the early seventies. Today is July 26, 2012. Putting finishing touches to this old novel of mine. Did I write it at the end of the twentieth century?) Anosmia is not a contagious disease. Despondently I shook my head as I perused the list of its natural and unnatural causes: allergy, infection, ageing, brain tumour, exposure to toxic chemicals. The last item conjured in my mind a few sequences from Antonioni's *Deserto rosso*. Do toxic chemicals stink less than human bodies? I wondered, inhaling the santal-perfumed air of my room. And then my *vita nuova* began (*quando a li miei occhi apparve prima la gloriosa donna de la mia mente*).

I smelt her wine, I drank it. On the palate it was immensely sweet, chewy and had a taste of black treacle, especially at night. She seemed to enclose everything the world had to offer in terms of odours and tastes. And gradually everything became her body: wine, bread, fruit. The air itself, indoors and outdoors. A transubstantiation was taking place under my very nose. Her body filled the visible and invisible worlds, like Brahma. She was all gods and goddesses: Eastern, Western, pagan, Christian. But most of the time she was just an invisible woman, reaching my senses only through the medium of my olfactory nerves.

Once I burst into tears while eating wild strawberries in her absence. It was as if I had tasted them for the first time. Was she really far from my flat that night? Is she far from me now, my invisible woman?

'Music reflects only itself and in this respect it can be likened to Narcissus looking at his own reflection,' I wrote at the age of twenty-five—before meeting Tata. 'Like Narcissus, music is so engrossed in self-contemplation that nothing penetrates it from the outside world, not even the songs of birds. And if some birds happen to be imitated in a piece of music—in Beethoven's *Pastoral Symphony* or in Messiaen's *Catalogue d'oiseaux*—they become trills and tremolos, losing their everyday or even poetical identity. Drowning in music, as it were. Scriabin conceived a work of art in which music was to be enriched by poetry, dancing, colours and scents. But these foreign elements would have been *added* to music that does not really need them. Likewise Narcissus might have been photographed with a group of nymphs for whom he did not care a hoot.'

After meeting Tata I realised that music was pervaded by smells of all sorts—not only because sounds and smells have a lot of affinities, thriving, spreading and dissolving in the air, their native element. Whenever I listened to music now, I got the feeling my olfactory nerves were located in my ears. Bach's fugues smelt of bitter truffles and often had a powerful tangy flavour. I would bend over them to smell their subjects and countersubjects, their strettos and canons.

'Did you make love with Bach's fugues? With a fugue for five voices? What does it feel like, I wonder? A sex orgy, no less!'

Schubert's late opuses, on the other hand, were odourless and consequently immaterial, ghostly. They seemed to have no affinities with Tata except death. But death was bringing them closer and closer together so that in the end they became identical, indissoluble.

'Tata was a sex bomb, a smell bomb, a taste bomb, a death bomb. Actually she fulfilled Scriabin's dream by inducing in her worshippers a supreme, final ecstasy.'

'Bach was Tata's life. And our room, our bed. And the five months we spent together, quarrelling and cuddling, crying and kissing. Bach was also Tata's immortality.'

'Mozart was Tata's life. Mozart, not Bach.'

'The *Requiem*?'

'Wasn't *Così fan tutte* more attuned—'

We awoke around 9 a.m. A splitting headache. She was sitting upright in the bed, propped up by pillows. I was pacing up and down the room. And I went out to ask my neighbours for an aspirin. And then I went to the nearest chemist's. Aspirin. Perhaps she needed something else but I had no idea what she needed. And she remained silent for three hours, for 180 minutes.

'There are too many malingerers in this world!'

'A fatal disease of the blood-forming organs that may occur at any age and in either sex. She was twenty-four, she was a woman. Only the dead and the unborn do not suffer from leukaemia. You're supposed to believe what I say.'

'My psychoanalytic program endeavours to tease out your desire from the incessant demands you make on me and the Internet. The neurotic is someone who privileges demand, hiding his desire beneath the imposing presence of demand.'

'I left the Soviet Union in 1974 because I was afraid she might die in my room, in my bed, in my arms.'

Memories, memories. Is that all I have now? A short encounter in a dimly lit corridor. 'Dimwit.' A short visit from your ghost. And a short visit to your abode in the Hereafter. We can be happy neither in this world nor in the Other World. No point in killing myself.

'Thoughtography, mind over matter. Try and project Tata's form embedded in your thoughts. In 1935, Mrs Gertrude Smith of York, Pennsylvania, discovered she could mentally coax her hens to lay eggs bearing images. She would stand near the hen yard and visualise sunflower-petals along with her initials. A few days afterwards her father came into the house all excited and said: "Here is the sunflower egg." The pattern of a sunflower was incised into the shell on the flattened part. Metaphorically speaking, Tata was some kind of flower, wasn't she? A sunflower.'

'A moonflower.'

'And you can hear her too—by talking to yourself. It is now quite firmly established that the voice the schizophrenic hears is his own. He is talking to himself silently without realising it. A simple procedure like having the patient hold his mouth wide open is sufficient to stop the voices. But I'm not asking you to hold your mouth wide open, am I?'

I have always aspired to forget Tata, as one might forget a woman one picks up in the streets and has no regrets at parting with after two or three months of slovenly liaisons in two-star hotels. In fact our life did have something in common with hotels and imminent departures. Even when she stayed with me for a week, for a fortnight. It was as if she had just entered my room and was already on the point of leaving it. Even when she lay in bed for two days and three nights. As if our bed were rolling up and down my room in search of an exit or a window.

We seemed to make love in small, dirty rooms where only fugitives stay overnight, harkening to footfalls, clutching at their revolvers. We loved each other with the same intensity, like Bonnie and Clyde. I don't care for the film. Nor would I have hit it off with the prototypes, Bonnie and Clyde in person, had I been granted the doubtful privilege of making

their acquaintance. But we loved each other like them, like two people hunted down for murder or pursued by contract killers. Like two people doomed to die in a few moments, not in nine months. In nine *minutes*. And we counted every minute we spent together. One, two, three, four, five. Yet I never lost myself in time so blissfully, with such wild abandon. In those days time was the woods through which I roved for hours and hours, ravenous and radiant. I knew she awaited me somewhere, my Sleeping Beauty.

And sometimes she was sleeping upon my arrival. Sleeping or dying. Or complaining of another splitting headache. Sleeping, splitting the atoms of my body. In desperation I would split her into several human beings, for one person, one body was not enough to quench my thirst and satisfy my curiosity. I was *curious*—the word that should figure in the love-program. I was curious to know how she would respond to a pressure, to a caress, to a kiss, to a curse, to a thrust, to a grasp, to an untimely declaration of love, to indifference or merely a lack of lust. She was not always asleep. Sometimes she was a sort of wide-awake beauty. In those moments she would scrutinise my movements as if her life depended on them, as if I held a paintbrush which could change the colour of her blood.

And I hoped her life did depend on my movements, on that metaphorical paintbrush—on a miraculous cure, a sort of 'natural pill' which might save her, turning our honeymoon into a lifelong happiness. Love-making and pregnancy. I hoped that our love, its physical and psychological impact, could be instrumental in fighting her disease. So I made love to her all the time, even when she was asleep—or dead, to all appearances. I could not wait for her to awaken and come to terms with my room and my desire. I would make love to her sleeping, unconscious body. To her unconscious perhaps. Or to her corpse. Why can't I make love to it now? Is she completely rotten? Is there anything left of her legs?

'Her corpse was packaged as a sex symbol.'

Were my hopes naive and ludicrous? Many women believe that pregnancy might help their bodies eliminate an obscure substance which, day and night, undermines the efficiency of beauty salons and beauty products. They regard pregnancy and delivery as their own second birth—a physical one, as distinguished from the spiritual birth advocated by St Augustine. I merely shared those women's views.

She would sleep in my bed. She was lying and waiting, her eyes closed, her breasts rising in rhythm with the music of her heart. And I listened to that music. I was reminded of our Christmas trees that had always been fitted with musical boxes. She was my joy, my second birth, my third birth. How many times was I born during that period of my life?

And I would make love to her. Out of love, out of passion, out of desire, out of curiosity, out of pity, out of lust. But first and foremost—out of love. And I was craving for a child, for our child.

And she would talk to me for hours and hours: 'Save me from death. Do something! I'm so lonely. The sick are lonely, always. Nobody understands their diseases. Nobody can understand a disease if he doesn't experience it in his own body. So you don't understand me. Why don't you suffer from leukaemia? We would be happy, very happy, the happiest people in the world...if you did. But you don't understand me. You don't hear me, you don't see my wounds, you don't hear my dying heart. You don't love me. You've never loved anybody except the dead. Is that why you want me to die? To fall in love with me at last? Nonsense, nonsense. Still you don't love me, I'm sure you don't. Because you're not dying with me. How cruel you are, how callous. How cold. I'll never marry you. We'll never have children. You're not worthy of our child. Your child is dying in me and you do nothing about it. Don't call a doctor. You should do it yourself. Your *blood* should do it. Your blood should rejuvenate my body. The Fountain of Youth, the Fountain of Love. The Fountain of Life. Don't you understand? Kiss me, make love to me. Make love to your future child. You don't love it, do you? You don't wish to have it around, to bring it up. A little doll you hid in my womb, your little doll. Why do you hide your toys in my womb?'

I wonder if it's time already
 For tears and the shorn head?
 Her disease is fatal and no prayer
 Can save her. No drugs will slow
 The progress of the disease.
 Yesterday her doctor said
 She was making good progress.

A woman's womb is a world within a world, a body within a body. It is said that nails and hair continue to live after one's death. Why not a child, a human being? 'Dead though she be she feels her young one kick.' Alive. Not a day, not an hour. Ten minutes perhaps. A lot can be done in ten minutes, a lot of people can be saved. Are they allowed to bury the unborn?

'This novel is a send-up of steamy Hollywood melodramas.'

And intensive care units? What are *they* for? Only for the living? And what are the unborn supposed to do on this earth of ours? Where are they expected to go? Are they

doomed to die in their mothers' wombs? Are they doomed to be buried with their mothers, in the same tombs, in the same coffins? What for? To accompany their mothers throughout the Hereafter? To keep them company in otherworldly trains? To divert their mothers' thoughts from sad losses and earthly landscapes? And what about their fathers? Who will divert *their* thoughts from sad losses and cemeteries?

Already

Tears are streaming down the face
Of her beloved. As a matter of fact
Tata is neither alive nor dead.
A twinkling star, a twiddling thumb.
How I wonder what you are!
The product of a twisted mind.
A Web site.

We ought to have drunk the love potion concocted by Gottfried von Strassburg who, unlike his predecessors, sought to deprive Tristan and Isolda of their will, of their worlds, turning them into puppets. And puppets are not responsible for their actions, however irrational and ridiculous. In no way was his love potion a mere symbol of everlasting love. We ought to have drunk it. 'You would have realised that even aspirin is more important than aspirations, more important and more useful.' Aspirations, ambitions. Ambience is more important. And, in spite of everything, Moscow life was conducive to happiness. I would have jettisoned my instinct for self-preservation. And the load of words.

The living betray the dead. Whatever they do is a betrayal of the dead. Life itself is a betrayal of those who have no share in it.

Does she remember me at all? She might remember everything, every tiny detail, every nuance of colour and flavour...the play of words, the dance of light and shadow. Perhaps only our memory represents us in the Hereafter, not our soul. Perhaps only our past resounds in the Hereafter, not our present, not our future. How easily our memory transcends Time—here, on earth—as if constantly stepping over its dead body and climbing over its Chinese walls.

She was so beautiful. Every gesture of hers, every movement of her arms was a dance, an oriental dance. Beauty in everyday life, in the kitchen. Even when slicing onions or garlic. And she slept beautifully. I am sure her dreams were beautiful, not just sweet. The sound of her breathing had a rhythm of its own. We seem to assume that nymphs and angels have very

little in common with our way of living. Needing no oxygen, they do not inhale the scents of the earth. Don't they? I am sure they do breathe, otherwise their beauty would be incomplete, imperfect. And even goddesses cook omelettes from time to time.

I often prolong her life beyond its natural or rather unnatural, inhuman limits. At my expense, to my own detriment. The best proof of my love for her. But who needs this proof?

'Thomas bought a new sweater to replace the one he lost. And you lost Tata. The factory replaced most of its workers with robots. And computers can replace real women with virtual ones. How about making love to Isolda or Anna Karenina?'

My Tata. In the virtual worlds based upon my memories she becomes a Flaubertian heroine, replacing Madame Arnoux in *L'Education sentimentale*. Flaubert leaves his house and follows her along boulevards and across forests, a pencil and a notebook trembling in his hands. Goethe and Jane Austen also leave their houses, their respective itineraries converging upon Tata's silhouette.

Another movie I saw recently on television reminded me of her ways, her grace, her face and figure. A German movie shot in the late thirties under the most inartistic and unfeminine regime. In a maharajah's palace a tall, sculptural woman begins to dance for no reason at all, as if animated by the wind or the music of the spheres.

'It sounds contradictory that a sculptural woman should move as if animated by the wind—i.e. like a tree—since sculptures are static, with certain mythic exceptions!'

'It is a mythic exception.'

She is called 'maharani' by a maidservant, yet she dances like an ordinary court dancer designated for her master's amusement. And later on, half-naked, a ghost of herself, a ghost of my Tata, she even performs an exotic dance in some cabaret—to the horror of the maharajah, her husband.

Once upon a time, she said to me in the doorway: 'We're having a small drinks party for one of our colleagues who's leaving next week. Would you care to join us?' I did and therefore I know the answer to the following question: 'Is there anything you've done in your life that you regret?'

'I'm very tired,' she said at some point.

'Nonsense. You can't be tired. It's just a quarter to ten,' said the hostess.

'I'm ill, you know. I'm going to die very soon. Perhaps next month. In twenty days. My blood has been affected. You can't really see it—everything happens inside. Like a secret, like a treasure. A poisoned treasure.'

'What exactly do you suffer from?' asked an ironical voice. 'There are so many diseases. The Syrian Pherecydes expired with a swarm of maggots bursting out of his body.' I had no time to identify the speaker. Anyway time was running out.

'I suffer from leukaemia. Nobody has ever been cured of it. I can't be cured either through surgery or radiation. And my last blood test—' Again she broke off, her eyes blinking. 'Don't you pity me?' she shouted, glancing around. 'Why don't you burst into tears? Why don't you lament my lot?'

A cry of lamentation did not go up. Everybody kept silent. Everybody remained motionless. Why should we overestimate the human aptitude for compassion? Or for the outward manifestation of it?

On that occasion Madame Arnoux would have behaved differently, I suppose. And yet, whenever I think about Tata, I visualise *L'Education sentimentale*: the first chapter, the boat, an inaccessible woman (*Elle ressemblait aux femmes des livres romantiques*), an unfinished love. She was melancholy and soft. She was like the reflection in a river. And she dreamt about a voyage to the North of Russia. Wooden churches, minuscule islands.

'We can't reach them by car or by train. We have to go by boat,' she would say, fiddling with a map or a snapshot. 'I'm told there's a church growing out of the water. Or is it a belfry? I don't remember, really. Many things grow out of those rivers and lakes. Small islands. They look like hands, the palms of somebody's hands. Suppose a giant lives under the earth. And he raises his arms, holding the palms of his hands upward. You know, a figure often used in Indian dances. How marvellous it is to travel on a boat! An enclosed space. And everything must seem unbearably slow at first. Life slows down, nine months become nine years. Would you agree to spend nine years with me on a boat, on a river? No terra firma for nine years. Just the boat, the river, our cabin. And churches growing out of the water.'

She was also Salammbô, the chaste, exotic Salammbô striking up a conversation with the moon. And Beatrice.

'Beatrice was, in her degree, an image of nobility, of virtue, of the Redeemed Life, and in some sense of Almighty God himself. Likewise you confine revelation to Tata whose task is to eke out a possible transcendence that will always elude you.'

Antonioni. How many films has he made about my Tata? She was Monica Vitti at the end of *L'Eclisse*. At the beginning of the film I was with her, in my apartment, in the morning. Not knowing what to talk about: all words had been purchased by Hollywood. All declarations of love, all outbursts of hatred. Only a few pieces of eighteenth-century furniture were left to us. And silence. And immobility. Silence and immobility have no commercial

value. We could not even separate, part company, for short-term separations and subsequent reconciliations had also been purchased by Hollywood. And neither of us was ready for a long-term or a timeless separation.

In my room, in the morning. After a sleepless night.

She sat in an armchair the whole night, her eyes wide-open. I paced up and down the room. And I approached her armchair from time to time. And I said a few words to her. 'I apologise, I'm sorry.' She might have left and gone somewhere. She might have gone to her mother's room, but she had stayed with me instead. Like a ghost, as usual. Like Madame Arnoux. Oddly enough, I was under the impression that a tragedy *had* occurred somewhere, not necessarily in my room. The death of a great man. The destruction of a beautiful, ancient city. The burning of a library. The burning of Troy. There *was* another Troy for her to burn. The death of Helen. The Fall of the Roman Empire. The death of a pagan god. The death of a civilisation.

Troy was burning as I paced up and down the room. Whenever I stopped, I counted up to nine, hoping she might recover her self-possession. Troy was burning. Nothing, no one will ever extinguish those fires. Ancient cities are doomed but the ritual of their destruction lasts forever. Just a state of affairs, nothing more. You count up to nine or to ninety. Or you just pick up a stone and look at it for a while.

In those moments she was a Piero della Francesca painting or an Egyptian pyramid. She was both a dream and reality. And a starry heaven. But in that heaven of hers no star ever twinkled.

I look out of the window and recall the sentence Romeo pronounced upon seeing Juliet in the ballroom: 'O, she doth teach the torches to burn bright.' My Tata seems to have taught the stars to burn so brightly the sky is on fire now. *En proie aux flammes, en proie à une femme, une seule.* The sky has been burning bright since my departure from Moscow. A celestial city, the City of Love. The second Troy, the third Rome. As if a majestic, magnificent tigress lay sprawled voluptuously across the canopy of heaven.

A diverse mix of moods. She went in for antonyms. She was joyful, cheerful, light-hearted, effervescent. She was despondent, despairing, desperate, depressed. Every time she was different and recognisable somehow. And there were also the same moods, all along. The same despair. Those sleepless nights and empty afternoons. I could not fill up a glass. You pour some water in a glass, but the glass remains empty.

So I continue to harp on the theme of my wasted life. Not wasted *love*, mind you. Love is never wasted, something always remains. A lot remains, actually. The whole thing. My life

does seem wasted, the life she has no share in. Her laughter. I no longer hear it. And an abrupt sadness. Suddenly, all of a sudden. I no longer hear her sadness. She was fond of contrasts but she was not really hysterical. Highly-strung perhaps, like Mahler's music. Her sadness, her *fantaisie impromptue*. What a pity we had no time to travel, to fly amidst clouds and birds. We never took a plane together, we never looked at the earth from afar. I wonder what she might have said during a flight over Rome or St Petersburg. Or during lunch in a Venetian palace. I am sure she would have talked differently in the neighbourhood of the Doges' Palace. Even the tone of her voice would have been different. And the colour of her eyes. Everything would have been different.

She did not even come to my dacha which used to hibernate until the month of May. *Im wunderschönen Monat Mai*. What would we have done in the wonderful, marvellous month of May? She would have breathed her last at my dacha. In July.

I know only a particle of hers. Just a small particle. A shred of evidence to support my dreams.

TRISTAN ON EARTH

5

When you are in love the world becomes a shadow, a darkened room. A swinging bare electric bulb throws sinister shadows across the walls. That is what love looks like—a bare electric bulb surrounded by sinister shadows. And only Furtwängler manages to bring out the light and shadow in *Tristan und Isolde*.

'I'm on a ship. What am I doing on this ship? I'm bringing Isolde to my king, to my house. My ship is bound for Cornwall. I am a knight of the Cornish court. My name is Tristan. I'm bringing Isolde home as a bride for my uncle, King Mark of Cornwall. She is free to marry him because I killed her bridegroom. Out of jealousy? Not quite. At the time I wasn't even acquainted with Isolde. I did it to spare my country's maidens who used to be sent to Ireland as payment—'

'You're wasting your time,' said my guardian angel. 'You won't find Isolde anywhere. But it's not the main purpose of your visit to earth, is it? You've come here to discover and experience the sentiment of love.'

What happens when a man falls in love with a woman? Does anything *fall* within him? His heart, his soul? Does he fall *himself*? Does he kneel before the object of his love? *What* happens during this process? Does a tiny, invisible particle detach itself from one substance and fly over to another? An arrow, one of Cupid's arrows.

I analysed the following Indian charm:

May love, the disquieter, disquiet thee; do not hold out upon thy bed! With the terrible arrow of Kâma do I pierce thee in the heart.

The arrow, winged with longing, barbed with love, whose shaft is undeviating desire, with that, well-aimed, Kâma shall pierce thee in the heart!

An invisible arrow. I realised there was no real arrow involved in the process, only a mythological one. Or metaphorical. But that love-metaphor had nothing in common with our use of literary devices. Our metaphors separate faces, conversations and thoughts. Human metaphors unite them—faces and bodies and souls and what not. Are human metaphors love potions? Are they liquid?

Kâma is a god of love. He must have a lot of arrows in his quiver. Are they all identical? Is love always the same? No, it is not, judging from human novels and plays. There

is a love that kills. There is a love that gives some moral uplift to the person in love. I am not interested in this kind of love. There is a love that drives one crazy. Was Anna Karenina crazy when she lay down on the rails? Was I crazy when I lay down on the rails? I was not. I knew I would not die. But Anna Karenina knew she *would* die as a result of her act. Was she crazy? Or did she suffer from the first variety of love—the love that kills, the love unto death?

There is a love that lulls one into a false sense of security. The person whose heart happens to be pierced by this arrow may cross the street without looking right and left. Or he may venture into a dangerous area of the city and get killed by a delinquent youngster. Does this variety also coincide with the love that kills? Do various loves overlap? How often?

There is a love that rejuvenates the human body. Being immortal I am not interested in this kind of love either.

Does Kâma (or Cupid) have all these arrows in his quiver? How does he distinguish between them? Are they painted in different colours? The love unto death must be painted red.

With that well-aimed arrow of Kâma which parches the spleen, whose plume flies forward, which burns up, do I pierce thee in the heart.

At the beginning of the opera Tristan made an attempt to extract this arrow from his heart. He was already in love with Isolde but he had no right to love her: she had been betrothed to his uncle. In her absence. And he might have succeeded had he not drunk the love potion.

How to get rid of the love potion you have just swallowed? Should you phone for an ambulance and drink a glass of milk? Milk is not a love potion, certainly not. Is it an antidote? Is there a liquid capable of stopping the effect of a love potion?

'You should take an emetic,' my guardian angel pointed out.

'What?' Again the Wagner music died down in my ears.

'If you accidentally swallow any of this liquid, take an emetic to induce vomiting.'

'And what about arrows?' I asked. 'You can't extract them with your bare hands, can you?' I had already forgotten that we were dealing with *mythological* arrows. Myths are a reality on our planet. Everything is a reality on our planet, even our metaphors. We actually see and touch them. How difficult it is to get accustomed to the *unreal* part of the human world.

'You'll need a pair of pliers. You use pliers for pulling out nails and love-arrows. Besides, the love-tumour can be surgically removed. But you have nothing to worry about—you don't have a heart.'

Consumed by burning ardour, with parched mouth, do thou come to me, pliant, thy pride laid aside, mine alone, speaking sweetly and to me devoted!

On our planet we never long to see each other. We just see each other now and then. Eternally. If you are infinite, 'now and then' becomes a continuous line—'always', in other words.

Isolda was not pliant when Tristan entered her cabin. And she never laid her pride aside.

How can you lay your pride aside? Where does it lodge? Do you need a pair of pliers to extract it from your body?

The sentiment of pride is unknown on our planet. What indeed could we take pride in? 'If you don't take professional pride in your work, you're probably in the wrong job,' a human told me last week. On our planet we just play games. All play and no work. We cannot therefore be in the wrong job.

What else do humans take pride in? A man might feel great pride when his daughter wins first prize. On our planet everybody wins—eternally. And we have only got first prizes. So what is there to be proud of? Our games are *divine* because we cannot lose. God is unable to lose anything, even if He happens to conceive such a desire.

I drive thee with a goad from thy mother and thy father, so that thou shalt be in my power, shalt come up to my wish.

Many people aspire to extract the love-arrow from their hearts. They grasp it with their hands and pull with all their strength until they faint with pain and exhaustion. But I promise you to push this arrow deeper and deeper into my heart.

'You don't have a heart,' said my guardian angel. 'How about driving this arrow into your lungs?'

Heart, breast, bosom—are they identical in the realm of love? Are they interchangeable within the language of love? Can you say 'bosom' instead of 'heart' or 'love'? What does the expression 'bosom friend' mean? Are you supposed to *love* that friend?

All her thoughts, do ye, O Mitra and Varuna, drive out of her! Then, having deprived her of her will, put her into my power alone!

'What are you thinking of? Whom do you honour with your thoughts, Isolda the Fair? Tristan? He is irrevocably dead. Dead and gone—I won. Alas, he was a human. Even legendary heroes die in human lands. I am alive, however. And I'll always be alive, always at your beck and call. Adoring you, kissing the hem of your old-fashioned, threadbare dress. Your frills and furbelows. Where are you? Where is your will? Do you wish to remain where you are, in your grave? But your grave is too narrow. And my palace is as big as a galaxy. I offer you my galaxy! And my infinity! Come hither! Let me deprive you of your mortal will and invite you to the opera of my life. I am on the ship, on our ship. And nobody is waiting for us. You're not my uncle's bride any more. Anything can happen in eternity. I've waited long enough to liberate you from your bond. You're mine now, mine—in my power, in my arms. And your lips are in my mouth, and your blood is in my veins. I drank the love potion. What was it? Wagner's music? I'm in love with you, my Isolda. Where are you? I didn't murder your bridegroom. He died a natural death. He wasn't immortal, you know. So many years have elapsed since his birth and his death. So many years lie between you and your bridegroom. Light years, night years. Can't you skip over them? Just concentrate your thoughts on the distance that separates you from your bridegroom. Measure it up! And let your body glide along it until you come to my hotel room. It is so easy to travel through space and time. And you don't even need a time machine. Just your thoughts, nothing but your thoughts. All her thoughts, do ye, O Mitra and Varuna, drive towards my room! Pull them towards my room. Remove them from her head and put them on my bed. Isolda, Isolda!'

'She will not come,' said my guardian angel.

'Are you *her* guardian angel?' I shouted. 'What do you protect her from?'

'You don't love her. You still don't know what love is and how it usurps the human heart.'

'Like an arrow, like an arrow!'

'But you haven't yet seen the bow from which this arrow can be shot. You're just trying to *will* yourself to fall in love. That's not enough. Perhaps you should be deprived of your will. Face to face with love, humans are defenceless. Love is God, you know. Why don't you ask a woman to slap your face? Sometimes it does the trick—in books and movies.'

So I went out in search of an appropriate hand. I was staying in *Vier Jahreszeiten* at the time. I walked through a few restaurants, looking at hands, studying them *scientifically*. The

science of love. A lot of hands were lying on long wooden tables. At regular intervals they would lift and put down froth-capped beer glasses, forks and knives. I was so absorbed in my contemplation of hands that I often overlooked the sex of their owners. I simply did not look at the owners of those hands, my eyes riveted on palms, on fingers. And whenever I chanced upon a more or less suitable hand—a hand suitable for my purpose—I would find out that the hand in question belonged to a young man.

A week afterwards I changed my tactics. I was looking at faces now as if the purpose of my quest were to slap someone—a woman preferably—and not to turn my cheeks this way and that in order to be struck. A woman was smoking a cigarette. I saw her hand superimposed on her mouth—an unusual sight for the natives of our galaxy. Anything can be superimposed on our mouths: a piece of fruit, a flower, a blade of grass. But not a hand, not a cigarette.

I walked over to her. 'Could you please slap my face?' I asked.

'Why? I haven't met you. You've done me no harm.'

'Do me a favour,' I said.

'But you haven't even insulted me.'

'Do you want me to insult you?'

'No,' she said.

'Can't you do it just for fun? Or for love?'

'For love?' She sounded surprised. And all sounds, save the sounds of love, grated on my nerves in those days. Wagner's music is full of love-sounds. There are also death-sounds in his music. And in his texts.

'Please slap me in the face,' I pleaded.

She graciously acceded to my request. She acceded to it so graciously and elegantly I did not feel anything either on my cheek or in my heart.

'You shouldn't do it *elegantly*,' I said.

Again she slapped my face. This time I did feel something on my cheek. What did I feel in my heart? Nothing at all. Nothing stirred at the bottom of my heart, in the upper regions of my heart. Even my lungs remained motionless. In desperation I hurried outdoors, thinking that the woman had failed to awaken love in my breast because of the cigarette stuck in between her fingers. Of course, before striking my cheek, she had transferred the cigarette to her *left* hand. 'But the smoke remained in the air, in my lungs, in my heart. And cigarette smoke contains thousands of harmful chemicals. A smoking woman is unable to slap men

properly. A smoking woman can't awaken the sentiment of love in anybody, not even in a human.'

'You should have turned the other cheek,' said my guardian angel.

7

I went out once again. In my room I was alone—alone with my guardian angel. And I had no wish to fall in love with my guardian angel.

I entered the Spatenhaus and proceeded to the small hall at the back of the building. I sat down and ordered a glass of beer. I drank three glasses of beer and something happened inside my brain. I decided to fall in love at once, on the spot. I made up my mind. For the first time in my life I experienced a psychological jerk. No longer did my thoughts move smoothly inside my brain. They jumped up (or rather down—as far as Hell) and suddenly froze in their tracks. They were rooted to the spot on which there was printed in capital letters: 'TO FALL IN LOVE'.

I rose to my feet and walked around the restaurant. Needless to say, I did not find Isolda. But I had decided to fall in love without leaving the restaurant so that I inspected its every nook and cranny in search of my future beloved. For an hour at least I scoured the ground floor for an appropriate maiden, and I extended my search to the first floor where only a few middle-aged gentlemen talked and sipped their beers.

I waited for half an hour. A group of humans entered the Spatenhaus. My life underwent a metamorphosis upon their appearance on the ground floor. (Another jump, another jerk!) By an odd quirk of fate I saw my Isolda or rather heard her name. 'Isolde,' said a man, putting his hand on a woman's shoulder. 'Was ist los?' she asked.

Oh, she was not the real Isolda. Just a woman in her thirties, neither beautiful nor ugly. Dark hair, dark eyes. 'Just a woman whose name is Isolde,' I thought.

'That is enough,' said my guardian angel. '*Nomina sunt consequentia rerum*. The North American Indian regards his name not as a mere label but as a distinct part of his personality, just as much as are his eyes or his teeth. If you write your enemy's name down on an ordinary sheet of paper, you will be able to carry off his soul along with it—in accordance with the belief of the Tolampoos.'

And I have written her name so many times, with such ardour and yearning. Nothing else remains of Isolda—only her name, the German version of her name sung by Tristan in Wagner's opera. That is enough because there remains *something* of her.

I sat at the table opposite and ordered a glass of beer. I stared at the woman I had set my 'arrowless' heart upon. In a way, I had taken my heart out of my chest and put it on her plate. A superficial act, just another experiment. I was not in love. 'Here, let me give you my business card,'—something along those lines. 'Let me give you my love card.' Love card. A small rectangular piece of stiff paper with information printed on it: the type of love, the intensity of love, the colour of love, the person's address and telephone number. To which type did my love belong? Theoretical love, love at first thought. Experimental love.

I continued to drink beer. Incidentally, I prefer draught beer to keg beer. My heart was beating faster than usual, but I realised that speed had nothing to do with love. At least that particular speed—the beer-speed—was foreign to love.

I began to talk myself into it:

'She's a rich jewel. All right. I hope the comparison will work. What kind of jewel? A pigeon-blood ruby. Or a diamond. Doesn't matter. Beauty too rich for use. Yet I'll use her as a guinea pig. The end justifies the means. For earth too dear. She is uncommonly beautiful down here. Quite exceptional, I must say. On our planet she would be plain. No, that won't do. I'll never fall in love if I think she is plain. Even on our planet, where everybody is beautiful and intelligent, she would "kill the envious moon".'

'O moon of my delight,' sang my guardian angel.

'Especially her legs, her body in general. So shows a snowy dove trooping with crows as yonder lady— Well, I *might* compare her to a dove, for the sake of experiment. A white bird with short legs. No, her legs are very long. Never mind, the others look like crows. She also looks like a crow, as a matter of fact. No, I shouldn't allow myself to think along these lines. My thoughts are too powerful, they might spoil everything. And touching her— Well, I can't touch her now, can I? How? Shall I walk over to that table and touch her shoulder? Would it be enough to make blessed my rude hand? Or should I touch something else? Her lips? Not in a public place. Her lips or her neck or her cheek. Not her shoulder. This is a friendly gesture. Not her back either. A teacher might pat his pupil on the back for getting top marks. Romeo didn't pat Juliet on the back, did he? What did Tristan touch when he saw Isolda for the first time? He was ill, he was in his enemy's country. He may have touched his sword, for all I know. Did my heart love till now? Of course not. So I needn't forswear anything.'

Two or three times she glanced at me, but her eyes did not even attempt to decipher my intentions and deliberations. I did not realise she was having dinner with her husband and his relatives.

They finished their dinner and departed. I followed them. Her bag bounced against her side as she walked along. 'I think we have a shadow on our tail,' she might have said had she taken the trouble to turn back and glance at me. They had a *light* on their tail, a light of love.

I walked in their wake along the streets of Munich. 'Romeo was luckier than me,' I thought. 'He knew where Juliet lived. He even knew the whereabouts of her balcony. Does this lady have a balcony, by the way? What if she doesn't? Our first conversation should take place tonight. This night, not tomorrow. Where's the moon?'

Soon the people I followed split into three groups, and the lady—my fair lady—remained in the company of a middle-aged man. They took a taxi and I followed them in another taxi. Their taxi pulled up before a huge building that had no balconies. My taxi stopped too and I got out. I did not follow them into the building despite my resolution to speak to my lady on the same night. The door closed behind them and I remained alone, with nobody to follow in the moonlight, along the streets of Munich. The moon was in the sky, at her post. Actually I had no wish to follow anyone: I was fed up with being a shadow of humans. I wished to be luminous, radiant. I was even loath to follow in Romeo's footsteps, but I had no choice. I had no idea how to court a human lady.

I stood for a while in front of her house. Is that how one should court a human lady? Just by standing in front of her house? 'I must sing something,' I thought. 'Why don't I serenade her in the moonlight? She'll come out and kiss me. And then we'll cuddle each other on the porch, serenaded by the dawn chorus of a thousand birds. There aren't too many birds in Munich, I'm afraid. Well, I'll sing something myself. At dawn. I'll sing all the time except for the moments when she'll kiss me.'

I cleared my throat and began to sing. I sang out of tune—compared with Kirsten Flagstad who is my favourite Isolda. But I was singing a serenade, that was enough: not everybody can sing as beautifully as Kirsten Flagstad and Elisabeth Schwarzkopf. And I had never studied in human conservatoires. Nobody sings on our planet. Why should we sing? Out of happiness? We are *used* to our happiness.

Once the serenade was over, I burst into another song, another serenade, which was not infinite either. (*Our* serenades would be infinite, I suppose.) Nobody came out. I cast a glance at the moon as if seeking her advice.

At that point I was no longer waiting for Isolda from Wagner's opera. I did not even expect to see Juliet: there were no balconies in front of me. I merely wanted to see my fair lady, but my desire was not reciprocated. 'Maybe one day it will occur to you to reciprocate,' I said in angry tones.

I resumed my performance—a little louder this time, in the hope of piercing the windows of the house opposite. 'My voice should be like one of Cupid's arrows.' A policeman approached my face and said something in German. Even my dictionary did not understand him. Somehow my nerve fibres caught the *meaning* of his words whereupon I interrupted my serenade once more and made as if I was going away. I turned round the nearest corner, dodged into a small courtyard, took refuge behind a car and glanced at my wristwatch. A few minutes later I peeped out and saw the moonlight that seemed to have obliterated everything: houses, pavements, trees. Retracing my steps, I found myself on the same spot. But I decided not to sing any more. Anyway it was pointless. Moreover, I had sung myself hoarse.

I just stood there and watched the house opposite as if the house itself could do something unusual, emotional. 'Shall I throw a stone at her window?' I asked myself. 'Which is her window, incidentally? How many windows are there along this façade?' I counted the windows: our people prefer mathematical probabilities to inspired guesses.

'You may hit her husband's window,' said my guardian angel all of a sudden.

'Is that man her husband?' I asked with a shiver. I shivered for the first time in my life. Even now I cannot repress a shiver when I think about that man.

'We'll need a certain amount of money to woo the object of our desire in grand style. A real old-time courtship, an irreplaceable olde-worlde courtesy. You're very traditional. All immortals are old hats. So you must woo her for months with flowers and expensive presents.'

Money, money, money. I can get as much money as I wish, provided I don't forget to focus my thoughts on a thousand-mark banknote, on a million-dollar cheque. How long would I need to become a multi-millionaire? A second, two seconds. Humans focus their thoughts on money for years. And they lose everything in the process: other thoughts, love, Shakespeare, honour. The photographs of their lives are out of focus.

'*Mais sans l'argent l'honneur n'est qu'une maladie*,' quoted my guardian angel. 'Do you disagree with Racine?'

'It's just the other way round. Money is a disease anyway, either with honour or without.'

'How to court a married woman?' I asked myself. Romeo was of no help under the circumstances. 'Juliet wasn't married when he met her,' I thought. 'Later on her parents tried to marry her off to Paris and she died—temporarily. On our planet you can't thwart your parent's projects by dying in your bed. But our parents never map out their children's future. Such things make no sense in eternity.'

I also dwelt for a while on our attitude towards marriage. Actually we have no attitude towards it for the simple reason that there are no marriages or wedding days on our planet. We are all married, in a manner of speaking. We are all married to each other and even to the unborn. And, at the same time, we remain bachelors—in our heart of hearts. 'In our brain of brains,' as we say in our language. And even children fail to create a real attachment between us.

How to court a married woman? First I had to find out whether Isolde had been blessed with children by our Mother Nature. There is only one nature in the universe so it follows that we have the same mother, all of us. We are brothers and sisters.

It was as if time had stopped on earth. Does time remain motionless on our planet? Could I stop time in a moment of bliss? Could I stop time if everything worked out in accordance with my expectations? Would time stoop to bribery or blackmail? How to blackmail time? I might tell it that it has no right to kill humans—anybody in fact. Anybody, anything: animals, plants, stones. 'You don't kill anything on *our* planet,' I might remind it. 'Do you think humans are much inferior to our species? Perhaps they are. Does it give you the right to destroy them? You should respect life everywhere and in everything. If you go on destroying humans, I'll speak of your behaviour to God.'

'Don't move! Stay right where you are,' I said to time. Instead of coming to a standstill, however, time executed the long jump and I saw the dawn, the sun and my Isolde. She was not alone this time. A little boy was walking by her side—her child, as my guardian angel informed me.

'Should I become his tutor? Like Julien Sorel?' I asked him.

'I would take her footprint to the hotel, if I were you,' answered my guardian angel.

'Her footprint? What are you talking about?'

'You should plant her footprint in a flower-pot.'

'Is that a sort of love potion?'

'And you should plant a marigold—a flower that never fades. As to her footprint, it's merely a matter of time. If you follow her long enough, you'll find the imprint of her foot on sand—in the Englischer Garten, for instance. Her son needs fresh air so she'll take him to the Englischer Garten sooner or later. All you have to do is dig up the earth from her footprint and put it in the flowerpot. The marigold is an unfading flower. Its golden blossom grows, blooms and never fades. Likewise your fair lady's love will glow and bloom—'

'Shall I ask her to remove her shoes?' I inquired sarcastically. And I laughed in my guardian angel's face. Our guardian angels have only eyes, big soulful eyes. And none of them

is likely to model his physique and personality upon the inhabitants of the planets he might find himself on. Anyway my guardian angel would have refused to ape humans, even if I had suggested it as another variety of moral support.

'You may also hang a lock of her hair on a peg,' he went on, undaunted. 'But don't forget to fumigate it with brimstone. Or you may catch a frog on St. George's Day, wrap it in a white cloth and put it in an anthill after sunset or about midnight. After a while the frog will be reduced to a hook-shaped bone. Pick it up, go to your fair lady and hook her dress with the bone. And she'll fall in love with you on the spot.'

'Stop this nonsense! Answer my question!'

'She doesn't need to remove her shoes.'

'The other question, the previous one. Should I become her son's tutor?'

'There's also the Love Chase—a form of wedding ceremony among the Kirghiz. The bride, armed with a formidable whip, mounts a fleet horse and is pursued by all the young men who seek her hand. She will be given as a prize to the one who catches her, but she has the right, besides urging her horse on to the utmost, to use her whip, often with no mean force, to keep off unwanted lovers. So, contrary to what Nietzsche advocated in his famous book *Also sprach Zarathustra*—'

'Should I become her son's tutor?'

'Here's a list of love potions: mandrake roots, mandrake apples, precious stones, dead men's clothes, candles, a certain hair in a wolf's tail, a swallow's heart, dust of a dove's heart, vipers' tongues, asses' brains, caul of new-born infants, the rope by which a man has been hanged, a stone from an eagle's nest—'

'Should I become her son's tutor?'

At that point my guardian angel pursed his lips and lapsed into silence. My Isolde was still walking alongside the house opposite. The child kept on running around her like a satellite. (In our galaxy, satellites are called 'children'.) Her child, her husband's offspring.

With nose wrinkled in fastidious distaste I crossed the street and knocked over another child who let out a piercing scream and burst into tears. Like an arrow his scream pierced the air and reached the ears of *her* child. 'I wish I had a voice like that,' I thought with envy. 'She would have come out last night had she heard *this* scream.'

Her child turned his head. She, too, turned her head.

'Is it your child?' I asked her looking at the child whose eyes were filled up with tears.

'No,' she answered. Her voice was almost as beautiful as Kirsten Flagstad's.

'So you've got only one child,' I concluded. 'Do you need a tutor for your son?'

'Who are you?' she asked.

'My name is Tristan.'

I tried to persuade her not to send her child to school. 'Many children pass through the entire school system without gaining a single qualification,' I said among other things. 'And I can teach Latin to your son. And the Bible. Do you want me to recite a verse from the Bible?'

She said they did not need a tutor. I asked permission to discuss the matter with her husband. 'I'm sure my husband will reject your offer,' she said.

'Could you at least tell me where your window is?' I asked. The other child began to whimper. She made an attempt to console him. 'She must be a good mother, like Madame de Rênal,' I thought. 'And what if her child is taken seriously ill? Will she throw me out—on religious grounds?'

The other child stopped whimpering and they left, all of them. They left me high and dry. I quickened my pace in order to catch up with the object of my dreams: I was beginning to love that woman. Our powers of self-persuasion are exceptional.

'It's your human genes that have fallen in love with her,' said the guardian angel.

As my human lungs with which I was not yet on familiar terms set their own molecules in motion and pushed a small quantity of air towards my vocal cords, she interrupted her trajectory, did an about-turn and entered an unfamiliar building. I looked up and noticed several balconies. 'What should I do to make her appear on one of those balconies?' I asked my guardian angel.

'Do whatever you want, but refrain from singing!' he answered impertinently.

A woman appeared on one of the balconies. She was more beautiful than the lady I had set my heart upon. 'Too late,' I thought, shaking my head despondently. An English poet suggested that lovers exchange hearts at the height of mutual infatuation. My heart was not yet beating in Isolde's bosom, but it was already lying in her pocket, metaphorically speaking.

The beautiful lady cast a wistful glance at our galaxy and forsook me, demoralised by the distance which separated her from immortality. In our world every disappearance is at once counterbalanced by an appearance, but the matter stands differently on earth—in the solar system in general. I waited for another two hours before Isolde vouchsafed to fulfil my expectations. She gave me a stare of disapproval as she emerged from the doorway, her son tagging at her sleeve. We all began to move in the opposite direction. Soon we reached her house and I followed them inside, disregarding Isolde's protestations. They walked into the lift and she slammed the door shut. I rushed up the stairs, thinking about the metamorphosis my life had undergone: I used to rush up and down the stars.

I memorised the address of her flat and returned to my hotel room. I had decided to speak to her husband in her absence.

That night I opened the window and realised that Shakespeare had not gone far enough in his description of love's influence on objects, on the universe in general. 'O, she doth teach the torches to burn bright.' Indeed the lights *were* bright along the streets of Munich. But the lights were also bright *above* the streets of Munich. 'The stars are old, very old. They're almost as old as my grandfather, very old and senile. And yet they shine as brightly as these lampposts and windows. Why? Because Isolde taught them to shine. She gave them a lesson in brightness, touched them, torched them—every one of them.' Carried away by my exaltation, I even improved upon Shakespeare: 'O, she doth teach the stars to burn bright.'

There was also a light in my human heart. 'In spiders and annelid worms the heart is just a straight tube. In fishes the heart is a folded tube, with three or four enlarged areas that correspond to the chambers in the mammalian heart. In man and other mammals and in birds, the heart is a four-chambered double pump that receives blood into its two upper chambers, or atria, and pumps the blood out from its two lower chambers, or ventricles.' My heart was a four-chambered double pump, according to human encyclopaedias. And it distributed blood throughout my body. Blood and light. (The pages of our encyclopaedias are luminous, effulgent.) What kind of light did it provide my body with? All kinds of light: sunlight, moonlight, firelight, electric light. There was a multitude of lampposts inside my body, a multitude of stars. Like a painter, like an Old Dutch master, my heart made great use of the effects of light and shadow. Love was light and all the rest shadow. 'But what doesn't belong in the realm of love?' I asked myself. 'Her light is reflecting off these façades and the sky—off the whole universe in fact. What is not love? What has remained outside? Nothing, nothing.' All of a sudden I heard François Couperin's masterpiece *Trois leçons des ténèbres*. A bad omen?

8

How to gain access to her room and heart? I go from point A to point B. Isolde goes from point C to point D. Her husband goes from point E to point F. Her husband goes on a long journey. Her husband is injured in a road accident. His burns are so severe he dies before reaching hospital.

Love. What really happened on the ship? What did they feel? What does the stage direction say?

Isolda throws away the goblet. Trembling, they look at each other, with eyes in which a defiance of death soon gives way to a glow of love.

All right. But what happens *in between* these states of mind, of heart, of soul? A defiance of death, a glow of love—two opposite states. What brings about this metamorphosis? The love potion. How does it work inside Tristan's substance? Does it fill a particular organ? His heart, his stomach? Does it impregnate his soul? Does Tristan's soul change in chemical terms? Does Tristan's heart grow bigger? Does it come into bloom? Or is that something impalpable? 'When I awoke today, a few impalpable images and sensations were all I could recall of the dream despite the infallibility of my memory,' I thought. 'Love. Is that what it looks like? The memory of a dream? The metamorphosis lasted till their deaths. And it was no dream but a palpable reality.'

What does music tell us? *Seinsuchtsmotiv*. The Yearning motive. A rising and chromatically descending song. A soft song, a moonlight song. First the cellos, then the oboes. A four-note woodwind chord. What actually happens? Does a new plant take root somewhere? Impalpably, infallibly? What is it? The Tree of Love? Or is it a flower? What flower? The one Carmen threw to José, the same flower? The Flower of Love? The impalpable flower. But you can smell it. The sweet-smelling flower. No, the smell is not sweet, there is a tang of lemon in it. And the tang of thyme. And the salt tang of the sea air. There is the tang of the sea in the air, whenever one falls in love. The Black Sea of Love. And everything takes place on Tristan's ship. Always, always.

They lower their heads slightly, passing a hand over the forehead. They look for each other, lower their eyes in confusion, raise them with a mounting desire—

At least they were on the same ship. In the same boat.

The four-note chord. The salt tang of the sea air.

Does music express anything? Or are there only notes, four-note chords, five-note chords, nine-note tunes? Stravinsky thought that music was just music, nothing else. Notes, notes, notes. But there must be something beyond: yearning and anguish, languor and anger, rapture and torture, morning and mourning. The twilight of the gods, the twilight of humans. Eros and Thanatos. Music must burst through its own boundaries. Like poetry and painting, like art in general. Like the heart, like the human heart.

'I'll only *touch* her hand today,' I said to myself. 'I'll hold her hand tomorrow—for two minutes. And the day after tomorrow—for three minutes. And finally I'll hold her hand in her husband's presence. And I'll begin to move my face towards her face, inch by inch. And I'll kiss her in a week's time. And our kiss will last for two minutes. And then for three minutes. And finally I'll kiss her on the lips in her husband's presence. And I'll begin to move my body towards her body. And I'll touch her body with my body—in a month's time. And I'll caress her body with my body. And we'll make love for two minutes. And then for nine minutes.'

I saw her hand in my dream and held it for six hours.

(To be continued.)

LIEBESTOD

The grimmest of all forms of sanction against Soviet dissenters was compulsory confinement in mental hospitals. Occasionally used by Stalin, this tactic came into its own once the criminal code became more difficult to apply to dissenters. It had many attractive features for the authorities; once the necessary diagnosis had been obtained, no further 'evidence' was needed, such as might be contested in court, the sentence was indefinite, and the certified insane did not enjoy even the meagre civil rights (correspondence, visits) that remained to prisoners. If it seemed desirable, furthermore, the 'patient' could be treated with drugs that made him ill or depressed, or caused great pain.

Geoffrey Hoskings, *A History of the Soviet Union*

'There were, in his mind, many other shapes—of people and places, of philosophies and poems. All these had their own identities and were each autonomous. But in his poetry Dante determined to relate them all to the Beatrician figure, and he brought that figure as near as he could to the final image, so far as he could express it, of Almighty God.'

She will not read this homage to her night, to her starry night, to the sleepless nights I spent in her company. The longest letter I have ever written to her.

'Epistolary novels are out of fashion. Long, curly hair is in fashion this summer. Miniskirts were all the rage in the sixties. Platform shoes were in mode in the seventies and again in the nineties. The modus operandi of one writer rarely has anything in common with that of another, but nobody writes epistolary novels today for fear of being ridiculed.

'The Soviet authorities destroyed the wrong people.'

'Oh, memories again! Persecution mania, nightmares. The Soviet Union revisited, in a bad dream. Are you homesick, pastsick? Are you dying for your sick past? It makes you sick to the stomach when you recall your Soviet past. Why do you keep on dreaming about it?'

'Hitler's cronies burnt the wrong books.'

'Should they have burnt some other books? Do you think inferior books should be burnt? "There may be too many publishers; there are certainly too many books published," wrote T. S. Eliot.'

I have a nostalgic longing for parallel worlds, for the lives I have not lived. I would give anything to find myself in one of those worlds, in all of them, provided they are situated in Moscow or in St Petersburg—in the fifties, in the sixties, in the seventies, in the eighties. The unity of time and space I call it. And my tragedies should involve the same people: my parents who died in the early seventies, Tata, my school friends. But I want them to do something else, something different from what they used to do, from what they are doing now. My eternal recurrence is an unfinished symphony of the past.

'And what about you? Are *you* supposed to do something else in that past of yours? Why not become a dissident writer and land up in a mental hospital? Is that what you're dreaming about? Dream on, my dear. No one will lock you up. A free country, isn't it? Incidentally, Vincent Van Gogh painted *Starry Night* during his year in a lunatic asylum. Why didn't he paint *Moonlit Night* instead? In a starry asylum?'

'Mental hospitals. A sign of recognition. In the Eastern block they took notice of mavericks.'

'And in the West they ignore you and walk on.'

Only a madman is capable of writing letters to the Queen of Day. A madman or a dead man.

TRISTAN ON EARTH

8

The universe of the very far future would be an inconceivably dilute soup of photons, neutrinos, and a dwindling number of electrons and positrons, all slowly moving farther and farther apart. As far as we know, no further basic physical processes would ever happen. No significant event would occur to interrupt the bleak sterility of a universe that has run its course yet still faces eternal life—perhaps eternal death would be a better description.

Paul Davies, *The Last Three Minutes*

I wrote a letter to Isolde:

My beloved,

I hope you realise I am in love with you. And you must have experienced the sentiment of love, for you live on earth, on the planet of love. Why don't you let me touch your hand? I think it is an appropriate prelude to a lifelong, immortal passion. At least Julien Sorel thought so. And he was an expert in the art of love. So was Stendhal. I think we can trust them in these matters. Why don't you let me touch your hand?

Let us perform this ritual in your dining room. Or in your luncheon room, if you have one. I shall bear the brunt of the work. I shall extend my hand towards yours. You should withdraw your hand at first. You are shy, aren't you? And you believe in God. And you fear God's punishment, don't you? 'Thou shalt not commit adultery.' You fear that your son may fall ill on account of your sins. You fear that your son may die in your arms so you are reluctant to sin. You are reluctant to make love with me either in your room or somewhere else. But I love you. I love you dearly and I dream of touching your hand and your lips. And your body. Why do you hide your body from me? By caressing me in your son's presence you will prove that you love me more than him. Don't be afraid of adultery, my darling. Many people in public life have committed

adultery and their children are not dead and buried. If your son looks ill, just tuck him in. You are often deceived by your son's simulation of the death agony. Humans cannot die every night, rising from the dead at the break of dawn. Death is not a nightmare. Anyway humans are sometimes granted a last-minute reprieve.

Let me come to your room in the middle of the night, when your husband is snoring in his room. I shall first listen at his door to make sure he is asleep, and then I shall approach your bed on tiptoe. Don't scream, my darling, or else your neighbours may call the police. Let us not forget that you live in a flat, not in a mansion. And please don't pray to God while I am in your room—we should not waste our precious time. Even in eternity time counts. Time recounts stories.

Anyway I promise to leave Munich if your son catches a fatal disease. In this case I shall return to my planet and get in touch with our doctors who can cure your son in no time at all through thought transference. A long-distance cure, as we call it. So don't you worry, my darling—everything will be all right. And I promise you not to follow in Tristan's footsteps so that you will not have to join me in the Hereafter after singing the *Liebestod*. Let me tell you a secret: I cannot die, even if I am mortally wounded. Many trains have run over my substance, but I am still alive and fit as a fiddle playing one of Wagner's infinite melodies.

Actually I should like to hear you sing the *Liebestod*. Your voice is as beautiful as Kirsten Flagstad's. Will you sing the *Liebestod* for me? You will not have to die afterwards. (Kirsten Flagstad died a natural death—neither on stage nor in a recording studio.) Do you like Wagner? I adore him. I am a very cultivated substance, my darling. I know a lot about life and I like art, music, painting etc. I am deeply versed in the classics. And I am a keen fencer. We can have an intellectual discussion from time to time. And I shall take you to the opera. A human told me last week: 'When I hear the word music I reach for my pistol.' But I trust that you will not reach for your pistol on hearing me talk about Wagner. By the way, do you have a pistol? We might need it some day—if your husband makes a nuisance of himself. Or if you make a nuisance of yourself. Suppose I fall in love with another woman. If you continue to ignore my presence I may fall in love with another woman. Suppose I ask for her hand in marriage, after holding her hand for a considerable stretch of time. Suppose you write to her father to tell him I am unreliable and obnoxious. And a social climber into the bargain. In this case I might kill you, my darling. And I am a very good shot—head and shoulders above Julien Sorel. 'I am face above Julien Sorel,' as I would say on our planet. But I

hope that my suppositions are wrong, although nobody is ever wrong on our planet. Nevertheless I am sure that everything will be all right. I am also sure that you are already in love with me. So let us not waste our precious time. Don't forget that I propose to touch your hand during my next visit to your flat.

I kiss you most affectionately, my beloved.

I am looking forward to hearing from you.

Yours forever

Tristan.

I posted the letter and began to wait for an answer. I waited for three days and four nights. 'She won't answer you,' said my guardian angel. 'You shouldn't have been so frank with her. Why did you show such an interest in her body and mind? You should have hidden your love beneath a cool exterior.'

So I wrote a second letter to her.

Dear Madam,

I am writing to tell you that your ridiculous silence is based on a complete misunderstanding of the situation. Upon reading my first letter you might have concluded that I am in love with you. How mistaken you are! It is certainly true that I am in love, but I am in love with another woman. I have respect for you, nothing else. A gentleman by nature, I always treat women with respect—all women without exception. So there is nothing exceptional in my attitude towards you. Myriads of women pester me round the clock and make unwelcome sexual advances towards me. As you might have noticed, I am a handsome young man. There are dozens of women queueing outside my door at this very moment. I hear their voices as I am writing this missive. But I have no intention of opening my door, although, as I have already pointed out, I respect all women without exception.

'Why did you send me a letter?' you may ask me out of curiosity. I am quite willing to satisfy your curiosity. I am generous by nature, I can assure you.

Here is my answer: I sent you a letter in the hope that you might become my friend. Not my mistress, God forbid! I cannot make love to a woman who fails to awaken my sexual appetite. But I can become a friend to such a woman.

I thought you were lonely. And, being a benefactor of humanity, I decided to dilute your loneliness, so to speak. Your loneliness is as concentrated as an old wine. And the

Greeks used to add water to their fruity, intoxicating wines. In a manner of speaking, I likewise decided to add water to your solitude. Liquids are important in the human world, aren't they?

So I sent you a letter, suggesting we should meet in your house and have a nice chat—nothing more. But you misunderstood my humanitarian zeal. For some reason you concluded I was in love with you. Let me repeat that you leaped to a hasty (and nasty) conclusion. By the way, the inhabitants of our planet never leap or fall. They just float in space—smoothly, majestically. The only woman they can fall in love with is Isolda who sings in Wagner's famous opera. Do you know that Isolda? And Kirsten Flagstad? And Martha Mödl? How ignorant you are! How uneducated! Had you answered my letter I might have taken you to opera houses and art galleries in an attempt to educate you. Alas, you have missed this golden opportunity. And I never forgive ungrateful, ill-mannered people. Don't you know that you should answer when you are written to? Are you forgetting your manners?

I think I should inform you that I shall not give lessons to your half-wit of a son. Why? Because he is a half-wit. And his mother is a stubborn, pretentious bitch. Who do you think you are? I write you a letter and you tear it into pieces. And you throw the pieces into the rubbish bin. Is that a proper place for my letters? The right thing in the right place? The thing was right but the place was not. I am sure you regret your light-heartedness now. It is too late, though. Too late. Even if you go down on your knees and implore my forgiveness, I will not forgive you. Never! Even if you do it every day, for a month. I will not forgive you. Even if you strip your clothes off and dance before me stark naked. Every day, throughout the summer. And the autumn. Even if you caress me from head to foot and lick my genitals. And my boots. Even if you allow me to spank you as often as I wish. Even if you kill your husband and become my cleaning lady. My licking lady. As I have already pointed out, I will never forgive you! Never ever!

I will always love the real Isolda. And I will make you suffer through my love for her because you are a very jealous woman. Just watch us sinking in total rapture! *Tristan und Isolde versinken wie in gänzliche Entrücktheit*. Just watch her licking my human body. She is beautiful, isn't she? And we are happy, aren't we? You might have been happy yourself at the present moment had you taken the trouble to answer my letter. But you thought that answering a letter from an extraterrestrial visitor was not worth your while. Just another mistake of yours! That was a really stupid thing to do, you blundering idiot! (Or not to do, rather!) Isolda would have answered my letter. In fact

she did answer it. And I invited her to my ship. To my spaceship! And I took her to my planet. We spent our honeymoon on my native planet, in my mother-galaxy. You have no idea how beautiful my galaxy is. And how hospitable! Both real and imaginary creatures are welcome to our world. Well, you are not likely to visit it. Never ever! Over my dead body. Incidentally, all inhabitants of our planet are immortal. You would have become immortal yourself had you answered my letter. I have a phial in my hotel room and this phial contains the elixir of life. Every immortal carries such a phial in his pocket during his trips abroad—in other galaxies. Humans are mortal and your mortality is contagious. So we need an antidote to your mortality.

You would have automatically become immortal had you visited our planet. (Isolda is immortal now. No more *Liebestod*.) And you would have become beautiful at last. Not like Isolda, needless to say. Like Anna Karenina perhaps. And you would have got rid of the earth and its inhabitants. Our planet is Paradise in the universe. According to our prophets, Adam and Eve were born on our planet. And our scientists agree with our prophets. Our air is pure. (The air in your room is rather stale, I suppose. And if you open the window, the air in your room will be polluted.) And our faces smell even better than your camellias. You must have enjoyed the smell of my face during our dialogue. May you remember it as long as you live! The memory of my smell will perfume your room and subdue the stench of your married life. The memory of my eyes will brighten the gloom of your earthly existence and prevent you from committing suicide.

Not yours

Not even for a minute

Tristan

I posted the letter and began to wait for an answer. I waited for ninety-six hours. 'She won't answer you,' said my guardian angel. 'Why did you insult her? You should write another letter. Try and make her pity you. And do pretend you are her child—a helpless human in need of affection and protection. Usually women love their children more than anybody else, for their children are part and parcel of their bodies. And include one or two poems in your letter, as Hamlet, Dumain, Don Boriso de Armado and so many others used to do in their times. But don't forget that sex is a gratuitously consuming and risky activity. According to Edward O. Wilson, the reproductive organs of humans are subject to lethal malfunctions such as ectopic pregnancy and venereal disease.'

'Why?'

'Their anatomical complexity—'

'You're unlikely to give up your lifelong attachment to our elegant simplicity.'

'Besides, courtship activities are prolonged beyond the minimal needs of signalling. They are energetically expensive and even dangerous—the more ardent are put at greater risk of being killed by rivals.'

I wrote her yet another letter:

My beloved,

I am so helpless. Every now and then I raise my arms in a helpless gesture. Why? Because I feel miserable. What a pity you cannot see this helpless gesture of mine. You would pity me, no doubt about it. I am sorry I was so rude in my last letter. I was desperate—on the brink of suicide. Yesterday I almost committed suicide in a desperate attempt to free myself from my misery. Once again I threw myself under the wheels of a train. My vain quest for death. I am not even allowed to use the expression 'over my dead body'. Only you can save me. You are my only hope.

My life is empty without you. My body is empty without you. I put my hands into my body and find nothing in it, nothing at all—nothing except a heart that loves you. Yes, my heart is full of you, my darling. My heart is a cup from which I drink the love potion of Tristan and Isolde fame. Every day I drink it. Every day I reach my hands towards you, but you do not answer. And my arms just make another helpless gesture.

When I first saw you, I felt something in my newly-born chest. There was something inside—a human heart. Not only lungs and a thorax. I strained my ears to find out if my heart was already beating. Was it merely hanging inside my chest, immobile and unconcerned? No, no, my heart was beating. My heart was beating a path to your door.

When one is in love, one's pupils dilate. If only you could see my pupils!

'An interesting experiment was conducted on this basis,' said my guardian angel. 'Two apparently identical photographs of a woman were shown to a group of men and they were asked to choose the one that was the sexiest. They all chose the same one. The only difference between the two pictures was that the chosen photo had been doctored with an airbrush so that the pupils of the woman were more dilated.'

My pupils are as big as my eyes. They are bigger than my eyes, bigger than my life. My life has dwindled to a tenth of its former size in the last two months. It is your fault. Why are you so cruel?

'Human beings have always been cruellest to their own kind,' said my guardian angel. Do you know that spermatozoa fight with each other? If we make love around 5 p.m. and your husband comes home two hours later, my spermatozoa will not allow his to enter your uterus. What is more, they will push his spermatozoa away. They will drive them away from your vagina and from your life. Why not give me the opportunity to drive them away? I will not kill your husband, I promise. I will just push him away with my spermatozoa.

'I believe the exact truth is that certain spermatozoa have a defensive role—they are spermicidal, in fact—while others exist to fertilise,' said my guardian angel.

So let me come next Tuesday around 11 a.m. Of course I shall not speak to your son. He is stupid and hopeless. There is no point in giving him lessons. We shall have our child, our own child. And this child of ours will be very intelligent. The inhabitants of our planet are much more intelligent than humans. And you inherit half your genes from your mother and half from your father.

Are humans better than apes or frogs? Why do they use adjectives like 'higher' mammals and 'lower' vertebrates? In what way are they an improvement on other organisms? In terms of sheer numbers, microbes win hands down. (Our species wins eyebrows down.) And superbugs cope with environmental stress better than Stoics.

So send your son away and wait for me Tuesday morning, around 11 a.m. We shall have a cup of coffee first. (Our love potion.) And I shall take your hand in mine. At last. And we shall kiss each other on the lips. Let the rest come as a surprise to you!

And if you find my intentions too daring, I swear not to touch you at all. For the first three days we shall sleep on the floor, abstaining from sexual pleasures. And we shall eat our food without seasoning it. For the next six days we shall bathe amidst the sounds of auspicious musical instruments. We shall decorate ourselves and dine together. On the night of the ninth day I might begin to talk to you. At last I shall embrace you. I shall embrace you with the upper part of my body by the light of a lamp or in utter darkness—whichever you prefer. And I shall press your breasts with my nails. If you forbid me this caress I shall merely wait for your kiss, as long as necessary. And I shall pass my hand repeatedly over and about your body. And I shall place you in my lap. And I shall bite your upper lip.

I know this will never happen. Never. It is just my dreams, nothing more. I shall get no answer from you either tomorrow or next week. And I shall stay in my hotel room, waiting for your letter, for your love, for the opportunity to drive your husband away.

And I shall write poems in order to immortalise your beauty. Kings and queens will be forgotten. Even Tristan and Isolda will be forgotten, sooner or later. But you will remain in the universe as long as there are eyes capable of reading my poems.

Every gesture of yours
Is a triumph of beauty.
And beauty is always
Old-fashioned,
For it is immutable,
Standing like a cherry-tree
By a river—the cherry-tree
That keeps its blossom.
Forever.
Issa wrote about you
And so did W.B. Yeats:
'Was there another Troy for her to burn?'
Another Troy. Another Moscow.
My task is easy—a mere enumeration.

And here is another poem I dedicate to your immortality:

My thoughts go in circles
And always return to you—
My eternal recurrence.

You're the Mount Meru
And the Tree of Life.

Symbols have a poor chance of success
In your presence: they're too small.

Disembodied and silent,
You roam around my room
That has grown big enough

To house all your shadows.

Death is much shorter

Than the shortest of your shadows.

I have got a bit of a confession to make, my darling. These poems are not mine. My mortal friend bequeathed me his notebook. My late friend. I find these poems beautiful. I cannot even write a poem. I am as hopeless as your son. Why don't you take me on your lap and caress my cheeks for a while? I should like to be your son. I need a mother. I lost my mother when I was a little child and ever since I have felt lonely. I suppose all orphans feel lonely and forsaken. Why don't you take me on your lap Tuesday morning, around 11 a.m.?

I was orphaned at the age of nine and brought up by my uncle, my father's brother. My uncle was very cruel. He often locked me up in the attic. And I was deprived of food for weeks. On top of everything, my uncle was in the habit of waking me three or four times every night to flog me for my disobedience. And no one can function properly if they are deprived of adequate sleep. So I did not function properly. Sometimes I did not function at all. I just lay in my bed, doing nothing. And my uncle would profit from my coma-like states of prostration to accuse me of sloth and parasitism.

I still do not function properly. The whole experience left me traumatised and even five years of psychotherapy did not help me deal with my childhood traumas. And in my childhood I witnessed really traumatic things such as rape and murder. My sister was raped by three bullies before my very eyes. And my brother was murdered by a notorious criminal. Before my very eyes. And not far from my ears—I likewise heard my brother's screams and cries for help. But how could I help my brother? I was eight years old at the time of his violent death.

Do you hear me? Am I so far from your ears? Do you hear my cries for help? I tried to forget you. I tried to fall in love with other women. To no avail.

I also tried to spend all my energy on work so as to have no strength left to think about you. I worked very hard, very hard indeed, but however much the work I was doing drained me, there was still enough energy in my brain to conjure up your divine image.

I attempted to drown my sorrows but soon realised that they are as unsinkable as my body. Incidentally, I can smell the alcohol on your husband's breath from nine metres away.

Humanity is so decadent. How can you live on such a planet, in the midst of such creatures? And the threat of nuclear war? The human race will not survive a nuclear holocaust. And the earth will never be declared a nuclear-free zone. What is more, no one has yet solved the problem of how to get rid of nuclear waste.

The huge amounts of chemical fertilisers and pesticides used on earthly farms are polluting the water supply. It is dangerous to drink human water. On your planet water will never become a love potion.

Humans should be more concerned about the continuing pollution of the environment. But humans are unconcerned with anything except their own welfare. ('Badfare' would be a more appropriate term.) Why don't you come with me and settle down on our planet for good? ('To settle up' would be more precise in the context.) Bacteria can destroy the world. An incurable disease—DH-9, for example. And the sun can approach your planet, adopting a scorched-earth policy against your fellow creatures. And against yourself. There are no suns in our galaxy. Or rather, every planet in our galaxy is a sun in its own right. And our planets get close to each other, from time to time. And they embrace—fraternally. And they kiss each other.

An asteroid can destroy the earth. Even a vacuum can destroy the earth. Higher-energy states tend to decay into lower-energy states. For some reason your scientists have assumed that the human universe corresponds to the true vacuum. In other words, your empty space is the vacuum with the lowest possible energy. And what if your vacuum is not the true vacuum? What if it is a long-lived, metastable, false vacuum that has lulled you into a false sense of security on account of its longevity? Indeed it has endured for a few billion years. So what? We know of many quantum systems, such as uranium nuclei, that have half-lives of billions of years. And your vacuum falls into this category. What if it fails, pitching your cosmos into an even lower energy state, with dire consequences for humans, animals and plants?

God can destroy the earth. What is the point in staying on this planet? There are no more great musicians on earth. So why go to concert halls? And you cannot sit next to Beckett or Joyce. In a Parisian café, on a Parisian boulevard. You cannot hear them talk. You cannot even see them move around. And you cannot encounter Wagner in Munich. Even Isolde is dead. Dead and buried.

Why don't you love me? I come from a microscopic galaxy which was colonised by our so-called Big Brother at the very beginning of eternity. And for all eternity our small and proud nation has been trying to throw off the communist yoke without respite,

without any hope of success. Of course I am prepared to sacrifice my life for my *narod*, as the Russians say, and that notwithstanding my immortality. Why don't you admire my intrepidity? Isn't it logical to fall in love with such a man—with such a substance, I mean? A freedom fighter! Humans assert that they are the only animals who have the power of reason. Why don't you listen to reason then? Do you have no ear for reason? Can you see it? Or touch it? Or smell it?

I have a mysterious past, you know. I married a dancer, a French dancer. But soon after our marriage she broke her leg and stopped dancing altogether. What is more, she has been walking with a limp ever since her riding accident. And she has gone mad, on top of everything. Her illness and dullness cast a shadow over my life. Can't you see this shadow on my face? And over my body? Mysterious, isn't it? I have locked my wife in a tower. (And I have locked my life in my room.) She screams every hour. (And my life screams too.) Isn't that enough for you? I am living under the shadow of death. She might kill me at any moment. Romantic, isn't it? She has betrayed me with dozens of men, all over Europe. Why don't you pity me? And she has often done it in my presence. Always, always! Awful, isn't it? I partly understand your indifference. Seeing so many disasters on television makes us less sensitive to human tragedy and suffering. But I do not suffer less because of other people's torments, you know. And I suffer horribly, I can assure you. Well, she has a very bad limp now. No more betrayals. She is very ugly now, very ugly indeed. So I don't show her to anybody for fear of being ridiculed. Isn't that horrible? Don't you pity me yet? And I cannot marry another woman—you, for instance. I am forbidden to free myself from the bonds of marriage on account of my wife's madness and lameness. Everybody seems to pity my wife. Why doesn't anybody pity ME? Because I am not lame? Because I am not mad? I am bound to go mad if nothing changes in my life. Prometheus Unbound. Tristan Bound.

Do you want me to become mad? And bad? Mad, bad and dangerous to know? Will that be romantic enough for you?

Well, I AM dangerous to know, as a matter of fact. One of these days I shall kidnap your son, your only treasure. And I shall kill him if you continue to reject my advances and snub my offers. Your son's life will depend on your attitude towards my love and sexual desire. Some people satisfy their sexual desires through reading magazines. I must make love to you—twice a day. In no other way can my sexual desire be appeased and my need for human company fulfilled.

I am sorry, my darling. 'Don't let your emotions run away with you,' my guardian angel warns me as I am writing this letter. But how could I restrain myself from pouring my heart out? I am human already and my heart is full of bitterness. Why didn't we grow together, side by side? Playing in the same garden, on the same beach, under the same rock. Why didn't we swear to love each other forever? Why didn't we take a love-oath in our childhood? I might remind you now of that oath. I might reproach you for having betrayed our vows. Alas, you ran on another beach, under different stars. We did not even spend our childhood on the same planet.

A castle garden. On one side a high building, on the other a long wall with a watchtower. In the background the castle gate. The castle is situated on a rocky height, with an extensive sea horizon visible. All is dilapidated and overgrown, suggesting years of neglect. Tristan lies sleeping in the foreground, beneath a great lime tree. At his head sits Kurwenal, bending over him, grief-stricken. From without a shepherd's pipe is heard, an interminable, desolate tune.

(To be continued.)

*When, through great attachment, we are wandering in the
Sangsara,
Along the bright light-path of the Discriminating Wisdom,
May the Bhagavan Amitabha lead us,
May the Mother, She-of-White-Raiment, be our rear-
guard,
May we be saved from the fearful narrow passage-way of
the Bardo,
May we be placed in the state of the perfect Buddhahood.
The Tibetan Book of the Dead*

Tristan lies sleeping. Unfortunately I suffer from chronic insomnia. Some think that artists should suffer in order to create masterpieces.

'Wie viel musste dies Volk leiden, um so schön werden zu können.'

Perhaps they are right. I have to suffer from a *physical* pain when writing a novel. A pain in my stomach, for example. Stomach ache, heartache, headache. Perhaps I have to *feel* that my body is being eaten away. Or is it the other way round? The pain might come first. Because my body *is* being eaten away. By words, not just by sorrows. So I do not actually wish to have a pain in my stomach or elsewhere. Nor do I wait for it. Pain comes by itself, on its own. And its coming is unpredictable, like that of inspiration. Pain is inspiration. It is not just a harbinger of inspiration. Pain *is* inspiration. In fact every novel is a long and painful illness. An incurable illness sometimes.

So is love. At least Tristan thought so. But he did it on purpose. Waiting for love-sickness. He deliberately arranged that they should be taken ill and die together.

It was love at first sight. Lying on his deathbed, Tristan opened his eyes and saw Isolda. The image of Isolda thus became inseparable from death. They were inseparable, Isolda and death. Even more inseparable than Tristan and Isolda.

'Why doesn't she lie down on this bed, by my side?' he thought. 'We should lie on it together. A love-bed, a deathbed. Love is a slow poison. Let her inject this poison into my veins slowly, softly, drop by drop. A love-drip.' And he recalled the traditional picture of death—in the form of a skeleton. 'Death is a beautiful maiden,' he told himself. 'Why don't painters understand that? A beautiful maiden. *Death and the Maiden*. They've got it all wrong. Death, the Maiden. They're one and the same person.'

The *Liebestod*. Isolda was lying in bed when Tristan returned to his castle. To his Oberwald, to his Monica Vitti. He thought she was asleep or sick. A bout of immobility. A splitting headache, as usual.

There was no need to look far to encounter death in her. Death was everywhere: on the surface, beneath the surface. A vista of deaths. But Tristan did not even see the surface.

He was talking to Isolda, asking her stupid questions. And he lay down by her side. Only when he kissed her did he realise she was dead. 'A cold winter's day. My fingers are so stiff from the cold. Could you light the fire? I am cold. A cold wind. High winds and heavy snowfalls. I should have put a fur coat on. Earth sinking into water. Water sinking into fire. Fire sinking into air. Cloudless sky. Blue light. Shining, dazzling and glorious. A dull, smoke-coloured light. Yellow light. The dull, bluish-yellow light.' He stroked her. He kissed her again and again. And he contemplated her body. He tried to internalise her, planting her soul inside his body. He meditated upon her soul. An archetypal image. Wholeness and totality. The potent core of psychic energy. A perennial balance of force. A serene, soft-hearted, melodious deity.

THE DEATH OF TATA

I drove up to the city. During my absence there was a change for the worse in Tata's condition. Suddenly she felt the approach of Death. Not only did she *feel* his approach but she actually *saw* Death in the distance. She knelt down, pleading for mercy. Death shook his head and Tata set about her funeral rite. She washed her white body in the bath, put on her black dress and flung herself on the bed, crying: 'Farewell, farewell! Here once I offered my maidenhood to him. What will become of you after my death? Will another woman lie on you, caressing and kissing my lover's body? Will another woman share with you her dreams, her perfume, her lust? Will his betrayals stain these sheets? Will *you* betray me, my bed? Will *you* forget me as soon as I vanish into thin air, into thick earth? You still love me, don't you? You love the weight of my body and the smoothness of my skin. And my new perfume, do you like it?'

Death is inclined to be a bit impatient with those who are slow on the uptake. So he shouted, brandished his scythe and Tata left the bed in peace. Her thoughts shifted to my life after her death. 'The memory of our love will be his lifelong agony,' she said out loud, but I did not hear her. I was too far away, consequently Tata was not within my earshot. She burst into tears. Soon, however, her sobs subsided as she realised the uselessness of her lamentations. And her voice subsided to a mutter. Actually she had sobbed herself hoarse, but she was still muttering my name. So the last word she pronounced in her lifetime was my name or rather my nickname.

Tata died at 2.36 p.m. (She died 8½ months after our meeting at the underground station.) I came back 1 hour and 18 minutes later. At first it did not occur to me that my companion had died. Nobody talks to corpses except madmen and half-wits.

Was Tata alive or dead? Quantum theory says both—the two worlds of superspace coexist and overlap. If described as a quantum system, Tata had been suspended in a schizophrenic 'live-dead' condition until I realised she was dead. (The cat paradox.) Only then did the worlds decouple and one of them collapse into reality. I assassinated my cat girl. Now she was not merely *dead to the world*. She was *as dead as a doornail* or any other nail. Or any door. Or any corpse.

I might still have regarded her as a living creature, but for the kiss I gave her. When I kissed her I felt the temperature of her body. 'No living creature can have such a low temperature,' I told myself. I did not sign a death certificate because only doctors are allowed to do that. And I am not a doctor.

Oddly enough, I did not cry. Tears are useless. What can be changed through their interference in such a case? The person you love is dead and nothing can bring her back to life, save Jesus Christ. The point is tears are not always addressed to Him in person. Besides, in most cases we are out of His earshot. I might say, 'We are *always* out of His earshot,' but I think that a certain amount of hope should be left on the surface of the earth. Otherwise the world would be depopulated.

And tears are not the golden sap oozing from the Cosmic Tree, a symbol of perpetual regeneration. Anyway the golden sap cannot bring a dead person back to life, for it only restores one's physical and spiritual energy. And the people whose energy is thus restored are alive. They are merely a little bit tired. And Tata was not tired that afternoon, although she had always complained of being tired. The dead never feel nor look tired.

And tears are not even raindrops that water trees and flowers all over our planet. Anyway Tata was not a tree. Figuratively speaking, she used to be a flower in her lifetime. But no raindrop can bring a dead flower back to life, for Death himself trampled on that flower.

I did not cry. Perhaps I understood the uselessness of tears. I stared at her face for 1 hour and 47 minutes. Then I removed the blanket and began to gaze on Tata's naked body. I studied her naked body inch by inch as if to identify it. I might have recalled Antonioni's film *Identificazione di una donna*. I turned her body this way and that. And I kissed her body. I covered every inch of her body with my kisses. But I did not make love to her because I am not a necrophiliac.

The next day I rang her mother up. 'Why didn't you clone my Tata?' I asked her. 'You ought to have cloned my dear girl, deducting in the process the malignant, lethal genes from the body of her doppelgänger. The malicious, malevolent genes. Cloning involves a smaller genetic gamble than does a combination of sperm and egg. You and your husband would never have given birth to the same Tata, even if you'd made love on the same day of the year, at the same hour. Your new Tata wouldn't have been mine even if your love labours had lasted the same number of minutes, reaching the same climax after the same climactic crescendo. What do you have against cloning? Isn't it better than artificial insemination or surrogate motherhood? The right to clone qualifies, under the due process clause of the Fifth and Fourteenth Amendments, as a fundamental interest, which may be invaded only if the government can satisfy strict scrutiny, by showing the most compelling of justifications. Didn't you want to have another daughter, a healthy daughter, a healthy Tata, an immortal Tata? You might have cloned her every year, creating a series of Tatas, a few generations of

Tatas, a race of Tatas. I'm attracted to the idea of selective breeding, you know. Only Tatas should inhabit our planet—to the detriment of other women, to the detriment of men. Why not alter the genetic composition of the human species as a whole?'

'The right to clone doesn't qualify as a fundamental right under the Constitution,' said her mother.

'The right to clone is part and parcel of the right to reproductive privacy, closely akin to the rights to use contraception and to have an abortion,' I answered.

'The right to clone is very different from the right to use contraceptives or to have an abortion. And there are compelling reasons to ban human cloning even if the right to clone does qualify as a fundamental right. There's a rational basis for restricting human cloning, to prevent a wide range of social harms.'

'I loved your daughter,' I said. 'I would have loved humanity and our wretched times if you'd cloned her ad infinitum. My Dantean Tata.'

'You killed my daughter. She should have spent 9 months in a sanatorium instead of making love with a libertine.'

Her mother even called me a 'sex maniac'. Our conversation lasted 22 minutes.

I said the front door would be open, put down the receiver and left the house. I did not know that Tata's father engaged in burglary as a night-time activity while during the day he was a clerk. But that time he did not steal anything, for he was stricken with grief on account of his daughter's death. He insisted on carrying his daughter downstairs. Tata's elder brother was asked to assist in keeping her body off the ground. Tata's brother stole nothing from my house. Only her mother stole an object from my writing desk—Tata's photograph.

Upon my return I encountered nobody in the house. Only the smell of a perfume remained in the air. But perfumes are not humans, although they might remind us of somebody—of our mistress, for instance. Actually Tata's mother stole two things from my house: her daughter's photograph and the odour of her daughter's skin. The sheets and the pillow smelt now of *her* perfume as if she had spent a whole night in my bed.

I cried for 16 minutes. My tears were useful, in a way. I found solace in my tears as if they contained a piece of good news. There was no good news in my room, nor within my eyes. Tata was still dead. Worse still, she had been removed from my bed.

I had no idea what to say to myself. I just offered a few words of consolation by expounding my own theory of immortality:

'Don't you worry! There are many parallel lives. In one of those lives Tata feels fitter and healthier, as a result of the diet. She suffers neither from leukaemia nor from breast

cancer. And if you happen to live in another parallel realm, far away from her pasteurised incarnation, you'll meet her later on—when the earth is reconstituted again, together with all its inhabitants! Patience—she'll be here soon! You're bound to meet. *Tristan Bound. Isolda Bound.* There are many successive lives. You're bound to live them all. Aren't you happy? You're so depressed that you might end up going to see a shrink. A shrunken middle-aged man. Do you want to become a wizened old man with yellow skin and deep wrinkles? After all, Tata was just another blond-haired Monica Vitti clone. A man's choice of partner always contains some reference to inhuman details: hair, hands. There's nothing human about such abstract features. Illness, death. Inhuman, aren't they? You're a death fetishist.'

I slept for 2 hours and 37 minutes. I did not dream of Tata and consequently was rather disappointed upon awakening. I did not stretch my arms in search of Tata's body, but I shouted her name several times as if she could hear my voice in the Hereafter and hurry back. There is a soundproof wall between this world and the Hereafter. Not the sound barrier but a soundproof wall! This wall is much longer and thicker than the Great Wall of China.

Again I had a little weep. In the human world Death is inevitable. Why was I so sad? Had I thought my beloved would live forever? The sad story kept on moving me to tears. I wept almost every night, before going to bed, in the bed. Even in my sleep sometimes.

I began to pace up and down my room. I went downstairs and out into the garden. It was too hot to do any gardening and moreover I was in no mood for it. I spent only 4 minutes in the garden. The sight of the roses brought tears to my eyes, for the roses bore a striking resemblance to my late mistress. So did the camellias. I returned to the house, put on my tweed sports jacket and drove into the city. I thought that numerous distractions provided for humans by big cities and their authorities might alleviate my psychological pain. Healthy lifestyles can do a lot to alleviate suffering.

I parked my car right under a 'No Parking' sign and began to saunter around the streets. I sauntered up and down, looking at shops and pedestrians. In a window I saw a young woman. Through signs she communicated that she wanted a drink. (A 'Parking' sign.) I felt like a drink myself. I pushed the door open, went to the bar and ordered two glasses of champagne. And then I receded into the distance. I lost sight of myself as I followed a middle-aged woman along a corridor at the end of which a room awaited us. (We are always under the impression that rooms await us, if their doors are left ajar.) I entered the room and spotted a naked woman on a bed. The woman did not look like Tata. Nor was she dead by all appearances. I spent 47 minutes trying to make her look like my late mistress. I succeeded in my endeavour. I turned her body this way and that. She *was* Tata. The next step was to kill her, but I did

nothing of the kind. I simply asked her to pretend she was dead. 'Imagine you were shot dead in a gunfight,' I said to her. 'Imagine I poisoned you yesterday. To prevent you from betraying my trust.'

She laughed. I slapped her face. She stopped laughing. 'The dead don't laugh,' I said. 'Even when fiends and harpies tickle them.' She was dead serious now, but she was not really dead. I kissed and bit her with frenzy. There was an element of frenzy and desperation in my handling of her body. She screamed but I reminded her that the dead were fond of silence. 'Not even when prodded with pitchforks do they scream and squirm. The thought of having to speak in front of 500 people usually makes a living human squirm. A dead human does not give a damn. He or she neither speaks nor squirms—even if 10,000 people turn up at his or her funeral.'

I was generous. And I said upon leaving her, 'If you had been killed your dependants would have got compensation.' I drank two glasses of champagne at the bar and telephoned Tata's parents. Her mother answered the phone, as usual. I asked her to return the photograph she had stolen from my writing desk. She refused point blank. And she made a few pointed remarks about my lifestyle. Then she hung up on me. So I went along the corridor, entered the same room and asked the woman with whom I had spent 3 hours and 24 minutes to come to my dacha. She graciously complied with my request and I put her in my bed after spending 1 hour and 37 minutes with her in my car. And I photographed her to my heart's content. She was alive now. But notwithstanding this detail, which is usually overlooked by immortals, she looked like Tata, my late mistress.

After her departure I tore the photographs up. And I telephoned another woman, my former girlfriend. She was not alone and I sensed uneasiness in her. I talked my head off, taking no heed of her suggestive, unambiguous moans. And I asked her to give me a photograph of herself—any photograph in fact. 'I'm short of photographs right now,' I said. 'Do you want some photographs of my sister?' she asked. 'How did you manage to forget me?' I asked.

Spiritual unhealthiness and misfortunes can generally be traced to excessive love of something which is subject to many variations.

Spinoza, *The Ethics*

A wonderful short story: beautiful, touching and tragic. A mixture of melodrama and *otstranenie*. Keeping Tata at bay. Defamiliarization or *otstranenie* is the artistic technique of forcing the audience to see common things in an unfamiliar or strange way, in order to enhance perception of the familiar. (The common reader should be spoon-fed.) Everything possible to be believed is an image of truth. She died neither at my dacha nor in Paris.

'Nor in Moscow. Her agony in your room, in your bed. (Mimi! Mimi!) The exact truth without any exaggerations and embellishments is ugly, isn't it? The truth is just one of the worlds, as you put it. And there are many parallel worlds around us. In one of them you left the Soviet Union and forsook Tata Aslanova, your one-time mistress. In another you stayed in Moscow and married Tata, alias Isolda. In the third you write letters to a dead woman. In the fourth you are a woman yourself. In the fifth you stayed in Moscow but fell in love with another woman. In the sixth you are homosexual. In the seventh you settled in St Petersburg and made arrangements to be christened under the name of Ernest. Sorry—Tristan, under the name of Tristan. In the eighth you *are* Tristan, a knight of the Cornish court. In the ninth you were born on another planet, in another galaxy.'

Last summer I spent a week in Jura. One day somebody slipped a newspaper under the front door. 'A man was found wading in a river in northern France apparently suffering from loss of memory,' I read. What kind of river was he wading in? A river of oblivion, an earthly Lethe. There was a river in the neighbourhood of the house I was staying in. I walked over to that river and stepped into it without removing my clothes. For a while I waded up to my knees through piles of dead leaves. 'In autumn the Tree of Memory might lose its leaves,' I thought.

Soon the leaves disappeared as if the river had forgotten them. I turned back and began to search for the leaves. 'The pity of it is that I didn't take a photograph,' I thought. 'I should carry my camera around wherever I go. So many things disappear every second. You cannot see the same leaves twice. A breeze destroys their pattern, a river forgets them.'

My incapacity to forget her.

'Memory is affected by damage to both diencephalic and hippocampal areas of the midbrain, and the temporal regions of the cortex. It is also affected by alcohol, drugs, poisons, blows to the head, old age and dementia. I could provide a few drugs and poisons, if you wish. And a few blows. A burglar may hit you over the head with an iron bar if you refuse to tell him where the money is kept. The chances of developing dementia increase with age. People live longer nowadays thanks to the progress of medical science and to the new world order. In both Europe and North America the proportion of dementia patients is rising sharply.

Should we wait until you're old enough to develop dementia? Too long, isn't it? Luckily for us, there are many short cuts on the path to pastlessness. Estimates vary from country to country, but as many as 80 per cent of AIDS patients are likely to develop dementia. The other short cuts are: Parkinson's disease, epilepsy, Huntington's Chorea, Pick's Disease, multiple infarct dementia, neurosyphilis, Jacob-Creutzfeld's disease, hydrocephalus and encephalitis. Why not just forget the words related to women? One man lost all words for fruits and vegetables. He had no other problems of any kind. Some people lose verbs but retain nouns, even when the verb and the noun are the same word. You would understand love in love is a beautiful feeling but not in I love Tata.'

An eternal *Liebestod*. Love. A sentiment full of silence and grief. And cliché-ridden. Lovers are like actors with their stock, dramatic clichés. 'After her death he became a pathetic figure, a shadow of his former self.' Is that what I am playing at? A best-seller. *Doctor Zhivago*. Those who love children are kind and humane, compassionate and benevolent, good-natured and sympathetic. A lorry stopped with a screech of brakes. Too late. A middle-aged woman had been run over. Another middle-aged woman breathed a sigh of relief: 'It wasn't a child!' she said. Children take pride of place. On earth. And a novel is cold without a child. 'When in doubt, kill a child,' said Dickens. So I killed a child in order to warm up this novel. I killed the hero's child in the heroine's womb. It's much more pathetic than killing a child in a room. In *The Old Curiosity Shop* Dickens pulled out the *vox humana* and *tremolo* stops upon his organ. Knowing that his readers enjoyed a 'good cry', Dickens made it his practice to wring the last possible tear from every event he was to recount. But he killed Little Nell in a room, not in a womb. And I killed my hero's child before its birth. For a while, little Nell had been allowed to stay on the surface of the earth—a great boon to humans, animals, plants and stones. My hero's child was nipped in the bud. It was a hard bud to nip, I must admit. But I nipped it all the same, in the bud. How many tears have you shed, dear readers? Twenty, thirty, forty, thousand and one? And her mother is dead too. My heroine, Tata, is dead and buried. Even childless women are pitied on their deathbeds: Traviata, Mimi. Supposing you shed twenty tears during the last act of Verdi's opera. Then you must shed at least fifty tears upon learning that Tata is dead. Twenty tears for her, thirty or forty tears for her child. Why such a discrepancy? Because the death of a child is far more important than the death of a woman, either middle-aged or otherwise. Last night a bus careered over a precipice. Newshounds (newsmice). Whose corpses did they single out for their reports? 'Thirty-four people tragically died in the accident. Among them—five children.' Readers pity little Nell's grandfather. Opera-goers pity Rodolfo who, in the last act of Puccini's

masterpiece, rushes to his beloved's bed and cries, 'Mimi! Mimi!' My hero suffered a double loss: after his departure from Moscow he lost his child and Tata. He also lost his motherland. A triple loss!

THE CASE HISTORY

Il est presque impossible qu'un philosophe, qu'un poète ne soient pas misanthropes : 1° parce que leur goût et leur talent les portent à l'observation de la société, étude qui afflige constamment le cœur ; 2° parce que leur talent n'étant presque jamais récompensé par la société (heureux même s'il n'est pas puni), ce sujet d'affliction ne fait que redoubler leur penchant à la mélancolie.

Chamfort, *Maximes*

The truth of the ego emerges precisely in madness where the world seems to dissolve and the difference between self and other is radically put in question.

Darian Leader, *Lacan for Beginners*

Home, sweet home. It is in these terms that I usually speak about my institution. I have to provide a dwelling place for the homeless and all lonely people are homeless without exception. Other people are also homeless because they live in their worlds and not in my world. And only my world is the real home for human beings with whom I get in touch through the Internet at first: no one believes in angels any longer.

This patient of mine was living in the world of an old legend—in a time warp, as it were. (Sometimes I cannot resist the temptation to write about him in the past tense.) Tristan and Isolde. He even built himself a castle within the legend. Not a castle in the air, for castles in the air are usually built by those living on earth. And he seemed to live on another planet. Moreover, he lived in the past, being allergic to both the present and the future.

Tristan and Isolde. Tristan and my patient. They have a lot in common, although separated by time, by centuries. The same glitter in their eyes, the same glittering eye. A kind of other-worldly gleam. The gleam of darkness, like fresh coal. The twilight world of madness.

Why not call a madman a madman? He was a raving lunatic, my patient, my Tristan. (What is the etymology of the word 'patient', I wonder? Does it have the same root as 'patience'? Deep-rooted patience?) He spoke about the dead as if they were alive and vice versa. In his opinion, many living individuals were dead despite their health and wealth. Yet only people of boundless energy and ambition can earn a lot of money. A sound mind in a sound body. Money is the outward and visible sign of an inward and invisible grace. And Isolda was alive—in his opinion. 'Why are you hiding her from me?' he used to shout. 'Why have you taken her away?' He might have confused me with King Mark who had married Isolda in that old legend and in Wagner's famous opera.

'I don't care about your Isolda,' I would answer him playfully. 'By the way, I'm not married—either to Isolda or to any other woman. I've nothing against marriage, mind you. I'm not what they call a confirmed bachelor. As a matter of fact, I'd like to marry a beautiful young girl.

'Hyde ye youre beautes, Ysoude and Eleyne:

My lady cometh, that al this may disteyne.

'Yesterday I read an amusing advertisement in a Paris newspaper: "Ever thought of a Russian bride! They are beautiful and not too demanding." And willing to please, I suppose. Eastern ways. The only disobliging Russian serf is a dead Russian serf. They must obey, otherwise it's pack your bags and back to Moscow! That's how we tame Russian shrews. A Russian bride. Not a bad idea, eh? There were also a few photographs in the newspaper. Those girls *are* beautiful. The Russian economy is on its last legs, as you may know. Both feet in the grave, so to speak. The one thing all Russian women crave is to settle in the West. Dresses, lipstick, a villa on the Riviera. And pink champagne, of course. And I've two bottles of champagne in my fridge. Not pink, I'm afraid. It's time I got hitched and settled down. To tell the truth, I'm fed up with lunatics! Nice to have a place in the country! Fresh air...apples and strawberries from my own garden...up with the lark every morning...to be greeted by a gurgling laughter...a little creature with fair locks. And how alike we are, two peas in a pod...a son with chubby arms. I'll bring him up on my own. No nannies, no play-groups, no schools—no contagion, God forbid! He'll carry on the good work. He'll bear the torch and bring my work to a blazing conclusion.'

He was not paying attention to my words. He always paid attention only to his own words, to his twisted, mad, destructive, self-destructive words. And he listened only to the

Liebestod—*The Death of Isolda* (*Smert' Izoldi* in Russian)—that resounded in his ears day and night, day and night.

He was born in Moscow—the capital of the former Soviet Union. He did not fit in the Soviet regime. Round peg in a square hole, as the expression goes. So he requested political asylum in France. (Leaving home was just a way of eluding his responsibilities.) That word 'asylum' again! He was getting used to the word, to *our* word. He was getting used to us. He moved away from his space and eventually from his time.

He becomes prickly and defensive when I ask him about his works. They are written either in French or in English. Language is the mirror that reflects our thoughts. He covered the mirror of his brain. That is what they do in Russia when someone dies—they cover mirrors. He covered the mirror of his life. What would he have seen in that mirror? Perhaps it is better this way, much better.

And he uncovered the mirror of Tristan's life—in order to counterbalance the loss of his own mirror, I suppose. Needless to say, Tristan belongs to the category of 'unhappy heroes' who usually torment themselves for no reason at all and sometimes even go as far as to commit suicide. In one of my recent articles I described masochism as involving activities such as being insulted, tied up and whipped. And I also made an abundant and wholly justifiable use of Lacan's key term '*jouissance*'. And *jouissance* is a synonym of unbearable torture to which one returns like a moth fluttering around a bare electric bulb. Burning ad infinitum. I am not sure Isolda actually whipped Tristan on the ship that finally brought her to Cornwall and her future husband. But, a masochist by nature, Tristan certainly availed himself of her insults.

The story of Tristan's 'delicious' sufferings dates from his hostile encounter with Morold, Isolda's bridegroom, who had come to Cornwall with a view to collecting taxes. In the fight Tristan was dealt a poisonous wound which had a purely psychological origin. That day he merely discovered his true nature—his inborn penchant for suffering. He liked his psychological wound. What was more, he *worshipped* it. But masochists do not content themselves with enjoying their wounds to the utmost. They have to *cure* themselves, from time to time, in order to procure the unparalleled pleasure of *losing* their wounds—the only source of their earthly happiness. So Tristan enjoined his vassals to carry him to a small boat which, in its turn, conveyed him to Ireland where lived the only person capable of healing his wound—Isolda the Fair. Indeed, in those days, Isolda was famed for her magic powers of healing. And she was prepared to save Tristan's life in order to offer him the pleasure he was seeking with such obstinacy. As she bent over his body her eyes fell on the sword lying by his

side. (Tristan would often caress himself with his sword.) And all of a sudden she realised that her patient's weapon had killed Morold, her one-time bridegroom. She picked up the sword and raised it against the helpless yet hopeful masochist before her. He implored her not to kill him. '*Pour faire durer le plaisir*,' he said in French, but Isolda did not understand the language of Racine. So Tristan concocted a story about a dragon that 'used to ravage Ireland and South Wales'. And he claimed to have killed the dragon. (Masochists often dream of the wounds inflicted by those imaginary beings in fairy-tales.) At once Isolda recognised in her would-be victim a fellow sufferer, a masochist in his own right. 'I also dream of dragons,' she said. 'I'll heal your wound. But don't you worry—I'll present you with another wound next week.'

'I also have a present for you,' said Tristan.

'What is it?' asked Isolda, unconsciously (subconsciously) touching the sword.

'I'll marry you off to King Mark, my sovereign.'

'How wonderful!' Isolda exclaimed, baring her breasts and embracing Tristan.

Isolda kept her promise: a week later she sent Tristan away and thus inflicted on him the wound he had been longing for. Tristan implored his beloved to allow him to remain in her country, in her company. Isolda was adamant. So Tristan climbed aboard a merchant ship and, three weeks later, stood before King Mark, a lock of hair in his hands. And he held the lock before King Mark's eyes as he described the lady who had healed his wounds. 'I would marry her, if I were you,' Tristan rounded off.

No snippets of Tata's hair adorn the treasure-house of *my* Tristan, but he has got her letters. 'I am cold without you.' Her second letter. It's rather cold in Russia, isn't it?

The castration complex creates a black hole in one's life and, in the long run, the hole takes on a libidinal value. Instead of filling the hole, which would be phallic *jouissance*, the subject gives it a new value as lack, producing *jouissance* through this absence.

I also have *his* letters, even the one he posted in Moscow on the eve of his departure. Taking his cue from Doctor Faust, he wished to stop the moment, if you please. The last moment. (The first moment is far away—at the bottom of the tower. The Tower of Time.) Her last glance. She saw him off at the airport. 'Then westward ho!' He was leaving for good. For 'bad', as a matter of fact. He was leaving her behind, on the other side of the passport control. Imagine the scene: he walks away, looks back...her eyes...no tears...a sort of paralysis. He walked away from his better half. Tata. Several efferent bundles of pulsating currents issued from her brain. Through long cellular protrusions (motor nerve fibres), unconsciously, she conducted them to her arm, to the muscles concerned. As a consequence, she waved her arm, bidding him farewell, ignoring the fact that he was already too far away to see her pathetic

manifestation of grief. Other pulsating bundles produced a certain glandular secretion sluicing her poor sad eyes with tears. 'She died four months later,' he writes in his novel *Tristan on Earth*.

Tata. His only beloved. His Dulcinea el Toboso. But Dulcinea was an ethereal creature, a figment of Don Quixote's imagination. And every time somebody reads the novel she is resurrected *completely*, for she has never been anything but ether. Tata was neither a clot of ether nor a blot of ink in Cervantes' manuscript. My patient did hold her body in his arms now and then.

In the meantime Tristan sailed back to Ireland. Isolda was brought to his ship and locked in a cabin. After a while Tristan paid her a visit. They made love on a divan, hoping to be caught red-handed upon their arrival in Cornwall. Isolda's handmaid and confidante, Brangaena, saved them from ignominious death. And Isolda accused her of being a sadist, a traitor to their masochist cause. She decided to get rid of Brangaena, but Tristan reasoned his beloved out of her murderous plan—*pour faire durer le plaisir*. The pleasure of being found out, the slow poison of discovery.

A tedious story, an infinite story. Only death can put an end to such a story. So Tristan and Isolda are bound to die: Wagner was reluctant to leave an unfinished opera behind him as he slowly proceeded to what Tristan calls '*das Wunderreich der Nacht*' (the wonder-realm of Night)—the Hereafter, in other words.

My story is not finished yet, alas. He writes letters to her. And he waits for an answer. 'It is hardly conceivable to me that, buried away in the snow of eternity, there exists a span of time during which I shall not think about you. How about accepting this inconceivable moment as the final definition of Death?' An excerpt from his last letter. The last letter, the last moment. Time does not stop. Nor does the flow of his letters. Should I kill my Tristan? Doctors are not allowed to kill their patients, you know. The Hippocratic oath.

So I speak to him from time to time. Here is the unabridged transcript of our last 50-minute session.

I: Hello! How are you today?

HE: Literature died with Beckett.

I: And there is nothing left remarkable beneath the visiting moon. Don't you think every epoch has an absolute value? In itself, I mean? We don't need a second Beckett, do we? Why should we always compare? Let's enjoy ourselves while the going's good. And it is good, isn't it? We've never had it so good.

HE: Without art your new world order is meaningless.

I: You sound like Virgil in Hermann Broch's *Der Tod des Vergil*. Or like Virgil himself who might have spoken to Augustus along these lines, on his deathbed. An old idea, as old as human art, as old as the human heart. But history is a free agent and can negotiate with any team: the Moirai, the Holy Trinity, NATO. History is as free as Carmen.

HE: Francis Fukuyama seems to have murdered it.

I: Perhaps the human heart doesn't need art any more, art with a capital A. History has other fish to fry. Its attitude towards art is one of bored indifference. The history of mankind will not come to a halt if art disappears from human hearts and brains, from museums and libraries. There are plenty more fish in the sea. The flames in which the library of Alexandria was reduced to a handful of cinders had no effect on history, not even on its temperature. But H-bombs and ecological disasters—

HE: I saw a poster once, in the New York subway. It was a cartoon head swarming with various things inside: science-fiction monsters, weapons, bulging eyes, tongues sticking out of twisted mouths, fishes, rockets. And the caption was: 'Fill your head with fun! Start reading!' In a childish scribble.

I: Well, what's wrong with fun? Why shouldn't we hark back to the halcyon days of youth? 'Heaven lies about us in our infancy.' Personally, I loved school. Anatomy classes, best of all. I even built a skeleton at home with a Meccano set. Instead of building cranes, I built human beings. Call it destiny, if you like. Most kids are obsessed with technology and overlook the human factor.

HE: An American film-director said recently, 'I felt when I made my last film that I had a real grasp on public taste. Public taste was my taste. We don't make these films to hang in the Louvre. We make them to be seen by as many people as possible.' And I want my novels to hang in the Louvre. And in the Alte Pinakothek.

I: So why don't you go and hang them? And while you're about it—why don't you hang yourself?

HE: That's right! What they've got on the walls are the painters themselves: Leonardo, Fra Angelico.

I: Many Pythagoreans and Stoics, firmly believing in the immortality of the soul, laid violent hands upon themselves and departed to heaven. I also believe in the immortality of the soul. Don't you? So I'm often tempted to leave this earth and fly away to heavenly regions. Thus it was with Cleanthes and Chrysippus, with Zeno and Empedocles, who in the dead of night cast himself into Etna's fiery mouth—

HE: A human sacrifice, a ritual. An initiation rite. Now works of art have become objects. So have artists.

I: Do I detect a Baudrillardian note in your reflection on art and artists? The decline of 'subject', the triumph of 'object'. Subjects in subjection to objects. Shall we build a triumphal arch to commemorate the victory of objects? Or would that be a tautology? After all, triumphal arches are objects. Or do you think the Arc de Triomphe is a subject—Napoleon in the flesh? Why do you object to objects anyway? *Cet obscure objet du désir*. As I child, I dreamt of being the phallus for my mother because I thought she needed one. But the intervention of my father in the Oedipus complex prevented me from assimilating myself with the object of my mother's demand. So the phallus I dreamt of was lost—forever out of reach. 'The missing phallus,' as Lacan puts it. You should read a primer, my dear fellow. *Lacan for Beginners*—

HE: Wittgenstein thought he was writing for extra-terrestrials and could only be understood by them—by Martians, by Venusians.

I: And by Saturnians like yourself.

HE: Every true artist is an extra-terrestrial.

I: But how can a poor earthling understand such an artist?

HE: A different kind of brain.

I: You mean one needs a different kind of brain? What kind of brain, may I ask? The third kind? The fourth kind? Well, I think I may safely affirm that the brains of *our* kind—of the first kind that is—cannot understand—

HE: The zero kind.

I: Thomas Mann believed that every great work of art (*ein bedeutendes Geistesproduct*) exerts a profound and lasting influence on the human spirit only if there exists an affinity between the personal destiny of the writer and that of his contemporaries.

HE: *Paucis natus est, qui populum aetatis suae cogitat*.

I: 'Whoever in his thinking takes note of his own age will influence only a few.' Seneca, *Epist.* 79, 17. Well, you're not forbidden to feed your extraterrestrial nonsense into your indulgent and all-forgiving computer. However, I would abstain from polluting the Internet, if I were you.

HE: Why do we always dumb down our standards, our judgements and aspirations? Is democracy synonymous with mediocrity? *Démocratie, médiocrité*. An anagram. Not quite. Tristan, Tantris.

I: Meritocracy, my dear. Democracy is synonymous with meritocracy. Democracy is a genuine, classless meritocracy.

HE: *Jeder will das Gleiche, jeder ist gleich: wer anders fühlt, geht freiwillig in Irrenhaus.*

I: Quoting Nietzsche, are you? 'Everybody wants the same, everybody is the same: whoever feels different goes voluntarily into a madhouse.' Well, you did come voluntarily into our...sanatorium, didn't you? We can't force anyone to make a decision—they've got to do it on their own. Incidentally, many sanatoriums have been forced to close departments because of lack of money.

HE: *Ehemals war alle Welt irre.*

I: Nietzsche again. 'Formerly, all the world was mad.' Not quite. I wasn't mad, was I? Friedrich Nietzsche. Why do you resort to quotations so often? Do you find it difficult putting *your* ideas over?

HE: The present is a clone of the past. A clone of an exemplary individual is supposed to reach the very high standards of its model's accomplishments.

I: Is the past so exemplary? Have you forgotten wars and dictatorships? Hitler? Stalin? Brezhnev? We must freely and spontaneously take responsibility for and make our own fate and life. The past is perfect only in the realm of grammar.

HE: Sometimes it's even pluperfect—not only in the realm of grammar.

I: Why are you bent on violating what Joel Feinberg calls 'a right to an open future'? We might have a diminished sense of our uniqueness and individuality if the past were a law, an order, if the past were to be followed in its footsteps. These psychological effects might take a heavy toll on the younger generation, on our children and grandchildren.

HE: Dante and Giotto are the right standards to measure our lives against. Why do you speak of John Doe?

I: Why don't you speak of your torments? Words might alleviate your pains.

HE: Could they at least serve *this* purpose? Didn't old women speak to those who suffered from toothache, in days of yore? To talk them out of toothache. I wonder what they said. Or was the meaning of their words of no importance? Would *any* words do under the circumstances?

I: I'm sure they didn't talk about Dante.

HE: Ten years ago, twenty years ago, Beckett, Borges and Nabokov were still alive. So I didn't feel lonely, although I met none of these writers. Now I feel like a time-traveller

whose means of transport is kaput. Nobody reminds me of Dante and Shakespeare, of Flaubert and Musil. Nothing reminds me of their grandeur.

I: Why do you always speak about Dante and Musil? And Fra Angelico? And Leonardo? We've got our writers and painters. They reflect our time, our tastes, our ways of thinking. Our way of living. Our *Prinzip Hoffnung*, our Earth of Good Hope. These days everyone's got their nose to the grindstone. Why can't we have a bit of fun in the evening?

HE: Escapist literature. What are you escaping from? Your fatigue, your defeats? 'The escape unto death'—just the opposite of the Kierkegaardian sickness. Actually he ought to have entitled his masterpiece *The Sickness unto Life*. Only the sick, the angst-stricken are truly alive—eternal.

I: Art should be simple.

HE: As complex as life. In a masterpiece every sentence is a complex sentence. Even one word is a complex sentence—in a beautiful poem.

I: Do you mean that every word has a complex?

HE: Beckett's words have a castration complex.

I: High art shares in the beauty of simplicity. It's accessible to everybody—even a dimwit gets something out of it.

HE: Being spoon-fed by an artist.

I: Of course we don't stop thinking. Because we *are*. Aren't we? Do you think we don't think? That's beside the point anyway. We live—above the poverty line, above the angst line! We live in the world and not in a mental home. In this world, not in a parallel world. Not in a perpendicular world either. We live on Earth and not on Venus. At the end of the twentieth century, at the beginning of a new era. Only a madman moves away from time, from his epoch. Keep up with the times! Forward! Forward!

HE: A dilute soup of photons, neutrinos. A dwindling number of electrons and positrons. This epoch has taken everything from me. The wrath of the lion is the wisdom of God. I don't go to concerts any more. What a joy it must be to hear a great orchestra—in a concert hall. But there are no great orchestras nowadays. Because there are no great conductors. I've only got records at my disposal. Mengelberg, Furtwängler.

I: You're living in a dead world, my dear fellow. And you lived in the Soviet Union before. Just another dead world, wasn't it? A gigantic prison.

HE: I've been imprisoned in the West. Only records and books.

I: A genuine work of art would never have got past your censors. So there was no art in your country—nothing but odes to Communist party and government officials.

HE: A famous Soviet ideologist said once: 'Our writers are bound to surpass Homer and Shakespeare because they live in the fairest society ever.' We laughed at him of course. But we thought along the same lines—the other way round. We thought that artists were bound to create masterpieces. In free countries. No censors, no KGB. What's the breeding ground for masterpieces? *Mystère*, as the French say. Mystery. The landscapes of destiny seem to be permanently shrouded in mist.

I: Cheer up, my dear fellow! The early-morning mist had lifted by breakfast time, giving us a magnificent view over the lake. Did you enjoy the view?

HE: No one can write a masterpiece on purpose. No one can program anything. Democracy is a computer program. But there are computer bugs all over the place. And a power failure—

I: Degeneration, in other words. *Les chiens aboient, la caravane passe*. You may bark your head off, if you wish. Our caravan will go its own sweet way as long as there's life on earth. Wouldn't you mind being called a dog? O damn'd Iago, O inhuman dog,...oh, oh, oh.

HE: I'm barking up the *right* tree! The Tree of Ignorance.

I: Why do you bark at all? A dignified dog doesn't bark.

HE: Sometimes I'm a caravan myself. And *you* are a dog. The point is there are few dogs around, few and far between. In both cases.

I: Do you think humans are born ungifted nowadays? Ungifted, untalented, ungainly, unimaginative, unheavenly—

HE: And unearthly. Nothing to do with 'unearthly beauty', though.

I: Unearthly ugliness?

HE: They're very down-to-earth individuals, metaphorically speaking.

I: It's typical of you to kick someone when they're down. By the way, are you a down-to-Mars person—as a writer I mean? Or an up-to-Mars—

HE: In a literal sense, however, they don't feel her any more. Our Mother Earth.

I: Our Moist Mother Earth, as the Russians used to say. *Mati-Sira-Zemlya*.

HE: Neither on Earth nor in Heaven. Hanging in the air, from the gallows.

I: A nice example of gallows humour. They're metaphorical, I hope. Why don't you hang yourself? That's all right, there's no great hurry! Tell me what you think about children, about newborn babies. Do they have other genes? Why aren't there any men of genius among them?

HE: Every talent needs an appropriate atmosphere for its development—an appropriate *Stimmung*, to use a Heideggerian term. What is lacking today—

I: Wittgenstein spoke about atmosphere—'*die unrichtige Atmosphäre*'. And what advice does he give to a man who finds himself in a wrong *Element*? '*Dann muß er sich also damit abfinden, als Krüppel zu erscheinen*.' To make the best of looking like a cripple. Or a madman. And what about women? Are they decadent, insignificant? Are they cripples? Why don't you court a beautiful maiden—a *real* one, I mean? Let me tell you how *I* go about it. At first I put on a show of being interested and all of a sudden—Do you get me? I become cool. I'm always pouring cold water on their hopes, after a promising start. A girl grows accustomed to a certain pace, you see...to the pace I set during our first and second encounters...and I suddenly alter it. I alter the rhythm of our relationship. What happens then? She's disappointed—offended even. The rhythmical drive carries her on. Her virtual Wedding March. But there's no kiss on the upbeat, nor on the downbeat. There's no bed on the downbeat—got it? We don't lie down on my bed, nor on any other bed for that matter. By the way, are you acquainted with musical terminology? I know you love Wagner. Do you understand all the technicalities? I offer her a syncopated tune that destroys the regular beat of her libido. And my syncopation is sexier than any crescendo. And when the downbeat comes at last, she falls on my bed, believe it or not. A hint is enough. She strips her clothes off and offers her body like a whore. She may even perform an amateurish striptease on the way to my bed. Well, there are other methods. A school friend of mine used to pick up girls in the streets. Once he ran across a rare specimen of feminine beauty somewhere in London. He introduced himself and said he was a pianist. And he *was* a professional pianist, but she didn't believe him. Finally she invited him to her place in order to test his abilities—she had an upright piano in her room. He refused at first, saying he hadn't practised for a long time. 'I've just recovered from a bout of flu,' he explained. Again she didn't believe him. Women are suspicious creatures, you know. Well, to cut a long story short, they went to her flat, to her room. He sat down at the piano and got up again. 'Perhaps next time,' he said. 'I really can't play tonight.' He apologised and sat down beside her on the sofa. Again she asked him to play a small piano piece. And again he refused.

HE: Repetitive music.

I: I'm sorry, my dear, but that's the whole point of my story. Duration! The length and breadth of time, so to speak. I'll finish it in due time—don't you worry! I always finish my stories, come hell or high water. Well, he sat down at the piano again and began to look hesitatingly at the keyboard. Or mistrustfully perhaps. 'Mistrustfully' is the right word. He mistrusted the reaction of the keyboard to the impact of his fingers. His features reflected his hesitation and panic. And his mistrust. 'Don't panic! Everything will be all right,' she said with

a smile. She was a sadist, a typical sadist, because at that point in my story she didn't know he was a professional pianist. He brought his fingers down on the keyboard and produced a few chords—a few discordant chords, I should say. And she broke into laughter, breaking his heart, as she wrongly presumed. Laughter is the orgasm of sadists. He was also laughing—inwardly. And silent laughter is more efficacious than audible laughter because it lasts longer, being independent of the vocal cords. So they both laughed for a while, in different ways. And then, all of a sudden, he played a Chopin etude with virtuoso brilliance. And she stopped laughing. She fell in love with him instead. The laugh was replaced by love. Inwardly and outwardly. It was her love now that resounded in the room, if you see what I mean. Why don't you perform the same trick, my dear fellow? Can you play the piano? 'A new love puts to flight an old one.' Courting a maiden is sure to heal your wound. I hope you're not a masochist. Are you? Don't you want to have a son? Your own flesh and blood and genes? Your own flesh and blood in jeans? You don't need to dress up just to go to a disco. And how about two sons, three sons—many children? Myriads of mirrors. Don't forget you're a man! A woman can expect to produce only about 400 eggs in her lifetime. And only 20 eggs of hers can be converted into healthy infants. A man releases 100 million spermatozoa with each ejaculation. If a man were given total freedom to act, he could inseminate thousands of women in his lifetime.

HE: Our grandchildren will never drink good wine, real wine. There has been no real wine since 1961. Only soft drinks.

I: This is a sensitive issue—I think we'd better soft-pedal it for the moment.

HE: Wines are filtered nowadays. Everything is filtered and pasteurised. A new variety of commercial censorship.

I: Oh, here we go again! I'm talking to you about women, my dear patient. Have you dropped the fair sex? Since 1961? Don't tell me there are no women left on earth.

HE: 'I say confusedly what comes uppermost.'

I: Are you talking about literature again? However much I try to change the subject, our conversation invariably returns to literature. 'Confusedly' is the right word, by the way. Uppermost, uppermost. What does that mean? In the context?

HE: 'The greatest eloquence seems to stutter.'

I: Anyway it isn't wise to be too clever—sometimes you overreach yourself. And you always overreach yourself, my dear fellow. Always. How did Nietzsche put it? '*Du sollst Herr über dich werden*—' A nice patient, Nietzsche. A dangerous patient. A destroyer, not a preserver. He said something else, Hitler's favourite philosopher—something useful. 'If I

understood why I had bungled a sentence, I have every right to delete it. The same goes for a man whom I understood properly.' Supposing this man were yourself. Why don't you delete yourself from...the register of births, marriages and deaths? *Chez nous, on rature les ratés*. Of course your death will remain on record—for a while. They'll burn your name in a few years. But I'll keep you in my files, in my Paradise. After all, you added a line to the history of the human brain. A zigzag. Why don't you abolish time? And space?

HE: They never overreach themselves. There's nothing to overreach or to reach, for that matter. They put it on your table, in your lap. A nice novel, a charming novel, a horror novel, a nice plot. Nice suspense. A political drama in the background—to make a banal love affair sound important. And their works are so light. So many aspects of our life are light nowadays. Our food is light, our wines are light and fresh. Nietzsche and Calvino praised lightness, but I'm heavy. Beethoven was heavy. So were Dante, Tolstoy and Kierkegaard.

I: 'Gravity is the root of lightness; stillness the master of agitation. Thus a nobleman travels all day without leaving his baggage-wagon. How then should a lord of ten thousand chariots conduct himself lightly in regard to his empire? If he conducts himself lightly, he will lose the root.' Are you a Taoist?

He: A poet's grandeur obliterates his shortcomings. And their absence doesn't guarantee—

I: You mean—flawlessness? I beg to differ. I think that a nice, well-written book guarantees top-quality service for its customers.

HE: A nice little opus will always remain little. And nice. The universe is a masterpiece of God. Is it little, nice and flawless?

I: You sound like Dickens who said about the English works he saw at the grand Art Exposition in Paris: 'There is a horrid respectability about most of the best of them—a little, finite, systematic routine in them, strangely expressive to me of the state of England itself.' But you're not Dickens, are you? One of my protégés identified with Tolstoy.

HE: Exuberance is beauty.

I: You seem to follow Novalis's advice: '*Der Akt des sich selbst Überspringens*.'

HE: I'm following my Tata. '*Trasumanar*' is the word, I believe. 'Transhumanising'. Rising above the human state. Dante literally rises with Beatrice through the spheres and high above the mortal condition.

I: *Desursum descendens*—a grace infused from on high. Actually she was a *garce*, your Beatrice, your Bice. A bitch. Borges thought so. He voiced his opinion in an essay on Dante. Anyway, nobody cares about 'Grand Narratives' any longer. During the twentieth century they

undermined they own credibility, creating a sort of credibility gap. The narrative of emancipation, the narrative of Beatrice and her Paradise. Why do you speak about Beatrice? Have you forsaken Isolda the Fair? Is it a bigamous marriage?

HE: Isolda, Beatrice, Anna Karenina and Tata are synonyms. *Trois femmes dans la même femme.*

I: Are you planning to re-write the *Divina Commedia*? By the way, I'm not yet acquainted with *your* poetical output. Olympic athletes often have to give a urine sample to prove that they've not been taking drugs. Poetry is a drug. And poets are drug addicts. Could you give us a sample of your versification to prove you're a poetry addict? I'm going to count up to three—

HE:

Gliding high above
The mountains. Not a bird, just a
Shadow. What do you need?
Why don't you sleep in a tomb,
In a cradle?

The sun
Shone through the leaves.

A shadow on my face.

You lived in it.

I: I like this endless journey into the past, away from both the present and the future, as far as a place called Happiness. Happy Valley. *Paradise Lost. Memoria praeteritorum bonorum. Du côté de chez Proust.* Are you on the point of becoming a kaon? You said you couldn't become an insect, like Kafka's famous hero. But what about a kaon? Don't forget that kaons occasionally flip into another universe, where time is running backward, and then flip back again. All you have to do is stay in that other universe until you reach the halcyon days of your youth and then return to our universe, to the present, to our present. Kaons are created by collisions between nuclear particles such as protons and neutrons. Why don't you have a go at it? The only snag is kaons don't live very long. No use shouting 'Long live kaons!' After a few nanoseconds—'

HE:

I wish we could sign
A non-aggression pact
With the future.

I: Are you in the past now? Or nowhere? Isn't the past a no-man's-land? A no-woman's-land?

HE: I'm in the future, in that distant future when people will have learnt to raise their forebears from the dead. In the literal sense of the word. Or in the material sense of the word. Not in words only—materially! They must walk in our midst, they must sit in our armchairs. Plato, St Augustine, Dante, Shakespeare, Bach, Beethoven, Schubert, Tolstoy. It's a Russian concept, you know.

I: All primitive societies nourish the hope of uniting the quick and the dead in a single community. Divided we fall. Lévi-Strauss describes a funerary rite among the Fox Indians—

HE: The Russian dream. Feodorov spoke about it, a Russian self-taught philosopher.

I: There are many self-taught philosophers in your native land, aren't there? Russia is a land of self-taught philosophers and self-appointed tsars. And self-appointed martyrs. And self-denying mothers. And self-contradictory writers. And self-defeating rebels.

HE: I may write a commentary some day.

I: Oh, don't push yourself.

HE: A commentary on the Apocalypse.

I: But you vowed never to write another novel again. Between ourselves, I think you're right. Anyway the novel is dead. Like Isolde, like Tristan, like Tata.

HE: A commentary, not a novel.

I: No structural twists, you mean? No dialogues, no descriptions. 'Paul sat down, Tata rose from the dead.'

HE: Writing a commentary is a noble task. Paying homage to the dead. The future is a commentary on the past.

I: Another unfinished best-seller, another failure. *Tristan on Earth*. *Orphée aux enfers*. *Orpheus in Hell*. Sounds better in French. Despite occasional patches of purple prose, the book is mostly clear and incisive. A sort of operetta. I've just finished it. We're legally obliged to plough through our patients' opuses. Your last novel obviously exists in a tangential relationship to everything that precedes it, and this is evident in your tendency to dip into your poetry, essays, novels. It is not synoptic. A high overview. Very autobiographical too! Your preoccupations come to the fore, all of them: poetry, the status of the artist, the elusiveness of the object of desire, transience, mind and technology, sexual

power politics, art, posterity. Once again they come to the fore—very much invested with your own voice. Less distanced than before, more personal. It is also a kind of literary stirrup cup: a bowing out, a leave-taking, which I think is what you intended. So did I. That was also *my* intention, to tell the truth. In a way, this novel seems to be a bit of everything. Tristan and Isolda, Romeo and Juliet, yourself and a lost love, Tata and the computer—the multi-faceted personae of your novels rub shoulders here, interchanging identities. As a cogent work of art it works—up to a point, I think. The extra-terrestrial ploy holds up, but at the end of the narrative things disintegrate into different vying discursive forms. This is of course defensible from a poetic point of view. The representation of fragmentation through textual fragmentation. However, it does leave the reader wondering what happened to your ET! He seems to metamorphose in a rapidly protean fashion into other personae—recognisable to you and I, but not necessarily comprehensible to someone encountering a sample of your literary output for the first time. In other words there's a deliberate diffusion at the end. What holds one's interest is the search for love by someone who has never known love. And my reading of the end is that it is self-love, achieved through communion with the self-reflexive surface of the computer screen. The Isoldas all disintegrate because they were 'man'-ufactured myths in the first place. What remains is the reliability of the self. But your self is *not* reliable, my dear. Your characters aren't reliable either—they often disintegrate before actually opening their mouths. You should introduce them to the reader by describing their physics, the way they're dressed and the settings where they sow their wild oats. Your colleagues from Russia used to luxuriate in sensuous, almost anthropomorphic descriptions of nature.

HE: Why should we create a fiction and make a statement about the creation of that fiction? A postmodern trick.

I: You *are* a postmodern writer. In this novel you mix several styles or genres of writing. You comment on other fictional works. An obtrusive voice interrupts your novel's 'naturalistic' flow from outside of the fictional 'frame'. Your use of anachronisms is deliberate, if I'm not mistaken. Your characters read about their own fictional lives. You directly address the reader in the act of reading.

HE: Others describe a coppice of young birches that always smells of Russia. They describe Barbados turtles. Or dresses and dressing gowns that always smell of humans. I'm interested only in God and the soul.

I: It could have been an exciting novel, but there was too much padding.

HE: True artists are always in danger of being led astray by their own adventurous spirits. Unlike mediocrities, they can't help taking risks. Great artists often irritate me and that

is a good sign. Dante, Tolstoy, Joyce. Mediocrities leave me cold, indifferent, and there is no room for irritation in my indifference.

I: To an innocent reader coming across this work on its own, some of the internal allusions may fall by the wayside, and while the chopping and changing of the scenario lends the novel its energy—

HE: I met an old friend of mine. In 1974. I had just been given political asylum. I told him I wished to save mankind. 'A Russian idea,' he said. 'You'll forget all this nonsense very soon.' I still haven't forgotten it.

I: You don't seem to forget anything, do you? Anyway there's a good deal of naïveté in your romantic assertions.

HE: Garbo the Divine. They used to dream about goddesses. Now they demand the girl next door.

I: But Garbo often played quite plain, ordinary women, didn't she? Ninotchka—

HE: They don't dream any more. And I'm a daydreamer, a nightdreamer, a morningdreamer, an eternitydreamer.

I: The culture you write about is so outdated and outmoded that only puerile dreams can conjure it up. *Ferne* and *Heimat*, *An die Ferne Geliebte*, *poètes maudits*. Outworn shibboleths!

HE: Modernity is only half of art, according to Baudelaire. Transitional, fugitive. The other half is eternal, immutable.

I: No one looks for the Grail in our streets, inside our skyscrapers. 'The love of money is the root of all evil.' Even preachers have erased these words from their copies of the Bible.

HE: The New Testament is too old for you.

I: We no longer travel in those horse-drawn vehicles from which we used to contemplate both Mother Nature and our inner nature. Information retrieval is the process of finding stored information on a computer—not in a coach or a landscape. Besides, solitude has become practically and technically impossible. And transcendence has become transparent—*glasnost'*, a communal property.

HE: A communal flat.

I: Instead of the *nobile castello*. And *poètes maudits*, as well as Tristans and Romeos, are nursed by psychoanalysts. Why didn't you swap horses in midstream? Your Great Refusal has been absorbed and annihilated by what you refuse with such obstinacy—by technology, media and money. Now it's too late of course. No more horses, no more streams. Even your stream of consciousness is running dry.

HE: I still want to save humanity.

I: Russian fanatics would never be content with material, ethical or aesthetic supremacy over other nations. They have always wished to *save* humanity. For all its atheism and anticlericalism, the Soviet regime adopted this lofty megalomaniac ideal and self-confidently proceeded to the beneficial conquest of the world.

HE: Every real poet is a saviour of humanity. Every real poet awakens the spirit of Los.

I: Once I had a patient who, under the influence of apocalyptic visions, became convinced that the end of the world was drawing nigh. He actually believed that the world had *already* come to an end. He was 'the only real man left alive', and the few human shapes he saw—the doctor, the attendants, the other patients—were just shapes, nothing more. But over time his despair shaded away into acceptance of the situation. A world-catastrophe is not infrequent during the agitated stage in other cases of paranoia. You know, patients come in all shapes and sizes but they have a lot in common—mainly catastrophes, cataclysms. My patients withdraw the libidinal cathexis from humanity and the external world in general, whereupon everything becomes indifferent and irrelevant to them. The end of the world is the projection of this internal catastrophe.

HE: A world-catastrophe? I don't think anything of the kind will ever happen. The world will end neither with a bang nor a whimper. Business talks, business trips. No interstellar journeys. Up through the clouds into the sunshine above. Into the moonshine, into the starshine. No, no, no. Down to business, back to business. No end of business. A better return on the investment, high interest rates...

I: Why do you dislike businessmen? They're artists in their own right.

HE: They are not. Even scientists are not creative artists because science is an imitative truth, a second-hand truth. Not a first-hand truth. Only the hand of an artist is capable of creating truth, of making it *happen*. Heidegger—

I: Oh, here we go again! Heidegger, Wittgenstein.

HE: Kant says that a scientist discovers 'what might have been learnt' and can be learnt after him. There's a difference between a work one studies and understands down to its very roots and a poem, an endless poem, as inexhaustible as the world itself. Scientists, statesmen, technical innovators—none of them are 'geniuses'. 'Great minds' at best. No great shakes at *creating* truth. *Talent zu Einfällen ist nicht Genie zu Ideen*.

I: They're dead, all those people. Dead and buried, rotten and forgotten. Why don't you quote a living man—Noam Chomsky, for instance? The most important intellectual alive, according to *The New York Times*.

HE: Chomsky is absolutely right when he says that consent, satisfaction, vanity and happiness are mass-produced nowadays. But I disagree with his idea that almost everybody is a creative artist. Businessmen, ordinary people. What do they have to do in order to create something? Just talk to each other. A nice theory, a nice man.

I: Why can't *you* be nice? Is it so shameful, disreputable?

HE: A second-hand truth, a mass-produced truth. People have already been told they're wonderful, creative and unique. Many times. In newspapers, on the radio, on television. Advertisers are interested in ratings, you know.

I: Should television viewers be told they're stupid jerks?

HE: Why not? That would jerk them out of their smug self-satisfaction. That would make them think.

I: And read. And go to museums. Fill your head with angst! You're a benefactor of humanity.

HE: Going through many lives. Not just through the motions and words. Parallel worlds. What kind of truth do they create during their Internet chit-chats? Eating chips, chit-chatting on the Internet—what's the difference? Chit-chatting, chip-chewing...

I: What are *you* doing right now, may I ask? Incidentally, a report published today says that chips—crisps as they're called over in Britain—are rich in vitamin C and E and a good snack for kids. We create our own health when eating chips. Isn't that creative work? Your child would have eaten chips day in day out.

HE: A woman I know asked me once, 'Why do you always talk about women's legs? Are legs so important?' 'Of course,' I answered. 'Then I've nothing to worry about,' she said, glancing at her legs. She thought they were beautiful.

I: Were they?

HE: I've no idea. She doesn't belong to the category of women whose legs could and should be looked at. She isn't beautiful enough—below *see-level*, as it were. And those ordinary people are below the level at which creation starts.

I: Do you number businessmen among them?

HE: Their lives are in inverse proportion to their bank accounts. Below the poverty line. Below *see-level*, *hear-level*, *smell-level*. Looking at the world only with their own eyes.

I: Do you mean they're blind, deaf and afflicted with anosmia? Or do they belong to the category of people who might be ignored? Are all humans dispensable except artists?

HE: A good reader creates a world situated between his own world and the writer's. Another parallel world.

I: And good businessmen are mind readers. Minds are more complicated and convoluted than books, aren't they? If you buy some shares on the London stock exchange—

HE: You should drink in moderation, otherwise you stop enjoying wine, its bouquet and taste. You just drink for the sake of drinking. The same goes for money. And for life.

I: Does it really? The more money you get, the bigger and juicier the slices of life you can cut for yourself. Money is the best carving knife ever.

HE: Any way you slice it.

I: But you don't slice money—you slice life. And your life's certainly been sliced to pieces.

HE: Living in moderation. Montaigne says something to this effect. Greed engenders greed, not pleasure. Money for the sake of money. And for argument's sake.

I: A convincing argument. Incidentally, Roland Barthes says that in the quest for pleasure and freedom money is essential. According to him, the great disadvantage of the three ideologies which have dominated the twentieth century is that each of them anathematises money. Marxism, Freudianism and Christianity—

HE: St Paul knew what the music of the spirit meant. And the music of the spheres.

I: Businessmen can save humanity much more effectively and quickly than poets! Hundreds of thousands of people face possible starvation, you know. And no one's likely to read poetry on an empty stomach. What would *you* do without businessmen? Artists, I mean? Who would sponsor your operas and tragedies? Who would sponsor your crazy inventions, the figments of your imaginations? Have you ever heard about industrial sponsorship of the arts?

HE: I met a few Russian businessmen lately. 'I've earned enough money for my great-grandchildren. Now I can retire.' That's what they say, almost in unison. And some of them are very young. Around thirty. Thirty-five at most. And they retire already. They don't think of us.

I: Why *should* they think of you? Why should *I* think of you? My inherent humanism, I suppose. Can't help it. The Hippocratic oath. I've fitted the asylum up with all mod cons. Electroconvulsive therapy is particularly advisable in cases of manic-depressive psychosis and other types of depression. The technique is essentially that of passing alternating current through the head. Why are you trembling? You shouldn't. Our patients just love it. We love it too. Of course we still use straitjackets. There are shades of an earlier era in the way our sanatorium is run. They're not mutually exclusive. Electroconvulsive therapy and straitjackets, I mean. Snuggle down now, and I'll sing you a lullaby.

They always fall asleep after the treatment, the dear rock-a-bye babies. And they dream of our garden, of our nurses.

The first reports of Tristan date from a period when he was not quite fifty years old. He was still at large, mind you. But lunatics always live in madhouses. The world itself is a madhouse for people like that. They confuse the world with their own brains. And they are different, aren't they? I mean, their brains and the world. He was already moving away from the world. Away from the world, towards us, in our direction.

I had a few mirrors installed in our hall. The Hall of Mirrors, if you please! I was hoping he might find himself in one of them, in all of them. At last.

Some think it is old hat: electric shocks, straitjackets, mirrors. But why make life difficult for yourself? We also keep them doped up: there are heaps of tablets in the foyer, in a bowl. The guests suck them like sweets. If something works it never goes out of fashion. That is what I consider modern—efficiency. The traditional methods have done us proud and they still do. Tristan is the living proof of what I am talking about. The living proof, the dead proof.

What he suffers from is a debilitating and incurable disease of the nervous system—worse still, of the soul. However much time he might spend in corners, in the nooks and crannies of our house, he will never become a normal citizen. '*Velle non discitur*,' as Seneca put it. Willing cannot be taught. 'If I were in your shoes, I would be a normal citizen.' A conditional sentence. 'What would you do if you were a millionaire?' 'If I was a millionaire, I'd sail round the world.' But he will never sail round the world, our conditional-born millionaire. And I shall never wear Tristan's shoes: they are too tight, like a straitjacket.

Such things are commonplace. We come across so many lunatics, here and there. Sometimes we do not even notice them. You need eyes in the back of your head! And in the top of your head. And in the right temple, and in the left temple. Don't ever allow yourself to get used to lunatics! We rub shoulders with them every day. A bloody dangerous business. What they have got is contagious, a deadly disease. Whole nations have been decimated by this scourge. Never spend more than half an hour with one of them. An hour and a half is the absolute limit. After all, you can tell a man by the company he keeps. Just say goodbye, politely but firmly, and go. Better still—say nothing. Don't talk to loonies! If you spot one, run like hell! Close all the doors behind you! Bolt them shut! Never use the lift! Jump out of the window, if necessary. Once outside, go to the nearest telephone-box. Our number is 0888888888. The call is free of charge.

How to spot a loony? At the beginning of drug-induced hallucinations people report seeing simple, coloured, geometric patterns. But what if those people are not drug addicts? What if their hallucinations have been induced by something else—by madness? And what if they see women and not geometric patterns? What if they see Isolda, Beatrice? Auditory hallucinations are a symptom of schizophrenia. But should we wait for those hallucinations? And how to spot them when they come? Will our loonies own up to being plagued by hallucinations? In their ears, in their minds, in their brains? In their lives? Some of them are secretive about their madness. 'We observe what goes on in the brain of a lunatic through the discrepancy between his actions and the behaviour of other people,' says Boissier de Sauvages. Well and good. But what if there are no other people around? How to spot a loony in a lonely spot? Look him or her straight in the eye! The only snag is that loonies go around with their eyes shut.

By the way, did you hear about the new loony bin—sorry!—psychiatric institution? The rest home in your neighbourhood? I call it 'The World'. My baby. I drew up the blueprints and even donated my favourite carpet to it. All in a good cause. A beautiful place, you'll enjoy it. A wonderful home for the criminally insane—for everybody in fact. Welcome to the club! Visitors don't have to be accompanied by club members. You need my help and loving care. What would become of you without me?

What is the use of all these mirrors if nobody looks into them? Nobody except myself.

Bad writers are madmen in disguise. Why waste your time on what you cannot do properly? Why withdraw from society and the privileges bestowed upon its members?

Do you know what he says when I question him on the subject? 'Perhaps I'm a bad writer, but at least I care about the dignity of literature. And in our times, in this period of decadence, even good intentions count a lot. *C'est avec les bonnes intentions qu'on fait la bonne littérature*. In our times, good intentions. For want of anything better.'

Well, there is no place like home. The sea of troubles. And, suddenly, the haven of peace. Home, sweet home. There is such a thing as homecoming. One can and must go home. Baby, it's cold outside. It's icy cold out there. It's snowing, a blizzard of snow. 'Blow winds and crack your cheeks!' A man's life is a journey through snow. *Winterreise*. Even in tropical countries, let alone in Russia. Man trudges through drifts of snow extending to all horizons. He is shrouded with snow, from cradle to grave, from womb to tomb. (And beyond. We should not scorn the virtues of eternity.) Snow, death in slow motion. (Snow motion.) Unless it is quicksand rather than snow. One of the two—just take your pick. Schubert preferred snow, yet he never lived in Russia. Drawing out the pleasure of disappearance. *Faire durer le*

plaisir. On the verge of death he mistook his room for a cubby-hole located somewhere underground. 'Don't I deserve a place *on* the earth?' he asked. He did not recognise his own room because Beethoven was not in it. Does my patient recognise Paris? Proust, Joyce and Beckett no longer live there.

He is living at home now, in his castle.

Tristan had a castle built by a giant. In the first hall there was a statue of Morold lying dead in his ship. In the second Tristan sculpted a life-size figure of Isolda from local stone. He made love to the statue—twice a day. And he talked to her:

'You should cling to me as a creeper twines round a tree. Raise your legs and put them on my shoulders! Why don't you kiss me? Why don't you bite me? I've put a wonderful set of teeth into your mouth. Why don't you bite me?'

Some day his statue might move, mind you—like Pygmalion's masterpiece. At least it might move its hand in order to caress our Tristan. Day and night its molecules jostle against one another in random directions. And if, by sheer coincidence, all the molecules just happened to move in the same direction, the hand would move and caress Tristan's cheek. The odds against such a coincidence are unimaginably great. The number is so large that the entire history of mankind is too short a time to write out all the noughts. The entire age of the universe. But Tristan has all the time in the world, in the universe. He has time on his hands, on Isolda's hands. And on her arms, and on her legs.

Unfortunately my patient is mortal and therefore must die a natural death. Peacefully at home in the night. He may not even reach the first nought of our quasi-infinite number.

HE: Death-potions. I wonder why so many English and American women wrote poems about death—from the point of view of a dead person. As if women died more often than men. Emily Dickinson wrote about her own corpse watching life go on around it. So did Christina Rossetti. Perhaps women die only in appearance, doing things by halves at the right moment. Their bodies are at rest but their minds—the other halves—remain in working order. 'He leaned above me, thinking that I slept and could not hear him.' Christina Rossetti did hear him—in her sonnet *After Death* at least. He said, 'Poor child, poor child.' Something along these lines happens in Schubert's late works. In 1826 he applied for the vacant post of deputy *Kapellmeister*, but his application was turned down. From then on he let matters drift, watching life from his deathbed, as it were.

I: He died in Vienna on November 19, 1828. On his tomb in the Währingerstrasse Cemetery—

HE: During that two-year period his juvenile self would come and lean over him, speaking softly. Piano, pianissimo. They speak softly in front of the dead, don't they? 'As he turned away came a deep silence, and I knew he wept.'

I: In one of your essays you said that Schubert was fond of drawn-out pianissimi throughout his life—even in his youth. Did he often speak in the presence of his own corpse? Was he also harassed by the Black Man, like Mozart? Freud might have described it as sexual harassment. Have you turned homosexual?

HE: Now he wept—silently, silently. No sobs, no moans.

I: Are you sure his juvenile self only *leaned* over his corpse? Making love to one's doppelgänger. To oneself, in other words. Why don't you say it in plain English? Anyway I'm delighted you indulge in self-abuse instead of betraying Tata with other women.

HE: You can hear the tears drop in the second movement of the *String Quintet in C Major*.

I: And what about the tune? Doesn't it carry on in its own sweet way despite the tears?

HE: It sounds like the musings of a dead man. And in the final movement the dead man mocks his juvenile self, parodying the latter's uncouth bearing and preposterous optimism. And even his sufferings. And then the dead man realises that his doppelgänger mocks his own sufferings, his past and present sufferings. The other way round, you know.

I: In Heine's poem *Der Doppelgänger*, which Schubert set to music in the last year of his life, the protagonist accuses his clone of pitilessly aping his sufferings.

HE: During that two-year period Schubert wrote a lot of fugues for two voices. The corpse and his doppelgänger. And his fugal pyrotechnics still hold us spellbound: inversions, augmentations, diminutions, retrograde imitations. The two voices mock, ape and pity each other—in the last piano sonata, in the *G Major Quartet*.

I: Paradoxically he wasn't an expert at fugue-writing. Only on the brink of death did he resolve to learn counterpoint.

HE: Schubert and his doppelgänger are united through music. Opposites, life and death. They also come together in music and are reconciled by it. Why? Are they interchangeable? Music is an embodiment of harmony, of love, of cosmic order. Major and Minor, yin and yang. In the realm of music Bach is a Chinese philosopher. Bach, Schubert and Wagner are our love.

I: Tata again?

HE: And our mediums. I'm going to build a time machine.

I: You can't go back further in time than the moment the machine itself was created. And it hasn't been created yet, has it? What do you need the past for? Can't you see her angelic face, her celestial smile? Can't you hear her wonderfully throaty voice? Can't you lovingly stroke her face with the tips of your fingers? Can't you smell the fragrance of her expensive French perfume? She's dancing with her arms up over your shoulders. Can't you kiss her full on the mouth? Why did you leave her?

HE: I don't know. Great expectations, my destiny, creating worlds out of nothing, my worlds, leaving the traces of my brain in the history of mankind, typing my brains out. A charming form of suicide.

I: Why did you leave her?

HE: Their *Prinzip Hoffnung*. *Der Prinz von Homburg*. Why didn't I shoot her? He did. Kleist shot that woman, Henriette Vogel, an incurably sick woman, begging him to kill her. What did she suffer from? Leukaemia? On the bank of the Wannsee. *Wahnsinn*. Shooting Henriette and himself. Madness? Lucidness? Were they mad?

I: Your *Prinzip Angst*, Kleist, suicide. *Der Prinz von Homburg*. Why not *Der Prinz von Hoffnung*?

HE: We might have gone to the moon.

I: What would she do up there?

HE: She would moon around—quite in keeping with Antonioni's style.

I: She can't stand all this pointless intellectualising about subjects that just don't matter. She's fed up with Antonioni, Wagner and Schubert.

HE: Even love can only be found in a parallel world. In *Giselle*, for instance. I saw it many times in Moscow. Did you ever love me like that? My Giselle.

I: She's Tata. Why don't you accept her on her own terms?

HE: Bessmertnova danced her so beautifully. How light she was in the other world, in the parallel world!

A tedious story. All love stories are tedious unless you are involved in them personally. The love of Romeo and Juliet lasts only a few days. My patient's love story has lasted for thirty-nine years. Why doesn't he kill himself? There is no greater torment than waiting for something. Waiting for the ship, waiting, waiting. Isn't that enough for his suicidal impulse? And his numberless failures. Should I add something to the treasure of his torments?

My lunatics are a lot of fun. Of course they can be naughty from time to time. They get up to childish pranks and have to be told what is what. We give them a good spanking or

make them stand in the corner. No longer solitary freaks and eccentrics, they are a henceforth recognised and accredited sociological category, the object of the scrutiny and concern of our experts and potentially organisable when they are not in fact already organised in good postmodern fashion. We dispel any last illusions as to the autonomy of thought. Actually the dissipation of those illusions may reveal—and does reveal—a wholly positivist landscape from which the negative has evaporated altogether, beneath the steady clarity of what has been maliciously identified as 'cynical reason'.

By the way, I was right: he did not finish his commentary on the Apocalypse.

Isolda, Juliet, The Snow Maiden, Carmen, Helen of Troy, Maud Gonne, Anna Karenina, Madame Arnoux, Salammbô, Emma Bovary, Monica Vitti, Tata. Now he hears only one voice, a sort of Gregorian chant. Makes things easier for him, doesn't it? Get up! Quick! Eyes forward! Don't look down! Don't look up! Don't look sideways! Straight on! Keep to the straight and narrow! Keep to the straight and narrow! Fix a straight line in your mind! Fix your eyes on the straight line! You're sidling along. Straight! Straight! Forward! Forward! Left, right, left, right! Forward march! March! Close your eyes and march! Straight on! Straight on! Straight! Stop! About turn! Come back! Your tie isn't straight! Back to your corner! Right now. Okay, that'll do. I'll let you off this time. We'll forgive and forget. Sing something for us, Tristan. Please! I beg you. We all beg you, on our knees. Yes, on our bended knees. Humanity longs for you to sing something. The silence of the spheres has become unbearable. Go on! Sing anything. A Beatles song preferably. Even *Hickory Dickory Dock*, if you like. Nobody's asking you to sing the *Liebestod*. Heaven forbid! It's bad for your health. It should carry a government health warning. I'm going to count up to three—

HE:

*Höre ich nur diese Weise,
die so wundervoll und leise*

He always sings the *Liebestod*. And he hums it, whenever I place a gag over his mouth. And if he stops humming, I tell him ingenuously, 'I've forgotten how that tune goes—could you hum it for me? No harm in humming. It's words that are dangerous.'

A COMMENTARY ON THE APOCALYPSE

'On the Lord's day I was in the Spirit, and I heard behind me a loud voice like a trumpet—' So many voices have been heard throughout human history. To whom do they belong? How to distinguish the voice of God from other voices? Is there any criterion by which to recognise the voice of God? The voice St John heard on that memorable day was 'like a trumpet'. Have I ever heard anything like that? The voice of the doctor sounds like a trumpet sometimes, like a trumpet of the Last Judgement. I know he is not God, although some patients might think he *is* the Almighty. He is mighty enough, high and mighty, but he is not the *A*lmighty. Is he? It all depends on the height of your spirits, I suppose. The higher your spirits the nearer you are to God. The man who is in the 'highest spirits' can hear the voice of God.

When I am in the highest spirits, I hear *her* voice which sounds like a clarinet from Brahms' *Quintet for Clarinet and Strings*, Opus 115.

We believe in our doctor who is our father, our God the Father. Not just a godfather or a father figure. We have a sort of paternal relationship. A *maternal* relationship, as far as I am concerned. My God the Mother. We all need a father—even those who have a father or a grandfather or both. They need a more powerful father. A high-grade father, so to speak. We all need a mother, a wife, a bride.

St John was in the Spirit that day, on the Lord's day. He was in a spiritual state 'from Divine influx' (Swedenborg). He was in good spirits, in God spirits. Did he have a predisposition to hear the voice of God? Was he God-natured? Am I God-natured, God-hearted, God-souled? Am I doctor-natured? Why do I hear *his* voice all the time? Am I Tata-natured? My love for her must be encoded in one of my genes, in all of them perhaps. I love her with every fibre (gene) of my being. 'You're not even Tata-*hearted*.' In what state am I when thinking about her, when feeling her both outside and inside my body? In a spiritual state, in a romantic, erotic, amorous state? From Tata influx. Is that how the dead communicate with us—through light, through the air? 'You are the air I breathe,' she says in one of her letters. You are the light I see. And the darkness. The dark lady of my novels.

'In his right hand he held seven stars—' My doctor often holds seven test tubes in his right hand as he bends over my body. Why *seven* test tubes, I wonder? 'These drugs can be tried out on bacteria in a test tube,' he says.

'And out of his mouth came a sharp double-edged sword.' My doctor is in the habit of putting a thermometer in his mouth before taking my temperature. He thinks I am afraid of thermometers so he shows me how easy it is to come to terms with these instruments. Looks like a cigarette. 'I don't smoke,' I tell him. Why do they want to take my temperature? Does temperature have anything to do with madness? Can they measure the temperature of my madness? What did the thermometers they put in Nietzsche's mouth show, I wonder? And what about Kleist's mouth and temperature? Am I haunted by a poltergeist? I am still thinking about our *double* suicide: as long as I live she will not die. 'My doppelgänger,' as the doctor calls me now.

The dream I had last night. I saw my doppelgänger emerge from my bed and touch the moulding-framed ceiling with a sword. The sword brushed against a chandelier which began to tinkle and dance. All of a sudden the doppelgänger flew into a rage and swished off the tip of a candle that stood on a chest of drawers. 'The world is full of demons,' he shouted.

We create God in our image—in the images created by us, by our everyday life. Today God is the Internet, the United States. 'These are the words of the Son of God, whose eyes are like blazing fire and whose feet are like burnished bronze. I know your deeds, your love and faith, your service and perseverance, and that you are now doing more than you did at first. Nevertheless, I have this against you: You tolerate that woman Marianne, who calls herself a prophetess. By her teaching she misleads my servants into sexual immorality and the eating of food sacrificed to idols.' Couldn't such a message be sent to the European Community (via the Internet) by the United States of America? France is a rebellious woman, a capricious Marianne. Standing up for herself. Standing up to junk food and junk culture. 'The eating of food sacrificed to idols.' Slow food. A three-hour-long lunch, a four-hour-long dinner. And old wines. Modern wines also belong to the category of fast food: they mature so quickly.

To the Russia of Yeltsin and Putin: 'I know your deeds, that you are neither cold nor hot. I wish you were either one or the other! So, because you are lukewarm—neither hot nor cold—I am about to spit you out of my mouth.' Now Russia is lukewarm, mixing capitalism with

communism, truths with falsities, holy things with profane to such an extent that they cannot be separated. 'You say, I am rich; I have acquired wealth and do not need a thing. But you do not realise that you are wretched, pitiful, poor, blind and naked.' New Russians. Caring only about themselves and their families. Driving in their BMWs along the streets lined with beggars. Both kings and beggars are naked. The whole country is a sort of striptease club. 'I counsel you to buy from me gold refined in the fire, so that you can become rich—'

I phoned many women. Trying to forget Tata and fall in love with somebody else. They came to my house. Shapes, outlines, stains. Did I experience the feeling of love? The shape of a feeling, the stain of a feeling. Imagine a stain on a wall, a small stain on a huge whitewashed wall. I needed the wall, not the stain, the whole wall of feelings. The wall which could protect me from my memories.

There were other walls, real ones. Have you ever noticed that people who cannot talk to each other stand by walls, lean against walls, touch walls, trace on them figures and words? As if they were talking to the walls.

They came one by one, my women. We exchanged a few words. To some of them I spoke about Tata and her death. They said I was too young to think about the dead and to live on memories. 'You're not confined to a desert island. You don't have to live on berries and wild herbs.'

Apparently the Grand Narrative philosophers are back on the agenda again. And redemptive novels. In search of lost time. Yet they continue to read junk novels where a smattering of information on medieval cloisters and on the Bible can be found. *Joindre l'utile à l'agréable*. Useful and agreeable. Business *and* pleasure. Redemption is useful, isn't it?

'Business before pleasure?' asked the doctor.

'Redemption before junk pleasures. What I advocate is redemptive pleasures. Redeeming Time, Space and Beauty from the pawn shop.'

'Yours is a tragic view of life because it sees no redemption from pain and suffering,' said the doctor.

Spiritual and moral progress, advancing to self-knowledge. Hegel's *Weltprozeß* has lost both the world and the process over the last twenty-five years. Even Kafka's *Der Prozeß* has been lost, for there is no point in arresting one person in a society where everybody builds a prison for themselves with ardour and fanaticism. The gradual realisation of human freedom, its final

result. But Hegel would have refused to discuss history in this day and age so as not to invest it with a sort of existence. This day does not exist and this age is just my age—the number of years I have spent on earth.

Baudrillard says that Pop Art Culture does not represent consumer life because it is integrated with it. Pop Art comes off the same assembly line all the while claiming to reflect on Americanness-as-ideology. Yet it is one of its trademarks. Baudrillard is one of our world's trademarks, all the more so as he reflects on it. A sign reflecting a sign. The Gulf War did not happen, he says. No wars happen nowadays. And Baudrillard does not exist either, because he reflects on our wars and on our struggle for life—on non-existent things. What is the use of a mirror reflecting a mirror where nothing is reflected? He also reflects on our peace, on *their* peace. I do not reflect on this day and age, nor do I reflect it. Therefore I am.

Roland Barthes' *Mythologies*. Some confuse time faddism with myths. Fad. 'Fade' is 'inspide', 'flat'.

And electromagnetic devices create only electromagnetic radiation, not a sacralised cosmos.

Too much love means SPLITTING APART. Our love was ruthless. Ruth-less. There is a split down the first page of our book. The first carriage hit a set of pillars alongside the track and the following carriages split away. We could not travel along the same path. We were doomed to ruin and decay.

*What would I have done
Had she appeared on her balcony?
I might have given her the moon.
But the moon has been offered so often
That what remains of her amounts
To very little indeed.*

'How easy it is to offer something you haven't got!' said the doctor.

Only themes count in life and art. Stories are of no importance.

Love, murder, death, incest. Obsessions. The rest are detours. The rest is literature.

The paths we should follow are not horizontal but vertical.

Themes are vertical. Myths are vertical.

'Stravinsky was right,' said the doctor. 'Music makes no sense. There are neither literal nor figurative senses in it. So you can't get sense of what it says, assuming that it does say something. Music has no meaning, in other words. In other notes. A tale told by a composer, full of sounds, signifying nothing.'

'What *does* it make? Sentiments?'

'Nor can it be understood. Some concert-goers complain to their experienced friends, "I don't understand this piece of music." And the latter attempt to cast light on the piece in question, explaining what really happens in it. As if it were a novel. Well, *nothing* happens in it except subjects and countersubjects, expositions and recapitulations. You can only cast a shadow—'

'*Tristan und Isolde* is a hymn to night!'

'Besides, structure acts as a restraining influence on the sentiments you read into music. Every bar is a sort of straitjacket. Even Wagner's infinite melody—'

'Is *Tristan und Isolde* a madhouse?'

'Actually you shouldn't *read* music—it's not a novel.'

Hot and cold. Lukewarm. Lévi-Strauss says there are two kinds of societies: 'hot' and 'cold'. He likens Western societies to thermodynamic machines which are capable of carrying out their numerous tasks, but like steam engines also produce a lot of waste or entropy. A lot of death. The railtracks of progress.

And cold societies strive to maintain themselves in a state of equilibrium where the past and the future are integrated with the present. An integrated circuit.

The birth of hot societies is intimately related to the invention of writing. And what would I do without writing? I do not recall what I thought about an hour ago. Let us settle for a lukewarm society.

'Your train seems to be in a railway siding,' said the doctor.

'From the throne came flashes of lightning, rumblings and peals of thunder.' I have no idea whether sounds or sights exist on earth except in computers, on their screens, coming out of their loudspeakers. I wonder if the people I see and hear really exist somewhere—outside computers. Anyway only computers are likely to engender the creatures described in the Apocalypse: 'The first living creature was like a lion, the second was like an ox, the third had a face like a man, the fourth was like a flying eagle. Each of the four living creatures had six wings and was covered with eyes all around, even under his wings.'

The greater part of the Apocalypse is akin to a computer game. As if a child were playing with kings and angels, with baddies and goodies, with goddesses and their bodies, with humans and animals. Turning animals into humans and vice versa.

A literary text. Strange, distant, inaccessible. *Otstranenie*. The Apocalypse is not lying in your lap. To open seals.

'And there was war in heaven. Michael and his angels fought against the dragon, and the dragon and his angels fought back.' Another star war? *My* star war?

'Then another horse came out, a fiery red one. Its rider was given power to take peace from the earth and to make men slay each other.' When was there peace on earth, I wonder? Men slay each other without waiting for God's permission or UN resolutions. Anyway the UN is not God, even when all its godlike members are in the highest spirits.

I dreamt last night of several clocks moving towards me along a narrow street. There was no room for anybody else in that street. Only I stood there like a monument to myself. And those clocks were walking towards me on tiptoe as if afraid of waking me up, of interrupting my nightmare. 'What time is it?' they asked, when I was within earshot. They were within reach now, but I had no wish to touch them. 'What time is it?' they kept asking imploringly. They were almost embarrassingly obsequious in their manners.

'I looked, and there before me was a black horse! Its rider was holding a pair of scales in his hand.'

'Do you think the pair of scales represents the power of money?' asked the doctor?

Equilibrium through the love of Tata, for Tata.

'A quart of wheat for a day's wages, and three quarts of barley for a day's wages.'

A money-oriented society lives according to mathematical equations and is seldom ruled by the passions which ran high in Antiquity, in Middle Ages, in Renaissance palaces. The doctrine of the Golden Mean no longer carries Aristotelian or Buddhist overtones. Gold, meanness. Politicians make determined efforts to portray themselves as party centrists. The centre of gravity. I don't think they understand the gravity of the situation. Our times are a centre of gravity in human history.

'But people still purchase books and go to theatres,' said the doctor.

Books will not disappear because they are a part of that mathematics and therefore have more in common with figures than with letters.

Novelists are dead, long live the novel!

A poem contains only one truth, so does a piece of music. A multitude of truths can be found in a novel—a splendid array of parallel lives and criss-cross ideas. And yet some novels sound like poems and symphonies.

A novel is an ideal playground for Wittgenstein's language-games. A playground, a breeding ground.

Sprachkritik, Sprachkrise. The twentieth century had a deep mistrust of language. But Dada does not make me doubt Dante. And when I say, 'I have recognised the features of my ancient flame,' I become Dante and Virgil. *Sprachkritik* has no retrospective effect. *Conosco i segni de l'antica fiamma. Adgnosco veteris vestigia flammae.* The same words, the same flame. Passing the torch of language in which love is enshrined. The same love.

A novel in which the *Commedia*, its pattern, cannot be identified is worthless.

When poetry attends to its essence it does not make forward strides at all. It remains where it is in order constantly to think the Same. *Sie schreitet, wenn sie ihr Wesen achtet, überhaupt nicht fort.* Why should I budge from the spot where Dante and Heidegger stood?

Isolda and Juliet cannot live without Gottfried von Strassburg, Wagner and Shakespeare. And vice versa.

'I looked, and there before me was a pale horse! Its rider was named Death, and Hades was following close behind him.' Money is always followed by Death. Actually they ride side by side, on both sides of the grave, on both hemispheres of the earth. Riding on a wave of popularity. Riding roughshod over St Paul's tenets. Riding for a fall, for *our* fall. They are so close to each other that sometimes I see only one rider on the horizon, his figure silhouetted against a night sky. 'They were given power over a fourth of the earth to kill by sword, famine and plague, and by the wild beasts of the earth.' Why over a *fourth* of the earth?

'Does the famine signify deprivation and rejection of art with a capital A?' asked the doctor.

When playing the money markets, you have to predict how stupid people will react and then react stupidly before they do. The clockwork that runs the world. Nowadays intelligence comes down to that: being stupid before other people.

Eigentum (property, possessions), *Eigentümlichkeit* (peculiarity, characteristic, personal feature). According to Marx, the commonest type of property (*die allgemeinste Form des Eigentums*) has little in common with those who own it, with their peculiarities, characteristics (*mit des persönlichen Eigentümlichkeit*). Sounds like Heidegger. Language is more powerful than ideologies.

'Have you turned Marxist?' asked the doctor. 'You used to prefer the Marx Brothers, if I'm not mistaken. Why did you request ideological asylum?'

'Those who resist state power, global capitalist economics and global city are Marx Brothers.'

'Global *village*,' said the doctor. Some village-Hampden, that with dauntless breast—'

'A contradiction in terms. The City of the Antichrist.'

Man has a big advantage over the universe that mercilessly destroys him, for Man *knows* he is being destroyed. In the days of Stalin the Russians knew what torture they were subjected to. What would Pascal have said nowadays?

How easy it is to die nowadays! In the seventeenth century one might have been curious about what would happen in the eighteenth century. Even in the nineteenth century Tennyson was intrigued by the future to the extent of cancelling his suicide in the poem *The Two Voices*. 'Through novel spheres of thought men will move towards the long-sought truth,' he maintained. 'The long-sought falsehood has been found' seems more appropriate. Iambic tetrameter. And Pushkin hoped he would avail himself of Mickiewicz's works to come. Salieri nourished the same hope with regard to a 'new Haydn'—in Pushkin's short tragedy.

I am a happy inhabitant of the era about which so many people have dreamt. And I think about Haydn and Pushkin. No news is good news.

'I watched as he opened the sixth seal. There was a great earthquake.' A mindquake. The effect produced by a masterpiece. Not just a tickling. Mediocre works only tickle us, staying on the surface of our body, under our armpits. They are in no position to get as far as our mind. And a masterpiece results in a mindquake—

'Mindquake is a hideous neologism,' said the doctor. 'Of course an up-to-date dictionary ought to include the latest neologisms. But I refuse to insert this one into *my* dictionary which, for all its comprehensiveness, shuns deformity and indecorous grammar. Suggested replacement: *mind-boggling*, *mind-bending*, *mind-altering*, *mind-expanding*. May I also suggest *mind-numbing*? Incidentally, I accept only the neologisms that are created by technological developments.'

'There was a great earthquake. The sun turned black like sackcloth made of goat hair, the whole moon turned blood red—'

'Do you intend to destroy the world?' asked the doctor.

'The keyword of my works is resurrection, not destruction.'

'Scriabin's *Mystery* was to depict a world-conflagration, and that image would have resulted in the end of the world had the composer been permitted to finish his masterpiece. At least such was his intention.'

To destroy the world? Why not? Even the Almighty thought it might have a beneficial effect. On what?

Human life has no absolute value.

'Better dead than dumb!' said the doctor with a look of mock horror on his face. There was mockery in his eyes. 'Stupidity can become an *objet d'art* and acquire a positive, aesthetic value.'

How often I think about the uselessness of my undertaking. What undertaking? Would my doctor's dictionary admit my definition of this word? Writing a novel.

'A novel with a capital N?' asked the doctor.

Trying to raise Beatrice (and humanity) from the dead.

'Have you bracketed humanity because it can be omitted?' asked the doctor.

Every human has an ethereal element in him, and out of this element I might piece her entire substance together again. Out of her ethereal element, out of her perfume. Proust was a master of ethereal reconstruction.

'The first angel sounded his trumpet, and there came hail and fire mixed with blood, and it was hurled down upon the earth.' Sounds childish. Who is afraid of hail in the days of atomic bombs? Yet France was disfigured by the winds last winter. And the parc de Versailles looks like a cemetery now.

All those prophets were mistaken. Orwell, Bradbury. They thought books would be burnt, destroyed, annihilated. Nothing of the kind, no one destroys them. They destroy themselves. All moving images before the 1950s were shot on nitrate film, a highly inflammable medium which inevitably tends to self-destruction. Nowadays books seem to be written on nitrate film. They are nice and suicidal, obliging and paranoid. (And those movies have gloriously survived!)

'The third angel sounded his trumpet, and a great star, blazing like a torch, fell from the sky on a third of the rivers and on the springs of water—the name of the star is Wormwood.' I read about it somewhere, didn't I? An asteroid falling from the sky. The point is we shall not see it until the very last moment. Why? Because of some curves in space. The curvature of space.

'The curvature of God's spine,' said the doctor with a chuckle. Presently he toggled back to his pedantic manner. 'Asteroids, the remains of comets—many of these objects are capable of causing more damage than all the world's nuclear weapons put together. Why did the

dinosaurs become extinct 65 million years ago? Something must have fallen on their heads. A continual traffic of these small but lethal bodies into and out of the inner solar system—'

Everything we say or write is a commentary on the Apocalypse.

'Adopting a refreshingly impartial approach, I look around the corner of the coming world and help you be prepared for what you'll find there,' said the doctor. My doctor, my mentor. *Mon maître. Ein Meister aus Deutschland. Ein Meister aus Rußland. Ein Meister.*

'And out of the smoke locusts came down upon the earth and were given power like that of scorpions of the earth. They were told not to harm the grass of the earth or any plant or tree, but only those people who did not have the seal of God on their foreheads. They were not given power to kill them, but only to torture them for five months.' Five months. The time we spent together. Locusts are the senses and their fallacies. The falsities of lusts springing forth from evil loves. 'Emotions are bad for your health,' says a Russian psychiatrist. Even *positive* emotions are injurious, destructive. Is love a positive emotion?

'During those days men will seek death, but will not find it; they will long to die, but death will elude them.' I was on the horns of a dilemma in those days, during those five months.

'You got it upside down—the horns were on you,' said the doctor.

On the horns of a dilemma, on the verge of suicide.

Had I really sought death I would have found him. This variety of hide-and-seek is easily won, provided you are on top form and in a combative mood.

I scour the corridors for her mortal remains and explore the floorboards with my fingertips as if playing a keyboard instrument. Dismal music rises from the floor and I attempt to dampen, to smother it. I fail and the music filters through the cracks into other corridors and halls and even spreads around my room. I shall be arrested in a few moments. Plato thought that sad music should be forbidden.

My hero abolishes space as his thoughts transport him to the earth. As a human being, however, he becomes entangled in space as he shadows his beloved, trying to work out the geography of her apartment, its erotic possibilities. He longs to abolish the space between

their bodies and hearts. Notwithstanding his calculations and hopes, space continues to grow around him.

'The horses and riders I saw in my vision looked like this: Their breastplates were fiery red, dark blue, and yellow as sulphur. The heads of the horses resembled the heads of lions, and out of their mouths came fire, smoke and sulphur.' Another game? Another computer?

'Then the voice that I had heard from heaven spoke to me once more: Go, take the scroll that lies open in the hand of the angel who is standing on the sea and on the land. So I went to the angel and asked him to give me the little scroll. He said to me, Take it and eat it. It will turn your stomach sour, but in your mouth it will be as sweet as honey.'

The music is not bad to listen to, or the poetry to read; the novel is the weakest of the newer cultural areas and is considerably excelled by its narrative counterparts in film and video (at least the high literary novel is; subgeneric narratives, however, are very good, indeed, and in the Third World of course all this falls out very differently). Food and fashion have also greatly improved, as has the life world generally...If the poststructuralist motif of the 'death of the subject' means anything socially, it signals the end of the entrepreneurial and inner-directed individualism, with its 'charisma' and its accompanying categorial panoply of quaint romantic values such as that of the 'genius' in the first place. Seen thus, the extinction of the 'great moderns' is not necessarily an occasion for pathos. Our social order is richer in information and more literate, and socially, at least, more 'democratic' in the sense of the universalisation of wage labour...This new order no longer needs prophets and seers of the high modernist and charismatic type, whether among its cultural producers or its politicians. Such figures no longer hold any charm or magic for the subjects of a corporate, collectivised, post-individualistic age; in that case, goodbye to them without regrets. (Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*)

The death of the object. The object of love.

The worst apocalypse is the one that people take no notice of. They live in Hell and think it is Paradise.

Hell and Paradise have become interchangeable.

'A great and wondrous sign appeared in heaven: a woman clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet and a crown of twelve stars on her head. She was pregnant and cried out in pain as she was about to give birth.'

Tata again. The moon under her feet, a crown of twelve stars on her head. She *was* pregnant. And she was determined to keep the baby.

'She gave birth to a son, a male child, who will rule all the nations with an iron sceptre. And her child was snatched up to God and to his throne. The woman fled into the desert to a place prepared for her by God, where she might be taken care of for 1,260 days.' She did *not* flee into the desert. This story is not mine. Why should I read it? Why should I comment on it?

'It's *your* story,' said the doctor. 'Fleeing into the desert, fleeing your motherland and your beloved. *Flying over the Cuckoo's Nest.*'

What do I care about humanity and its future? I do not even care about my present. How many days have I already spent in this hospital?

'Humanity *will* be taken care of,' said the doctor.

'Then from his mouth the serpent spewed water like a river, to overtake the woman and sweep her away with the torrent. But the earth helped the woman by opening its mouth and swallowing the river that the dragon had spewed out of his mouth.'

'You're the dragon that decided to kill Tata,' said the doctor. 'But your spittle, which, like all bodily secretions, has a magical significance, being a libido equivalent, was swallowed by the Mother Earth. What counts in this verse from the Apocalypse is the transference of libido to the mother.'

Now I see the world in black and white. I used to like the Impressionists, the short-lived, transient beauty they captured and fixed on canvas. But the soul is neither colourful nor transient. It is Rouen Cathedral painted once and for all. In white. There are no seasons for the soul. No dawns, no sunsets.

Manufacturing consent. Brainwashing is a universal phenomena. Even on Mars there must be a few spin doctors, I presume. Spinning yarns, washing brains which may be located in the

Martians' feet or on their faces. Soviet spin doctors were so amateurish and lumpish they could not wash our brains—a delicate task. They washed our hands instead, and dutifully we would raise them in unison. They also washed our tongues, but our brains remained dirty.

Manufacturing indifference towards Art. Indifference is the worst form of censorship.

Only creators are the living image of God. *Weltbildend*.

I received a postcard yesterday. A photograph of Lenin in the mausoleum. The caption said, 'The living image of God who is dead. Love, Nietzsche.'

I often imagine God as a writer—as a mediocre writer, even. How many bad novels He has written! But, for all my efforts, I cannot imagine Him as a stockbroker or a stockholder.

Is God jealous of creative artists?

This afternoon the doctor quoted Marshall McLuhan: 'The artist in the Middle Ages, Renaissance, or the era up to the nineteenth century was regarded as a unique, exceptional person because he used an exceptional, unusual process. In primordial times, as today, the artist uses a familiar, ordinary technique and so he is looked upon as an ordinary, familiar person. Every man today is in this sense an artist—the administrator, the scientist, the doctor, as well as the man who uses paint or sculpts stone.'

'I am a medieval artist. A Renaissance artist.'

'So was Dante,' said the doctor.

'And I use an exceptional, unusual process.'

'An exceptional, unusual person,' said the doctor. 'The last artist.'

'Ein Hungerkünstler.'

Beatrice gave up the ghost at the age of twenty-four, doing her utmost to make Dante forget her. But he did not give up her ghost. How she scolds him during their virtual encounter in the *Purgatorio*!

'In the latest television production she also whips him,' said the doctor.

Did God allow us to create or do we create in defiance of Him?

'Licensed to create?' Again the doctor raised his eyebrows. 'Never heard about it. *Licensed to Kill*. Haven't you seen any James Bond movies?'

Every great novelist builds his Tower of Babel. Dante did, otherwise he would not have reached the Rose of Paradise.

'Deconstructionists have already taken care of these towers, of these flowers,' said the doctor.

But *Migdal* is not, primarily, a 'tower'. It is a 'great' or 'exceeding' object with 'its head in the heavens'. A giant idol. An artist.

The creative process hath the primal eldest curse upon't—partaking of the forbidden fruit. The first work of art was a sculpture: *Naked Adam with Fig Leaves*. A living sculpture. Adam without fig leaves was just naked.

In the act of creation we always kill God. The primal eldest curse.

'The rest of mankind that were not killed by these plagues still did not repent of the work of their hands; they did not stop worshipping demons, and idols of gold, silver, bronze, stone and wood—idols that cannot see or hear or walk.' Are works of art idols? Sometimes I am under the impression they can see and hear. And walk. Novels, poems. Aren't they covered with eyes all around? Or are they blind and deaf? Are they dead? Are they demons?

A knack, not a craft. Not a ritual. Contemporary writers are very much like those orators of old that Socrates stigmatised in *Gorgias*. Flatterers, all of them. Flattering the reader, flattering themselves. Flattening the world. Their earth *is* flat. As flat as a pancake. Panders.

Pandering is the opposite of perception and knowledge, of *Erkenntnis*. '*Die göttliche Aufgabe des Menschen*.' Our divine task. Our eternal duty.

Probing into the mystery of our mind. Of the Mind. *Ent-schlossenheit zum Geheimnis*. A many-sided problem. How to tackle it? From many sides, from many sites. Only in a novel can one do it. After all, the *Divina Commedia* is also a novel—a novel in verse.

I decided to write a best-seller and accordingly chose a hero who would please children and adults alike. An extraterrestrial visitor. Not a destroyer, however. A substance devoured by curiosity. And I chose love as my subject matter. Love is still popular, isn't it? As popular as murder? I was determined to create a nice work of art but my style spoiled everything. I cannot wriggle free from my own straitjacket and flee headlong to the mountains—away from my Kingdom of Death. I cannot even detach myself from myself for a little while. And if I manage to do so, one day, I'll catch up with myself in no time at all.

In normal human society there is a room for men and women who belong to the category of *peregrini*—one of St Augustine's favourite words. Resident aliens. These pilgrims mostly stay at home, awaiting their release from Babylonian prisons. But they are *residents* after all, temporary residents, who depend on the life around them. And this life has been created by their fellow creatures, not by spiders or extraterrestrials. Our business within this common mortal life. I ought to have gone out and walked amidst my fellow creatures. Without looking at their faces, at their clothes. Just walking in their midst. In the midst of life we are in life.

Is our society normal? Is it human? What would St Augustine have said nowadays?

Marx wished to change the world instead of describing it. Lyotard describes it; Baudrillard destroys it. You can read the Apocalypse; you can *enact* it. You can conjecture what time has in store for you; you can destroy it. Time *can* be destroyed.

We stopped at a greasy-spoon, lumpen café where all they served was lumpy food and lukewarm tea. All cafés in Russia were lumpen in those days.

As the molecules mill around, the universe visits state after state. Eventually, every possible state that can ever exist will be visited: anything at all that can happen, will happen, sooner or later. After this, the shuffling continues, and the universe starts revisiting states that have previously occurred. Eventually, every state will have been revisited, and so the process continues. This phenomenon of unlimited repetition and duplication is known as the Poincaré cycle, after the mathematical physicist Henri Poincaré who proved the result (at least, he proved it for an idealised model). Taken at face value, the Poincaré theorem implies that, in the fullness of time, planet Earth, long since disappeared, will be reconstituted, together with

all its inhabitants! Moreover, this will happen infinitely often. (Paul Davies, *God and the New Physics*)

'*Das Wunderreich der Nacht.*' The Kingdom of Night. It has become a republic of late.

Nietzsche says that only 'slow societies' can give birth to a great man whose life, to all outward appearances, is always a tragedy—in one act, in five acts, in a hundred cantos. Old instincts should be kept in a cold society such as the Soviet Union of the sixties. Cold-blooded authorities, cold-blooded psychiatrists.

Andante is the tempo advocated by Nietzsche. We crawled on all fours. *Adagio*.

Licensed to create.

'Please show me your creator's license,' said the doctor.

Art is an immediate disclosure of the Absolute. Flowing from above, flowing through our veins. Doth it not flow as hugely as the sea? Nature and Spirit are united in the Kingdom of Art. So are Necessity and Freedom.

My verse

Flow'd with her beauty once.

For a fistful of dollars. For a handful of dust.

Money, creativity, degeneration. Whatever I say has already been said many times, in other words, in other languages, in other countries. The eternal recurrence of ideas and ideals. A reflection in my mirror. And I hold this mirror up to nature. Down to human nature, up to superhuman nature.

'This poem is called upon to transcend its own beauty in order to help man overcome a cupidinous preoccupation with created goods,' said the doctor.

The ardour of discoverers, its eternal recurrence. As if all these ideas were new.

They *are* new. It depends on the way you tell the story. Expressing an old truth in new language.

It depends on the depth of your chasms, on the height of your heavens. On the number of crevasses.

'And I saw an angel coming down out of heaven, having the key to the Abyss and holding in his hand a great chain. He seized the dragon, that ancient serpent, who is the devil, or Satan, and bound him for a thousand years.' My ET *had* the key to the Abyss. And he *was* holding a great chain in his hand. Why didn't he bind the dragon? Why didn't he throw him into the Abyss?

'Evil loves,' said the doctor.

A contradiction in terms.

There *are* evil loves. No contradiction. Whatever we feel is love. Hatred is love because it is the love of hatred. A robbery is love. A betrayal is love. A murder is love.

I saw the angel coming down. I saw the dragon crawling on all fours. The angel was in heaven, the dragon on earth. High and low.

'Ups and downs,' said the doctor. 'The range of our patients will always stupefy me. One moment they're in seventh heaven, the next down-in-the-mouth.'

'What about the angel?' I asked. 'Can you talk of *him* without irony? Or was the angel crawling on all fours? Did they walk together, hand in hand?'

'Did God appoint you Minister of Culture, Your Excellency?' said the doctor. 'How do you know this bird is an angel? Looks like a dragon to me.'

'The angel did come down. He did bind the dragon.'

'Love is more important than the world.' One of your maxims. You were as romantic as a child of sixteen. An incurable romantic. How many incurable diseases did you suffer from?

'Romanticism is a contagious disease,' said the doctor. For a moment I thought he was being serious, but then he winked at me.

She has shot arrows and wounded the prey.

I have got many arrow wounds on my body.

She nurses my wounds. The more she licks them

The sharper grows my pain as if she were rubbing

*Salt in my wounds. May she return to my room
 And heal my wounds by making them deeper
 And wider. This is the only remedy
 I am yearning for—deep wounds,
 Deep-seated wounds. As deep as the sea,
 As wide as the horizon. The wreckage of my being
 Scattered all over the earth
 And over the worlds
 I am creating for her.
 May my wounds burn forever.
 Let no one clean them.
 May her long kisses
 Lessen my body's resistance
 To infection. May her caresses
 Contaminate me with poisonous bacteria.
 Let me die in her arms, upon her body.
 May she cut me to pieces with her sword.
 May I be granted a second birth only to receive
 Yet another wound. May I be granted
 A third birth, a fourth birth,
 A ninth birth.*

This is the first resurrection. Blessed and holy are those who have part in the first resurrection.
 The second death has no power over them.

And I hold the keys of death.

Another book was opened, which is the book of life.

Only for saints and artists does Redemption come by itself. The latter embody their emotions
 and thus create bodies, celestial beings, that survive their creators.

It is yearning that makes the heart deep. *Desiderium sinus cordis.*

Io levai li occhi.

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and there was no longer any sea. I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband.

As a doctor beautifully dressed for his patient.

