

VALERY ALEFF

THE FACE

PART ONE

1

I don't know if my life has any meaning, but I do know that its meaning, if any, depends on whether it is a dream or not. And if it *is* a dream, I would like to know for sure in whose mind this dream is rooted: in mine or in God's. If I am a dream of God, I have nothing to worry about, which doesn't mean I'm worried now – to the point of being unable to go on with my work and life. Something happens all the time and I do my best to disregard whatever happens because I have a life of my own and this life of mine has nothing to do with what I see or feel as I look at the world and touch it. So it's better not to touch it, I say to myself, but I contradict myself in the same breath because I go on living and as long as you live you can't disregard what is pompously called 'reality' or 'the outside world'. Of course I'm tempted to speak only about *inner* worlds which are somehow connected with whatever lies beyond these bushes, pedestrians and houses. I'm fed up with the houses that make up my daily routine and so I yearn for *other* houses, courtyards and fountains. I look *beyond* what I see and I even touch some landscapes that must be beyond my reach, for they don't belong in this world. However, they *are* within my reach, otherwise I would have no idea they exist and prosper somewhere.

Even in my childhood I was eager to get *beyond* the walls of my room; and yet I didn't really dislike them, being attuned to their colour and the pictures hanging on them. You may be in love with a human being, but if you feel like looking in *another* direction, nothing will ever prevent you from doing so with impunity unless the human being in question is a king or a queen. I looked beyond my walls, beyond the sky; I soon realised I didn't have to look out of the window, for every wall of mine was a sky to some extent. There were four skies in my room and their number increased as I looked at them more and more attentively, ecstatically. I think at some point I reached the stage that mystics define as 'contemplation', and whenever I recapture the vision I had in those halcyon days, I feel elated and rejuvenated. Of course I had many visions in my childhood and my youth, but they all boil down to one vision – at least within the bounds of my memory that keeps on shrinking as if weary of its contents, of the slices of life I have stored in it. And this vision of mine pays me visits whenever *it* chooses, which may hint at God's presence and His involvement in my daily routine punctuated by revelations and otherworldly landscapes.

My mother took no notice of my dreamy looks because I didn't let her in on my pastime, on my walks beyond the walls and skies. To her, my walls were just adorned with a few earthly pictures and not with the otherworldly pastures I contemplated in my spare time, turning a deaf ear to my mother's requests. She thought I should pay more attention to geography and other disciplines I studied at school where my visions left me in peace as if displeased with my teachers' indifference to them. Of course I never talked to my teachers about my private life and the walls I played with whenever I found myself in my room. But they did all they could to distract me from my journeys into other worlds as they spoke about the numbers or ideas that had nothing to do with them. I know that numbers do take part in the concert one hears as one looks at the sky where the music of the spheres hints at the Prime Mover without Whom nothing would ever have moved in the universe. But the way my teachers talked about numbers was insipid, uninspiring, and my visions were sensitive to my inspiration, although they didn't really depend on it. I was to be *prepared* for them and fit for the level of responsibility I had been given: those entrusted with such visions must behave accordingly, with due respect and care.

At home I made no special effort to obtain the results for which I'm rightly famous now, for some of my visions have already been published in magazines perused by many illustrious people. And *they* think my visions are quite exceptional, considering how profound they are and how much light they shed on the human condition and the future of humankind. I'm not unduly disturbed by their praises because fame and money are the things to which a true philosopher shouldn't attach too much importance, concentrating chiefly on what really matters in his or her life. Sometimes you just yield to a temptation and convince yourself you're famous and admired by those whom you yourself admire a lot: there's no point in being worshipped by the multitude. And then you say to yourself that no one knows what you have achieved and that you'll never be in the public eye, however much time you spend on your vision and its materialisation. So you begin to speak to God Who understands you much better than humans whose limitations are well-known and can't be dealt with in the vale of tears. Only a sojourn in Purgatory is liable to improve their understanding through the agency of a guru who usually tells his disciples a few home truths and teaches them eternal truths. So you speak to God and the Almighty answers you by visions and verbal revelations from which you awaken to find that nothing looks and sounds like a fairy tale; in your absence the world has *not* become a better place, a paradise on Earth.

I have no idea who is speaking now because I'm not responsible for my dreams or for the character they create to become independent and confront daily problems on their own, without my help and interference. Perhaps it is God you listen to as you read my text out loud as if it were Homer's epics or *Mahabharata* or any other ancient saga that was to *resound* in the air, in the cosmos, instead of being confined to sheets of paper, a papyrus and one brain. In my childhood I read neither the Bible nor Greek philosophers who are the cornerstone of my present life, of my trials and errors. I read science fictions novels and *their* visions often coincided with mine so I thought I would eventually turn my inner experience into a novel; I wished to share the images I saw with my fellow creatures.

Shortly afterwards I realised that some of my fellow creatures knew the images I saw because I wasn't the only owner of these images. Images are everywhere and their quantity is such as to remind you that, for all your so-called uniqueness – there's no other creature like you in the entire universe – you may coincide with someone else, with a human being who is not yourself and not even your relative. At least some slices of your life may turn out to be in unison with other slices of which you know nothing except that they're identical to yours. You don't know the person to whom they belong; you know him neither personally nor indirectly, which means that you've never seen him on TV or elsewhere. You know this person must be a man: you're a man after all and you think you have nothing in common with women. You adore them but you're not prepared to identify with them because you don't feel like it and your body is quite different from any female body. You're mistaken, of course: men share a lot of their habits and genes with women so that, to some extent, we are all androgynous and there's no point in trying to protect your body from female invasion. Whenever you happen to have a swim in your gene pool, you encounter women who salute you jovially as if they had been acquainted with you for ages.

So the images I saw in my mind and in my gene pool were shared by other representatives of the human species, and I was quite surprised to find that many of them had died a long time ago. Let's take Empedocles in whose writings you come across heads without necks and arms without shoulders. I also saw a lot of heads that walked on their own, taking no notice of headless bodies; and yet these bodies seemed to be awaiting them or rather a sort of union allowing both parts to become one whole. At the time when I got acquainted with

Empedocles I already knew Plato's dialogues and even went so far as to imitate them as best I could. Here is one of *my* dialogues: 'What are you doing without a body?'

'I don't need one.'

'Really?'

'I'm self-sufficient. Anyway, everything happens in one's head. Don't they say, "Use your head"? They don't say, "Use your body."'

'They might. Why not? I, for one, always say, "Use your body."'

'Because you're a body. You're a selfish, pretentious body. What do you think you are?'

'I don't think because I'm a body. We can't think highly of ourselves. So we're neither selfish nor pompous. We walk modestly down our roads and neither fame nor success ever goes to our heads.'

'A body can't be successful without a head.'

'I'm afraid I have to disagree with you on that issue. Many bodies are famous on account of their athletic exploits. And you don't need a head to jump or run or throw javelins.'

'Aren't you eager to see the javelins you throw amidst the clouds? You need a head for that – the body has no eyes.'

'I remember a god who has a lot of eyes.'

'What's his name?'

'I can't remember.'

'Does it slip your mind whenever you try to remember it?'

'It slips my memory. Do you know that even after one's death one's nails continue to grow? The mind has died, but they're still alive. Nails don't need a head to grow, getting stronger and stronger. Nails remember life. So does the rest of the body.'

'Let me tell you about this god. His name was Argus. He was appointed by the goddess Hera to watch the cow into which Hera's priestess by the name of Io had been transformed. Argus had a number of eyes all over his body so Hera thought he would be a perfect guardian.'

'Now I know who I am.'

'Who *are* you?'

'I'm Argus.'

'Argus was slain by the god Hermes.'

'I am his reincarnation.'

'I don't think so. Actually you're far better than Argus – you're covered with both eyes and ears.'

In Russia – and also in the Soviet Union – most children were rather keen on Mayne Reid's novel *The Headless Horseman*. It was no easy task to obtain the book, our bookshops being focused mainly on ideological literature; so that once again I fell back on my visions in which I encountered the protagonist on many occasions. Sometimes he would *carry* his head as did some beheaded Christian saints and the Green Knight; sometimes he was looking for it in the mountains, of all places. But once he searched for it at the bottom of the sea, in the area renowned for its collection of sunken ships among which I recognised our legendary battleship Varyag that for a while withstood the onslaught of the Japanese armada. The headless horseman found his head in one of Varyag's cabins and I kept wondering how it had got there, for the horseman was neither a sailor nor a Russian. At least I

thought he was not, being first and foremost a scatterbrained horseman whose body Mayne Reid had singled out as an outstanding performer of headless exploits.

Many years later, I bought in London a series of books devoted to Greek philosophers: *A History of Greek Philosophy* by W. K. C. Guthrie. In the volume entitled *The Presocratic Tradition from Parmenides to Democritus* I found the following quotation:

Men think mainly with the blood, for there the elements of the body are most thoroughly mingled. Those then in whom the mixture is equal or nearly so, with the elements neither too far apart nor too small nor too large, are wisest and keenest of perception, and so, in proportion, are those who come nearest to them; whereas those in the opposite state are most witless.

Theophrastus, *De sensu*

Does this mean we don't really need our head to think about life and write philosophical treatises? The headless horseman might have been a philosopher in his own right: I did read the book, but I don't recall any characteristics of the protagonist. At the end of his life a horseman can turn into a philosopher; he is unlikely to be a sailor at the same time so I think the conclusion I came to in my childhood was logical and incontrovertible. And what about the mixture of the elements about which Theophrastus speaks in the excerpt I quoted? Needless to say, Mayne Reid doesn't speak about this mixture and if, in the course of his narrative, he does touch upon the horseman's blood, I don't think he does it in connection with his mental agility or disorder. However agile and courageous, he must have shed his blood on some page or other, otherwise his adventures would have lacked the element for which many children look as they read their childish books: a setback, an obstacle, an impassable path. Their hero is supposed to triumph over his enemies and natural disasters, and his triumphs, however impeccable and definitive, are traditionally emphasised and brought to perfection through a few drops of blood shed on a battlefield or near the water's edge where duels took place in days of yore.

What was Empedocles driving at? My visions pursued no goal except the one I had assigned to them: they had to prove I was in a class of my own – quite unlike other children and human beings in general. Empedocles, on the other hand, was a philosopher. He couldn't indulge in idle speculations without feeling a pang of remorse: he had to open his fellow citizens' eyes to how beautiful and intricate the universe was, for such knowledge might allow them to deal with it more successfully. Why did he speak about heads without necks, about creatures with the bodies of oxen and the faces of men?

Empedocles wrote in verse and I paid him homage by writing a poem in which I enlarged upon these necks and oxen whose purpose was still unclear:

Many creatures walk around us. We shake their hands
And look into their eyes. They've got no eyes,
No heads, no ears. And if they do, they're located
On their bodies, not elsewhere. And their bodies are
Different from ours: not everybody should have
Something we are used to. We're not used to oxen whose faces
Remind us of men. The universe is bizarre

And we have to get used to it, otherwise we won't survive. Darwin
 Speaks about the survival of the fittest. We should rub
 Shoulders with oxen if we want to survive, to see the future.

Empedocles says that Strife and Love prevail in turn among men and fish and beasts and birds. 'This is manifest throughout the mass of mortal bodies,' he says. 'At one time all the limbs which belong to the body, in the prime of blooming life, come together into one through Love. At another, severed by evil spirits of discord, they wander, each separately, on the shores of life; and it is the same for bushes, and fishes housed in water, and beasts with their mountain lairs and birds of winged flight.'

I'm pretty old by now and my limbs, in accordance with Empedocles' theory, take leave of my body – without so much as a by-your-leave, mind you. I have no idea where they wander and what they do in my absence; I don't really care because I can't avail myself of their services anyway. I'm no longer their master so they can do whatever they wish, provided they don't harm my body or rather what remains of it: some limbs are still faithful to me in spite of everything. Well, apparently Empedocles touched upon Darwin's doctrine without having the slightest idea of what Darwin meant by the survival of the fittest. There are many coincidences in the history of humankind and so my visions, for all their individual character, often coincide with Bosch's paintings where *my* creatures are permitted to frolic in Paradise or rather to suffer in Hell. Actually in Paradise we see only saints who undergo no metamorphoses: their heads are still on their necks and their bodies don't look like oxen, if I'm not mistaken. But in Hell we do come across the creatures described in Empedocles' poem – and in this novel of mine – which proves once and for all that no earthlings are really in a class of their own: we all have the same visions, nightmares and hallucinations.

I saw landscapes inhabited by arms, legs, stomachs and intestines; they slept on bushes and treetops, taking no notice of winds, storms and earthquakes. They seemed to await their *real* births, which more or less corresponds to what Empedocles endeavoured to convey by his descriptions of the limbs whose journeys through the world looked rather pathetic. Actually they were born *already*, but 'to be or not to be' was the question they had to ask themselves in order to survive; and those who didn't bother about the consequences of their births on Earth were to perish rather quickly. They just enjoyed their lives, thinking that games and walks in the woods were the only aims they should pursue, for life had no other purpose; in other words, 'it has no purpose at all,' as some of them put it. 'Where everything turned out in a way which simulated purpose,' writes Aristotle, 'those creatures survived because by chance they were constituted in a suitable way; whereas all that were not so constituted perished, and continue to perish, as Empedocles says the "man-headed oxen" did.'

I saw an armless man who complained about his disability, saying he longed to play the piano; he liked music and couldn't live without it. 'Why don't you enjoy it from afar?' I told him.

'Because I wish to know it from the inside,' he said. 'My body should get involved in the process of music-making. I'm longing to *make* music instead of listening to CDs all my life.'

Of course, you can live without your limbs and in the long run you may even get accustomed to their absence. This is another aspect of the problem successfully tackled by Darwin in relation to the species he discussed in his legendary book. You survive because you think that what really counts is life itself, no matter how toilsome and unpleasant it turns out to be on account of your rotten genes. You have no arms, but you survive and prove to God you're fit for the life that doesn't always treat you fairly and pays no homage to your

courage. So your son or your daughter fulfils your ambition and the piano you bought in anticipation of your offspring's exploit resounds in your house and even in your garden where your roses smile at you as you walk past them, proud as Lucifer.

I also saw the early human beings described by Aristophanes in Plato's *Symposium*. As everyone knows, Plato's creatures are spherical in shape and in every way double, with four hands, legs and ears, two faces, and the sexual parts of both male and female. Such a creature wouldn't need a partner to play Schubert's *Fantasy in F Minor*, written for four hands. You just sit down at the piano and play it the way you want to play it: you don't have to discuss the piece with your partner who may not agree with you on every side issue. And every nuance, however tiny and insignificant, takes part in shaping the piece you interpret and is likely to ruin your intention and inspiration, if you don't pay enough attention to it. I, for one, know from past experience that you can't rely on anyone in these matters – not even on good pianists and wonderful friends who have their ideas and interfere in your work whenever they can. You work on the piece and say, now and then, 'Do you agree with me? I think the tempo is quite suitable – after all, Schubert is neither light-headed nor light-hearted.'

'It's too slow,' says your partner.

'I don't think so,' you answer. 'Let's play it once again in my tempo.'

'No point in playing it again. Why waste our time on your tempo?'

'The slower we play, the more time we waste. Is *that* what you mean?'

'No. If we play it my way, we won't waste our time – even if we play it three times in a row.'

'Why should I play badly three times? We'd better not play at all.'

So you say goodbye to each other and part without further ado; yet you adore the piece and yearn to play it as often as possible, playing down your partners' illogical and unmusical intrusions. Once, I played this piece with a very good pianist and an outstanding composer. During the rehearsals, he got angry several times, but I displayed a peaceful disposition so that we neither quarrelled nor cancelled our participation in a huge concert. It's better to quarrel during a rehearsal than to wash your dirty linen in public – everyone is aware of this rule that tolerates no exceptions. At the end of the piece – we were playing the last page – my partner suddenly rose from his chair and said in a loud clear voice, 'I've had enough – I'm going home.' And home he went, leaving me high and dry in front of the piano and the audience that was awaiting the end of the piece. I couldn't finish it without my partner because I don't belong to the species described by Aristophanes in Plato's *Symposium*.

Actually I wouldn't mind being a creature like that: you're unlikely to feel lonely if you've got four hands, legs and ears. At any time you talk to yourself without looking ridiculous or senile, and the caresses you lavish on your 'better half' elicit a gratifying response from him or her. And of course you play Schubert as soon as an opportunity presents itself, which depends only on you: your partner wouldn't say he is busy and so can't share with you the pleasure you're yearning to avail yourself of. You just find a suitable piano, sit down and play some marches, landlers and the *Fantasy* that ends with a fugue interrupted at the very end where the initial theme makes its appearance for the last time. Unable to resist the temptation, I abandon my novel for a while and go to the living room whose centrepiece is the Steinway I bought in Hamburg in 1974; in those days Steinways were still up to the mark. I play the *Fantasy*, using my two hands to the best of my abilities, and I feel neither disappointed nor frustrated; at least I'm not tempted to get up and go home.

As we all know, God split Plato's creatures in half and ever since those halves have been wandering around Europe in search for their better halves without which they cannot live and die at home in their sleep. Don't forget that all you need is love, love, love. 'Did you see my better half?' they ask passers-by.

'What half are you talking about?'

'My half.'

'What does it look like?'

'Like the half you see in front of you.'

'I don't see any halves. I see a man.'

'Don't be fooled by my appearance. I'm actually half of what I used to be in days of yore.'

'What days are you talking about?'

'Did you read the *Symposium*?'

'I don't think so.'

'Do you know Aristophanes?'

'I don't.'

'Goodbye then.'

There was a similar situation in the film I saw tonight; and yet its action was set in the Soviet Union and not in Ancient Greece. I can't say I appreciate films with a lot of action and there was no action in the film I saw because the protagonist kept looking for a woman he had lost at the end of the Second World War. He was about to give up his work and forsake his family whose members worshipped him and treasured the medals he had been awarded in the course of the war. He would spend his time in a restaurant, frittering a lot of money away on beer and vodka. He also called on all Polinas he had found thanks to an agency situated in the vicinity of the house where he was supposed to live with his wife and three children. But he was reluctant to drink vodka in their presence and so the restaurant was the only place where he could be seen regularly, almost every day.

Once he found himself at a station, after paying a visit to yet another Polina. There was a wall at the station and he wrote on this wall a question addressed to the woman he was looking for: 'Where are you, Polya?' Then he boarded a train and took a seat in an empty compartment, determined to journey back home on an empty stomach: his failure had put him off food for one day at least. An unfortunate conjunction of circumstances guided the woman in question – the true and only Polina – to the same station, to the same wall. She saw the inscription and realised he was looking for her. She knew who he was because she hadn't forgotten him. (I don't know his name.) She boarded another train that was to go in the opposite direction. That's why I wrote 'an unfortunate conjunction of circumstances': there's nothing more pathetic than such a failure. Another inch, another minute, and you hug the man you've been in love with all your life – even in your childhood when you had a premonition you would meet him sooner or later. But there's a mix-up in heaven; you live through the wrong minute and hastily board the wrong train.

'Where are you, my other half?' According to Empedocles, Love unites heterogeneous elements and allows what seems to be a part of some entity or other to join this entity and form a human body or Plato's androgyne. Strife does its best to separate them again, but Love insists on unity that reminds it of harmony and music, of Schubert and Pushkin. And the film did justice to unity by removing walls and obstacles from the path that led to the spot where the hero and heroine met up at last. Polina burst into tears as she caught a fleeting glimpse of a man whose body stood in a doorway. He disappeared, but she dashed out of the room and found

him at last in a snowdrift where he seemed to have taken refuge as if still haunted by the war and its monstrosities.

The war is over and yet our Strife doesn't capitulate, having set its heart on chasing Love away from the world that accommodates neither the former nor the later. Strife appropriates the fire and persuades it to bear the brunt of the attack it makes on the City of Love, traditionally called the City of God – as if God was really staying there in some palace or other. 'Whole-natured forms first sprang up from the earth, having a portion of both water and heat. Not yet did they display the comely shape of limbs, nor voice nor the part proper to men.' Strife thinks that it should act at once, without waiting for these forms to become men and women. Unfledged and immature, they can offer only token resistance and are easily overpowered by the fire that Strife has already provided with invaluable experience in the domain of violence and dictatorship. So gradually the forms turn into fire, which can and should be regarded as a blessing in disguise, for the fire is liable to nurture the sentiment of love in their bosoms: love is often associated with fire. 'Do you love me?'

'Can't you see the fire in my heart? My heart is on fire, so is my soul.'

'The Buddha said something to this effect, if I remember rightly. "The world is on fire." If fire is everywhere, your body's no exception to this rule. No wonder your heart is on fire, but that's no proof of your love.'

'I swear by the moon I love you.'

'Don't swear by the moon because it's not on fire.'

The fire hidden in the Earth is reaching outwards towards the large mass of fire that can be found at the circumference of the cosmos. 'In this process,' writes W. K. C. Guthrie, 'curious living forms arise compounded of earth mixed with water and fire, without limbs, organs, or distinction of sex.' These forms look like the images I saw in my childhood as I strove to walk through the walls towards another kingdom: at the time, I talked neither of other dimensions nor of parallel worlds. I felt there was another kingdom somewhere; and that kingdom couldn't be located *within* any space known to human beings. And those who *are* aware of its whereabouts do not share this knowledge with their fellow creatures: no point in casting pearls before swine. And if they do allude to this kingdom, they resort to indirect languages such as painting, poetry, philosophy, mantras and so on.

2

I had no wish to imitate Alice's exploit and walk through the looking glass as far as another world: I didn't read the book in my childhood when I would certainly have read it, had I been born in another country. In the Soviet Union this book was not obtainable and I had no alternative but to deal with other worlds and looking glasses in my own way which was quite different from that of Alice, as I realised upon reading the book for the first time. Of course, I don't recall any episode from this book, but my library isn't likely to get delusions of grandeur and therefore I'm pretty sure it won't burn like the library of Alexandria before I find Lewis Carroll's masterpiece. I need to refresh my memory and no film will ever accomplish this task as adequately as the original text adorned with illustrations.

In the very first chapter, Alice enters the looking-glass room and casts a glance at the pictures that someone must have hung on the wall a long time before. The pictures are alive, which corresponds to what *I* saw in my room: the picture I had hung on the wall performed many dances as I played a few snatches from *The*

Sleeping Beauty and *The Nutcracker*. I don't really know whether there was only one picture in my room: I always multiplied it by going beyond what I could see and touch, carried along by my eternal impetus. *The Garden of Earthly Delights*. Bosch's creatures played the parts of evil geniuses whose interference in the lives of princes and kings can't be overestimated. I aspired to see the Hereafter and its inhabitants, but I think that *any* other kingdom would equally have quenched my thirst for the great Beyond. We lived in the City of Stalin (or Satan) and I often saw the members of our Politburo on the right panel of Bosch's triptych. Then Stalin died; our kingdom remained where it was and no looking-glass room could alter our lifestyle.

'A whole city established according to nature would be wise because of the smallest class and part in it, namely the governing or ruling one. And to this class, which seems to be by nature the smallest, belongs a share of the knowledge that alone among all the other kinds of knowledge is to be called wisdom.' I read Plato's *Republic* at the age of 15 and I said to myself our country had been modelled on this dialogue, for no one could explain how it had come into being: its absurdity stuck out a mile. I asked my father why we lived so miserably and with such pomposity and my father said I was too young to understand anything and that Plato's dialogues were beyond my ken. 'Why should I understand Plato?' I asked.

'Because you wish to know what's going on in our country.'

'Nothing works in our country,' I said.

'But something's going on and you wish to know what exactly is on the agenda.'

'I don't wish to know anything. I'm beyond the wall already.'

'There are walls everywhere,' said my father.

'But I'm longing to see *other* walls.'

'There's only *one* wall,' said my father.

What do I understand now as I read Plato's dialogue in which I'm supposed to find the solution to all my enigmas and even to those I've never heard about? I read the dialogue and realise there's an enigma or a mystery you've never thought of: you've overlooked it because your life and that of your friends and colleagues has no room for enigmas, mysteries and Plato's dialogues. You earn money and enjoy yourself in discos and elsewhere on condition that you've got enough money for these enjoyments of yours, for the women you meet and fall in love with.

'Why do you read Plato's dialogues?' I'm asked now and then.

'Because I wish to become what I am.'

'Aren't you already what you are? Can't you say, "I am what I am?" My wife says that all the time.'

'I'm not your wife.'

I read the dialogues I read in my youth when I was eager to find out why I was living in this world: in the Soviet Union, on the Earth, within the solar system and the Milky Way. Why was I living in the Soviet Union? Because my mother conceived me in the country where she and her husband – my father – were born before the Russian Revolution. I don't think they could have been born there *after* the revolution because in their kingdom the birth rate was extremely low in the Twenties and in the Thirties. (They lived beyond one of the walls.) One can see them in Tchaikovsky's ballets, but they don't dance, contrary to what might be presumed: they just watch their children dance and get married in the woods where there are lots of sleeping beauties and wakeful princes.

So the smallest class ruled our country where many children were born and no one asked them if they really wished to live under Stalin's dictatorship or after his death. Anyway, they ate caviar galore. 'Why do you complain then?' says another of Plato's protagonists.

'Because I couldn't go abroad.'

'And what about caviar?'

'What about it?'

'You could eat caviar every day, as much as you wished.'

'That's right.'

'What kind of grievances do you nurse against Stalin and his successors?'

'I couldn't go to France, to Italy.'

'There was no caviar in France, I can assure you. You had to be stinking rich to afford it.'

Yesterday I saw a film about Stalin who was apparently regarded as the wisest ruler in the world where there were only Churchills, Roosevelts and their like – nothing to write home about. No one could live in the world deprived of Stalin whose stature as a statesman, philosopher and human being was tremendous – to the point of making renowned composers defecate in his presence (Khrennikov). They didn't go to the lavatory where they could have relieved their bowels in the customary way, leaving their trousers alone or unstained: after all, their trousers were innocent. They did it in His presence as if paying homage to His stature and magnificence of which the whole world was quite aware, judging from the articles one could chance upon in newspapers, books and magazines.

Stalin was an actor of genius: he smiled as he held in his arms – in his body – a baby, a child, the younger generation whose destiny depended only on him and not on Churchill and Roosevelt who remained outside the Soviet Union. Whenever he held a girl, one had the feeling the girl was his own daughter – the child he had nurtured in his own bosom, as if he had been a woman, not a man. He was everyone, everything, and people didn't try to find out who he really was: He was God and God can't be described like a character in a book. You can describe Karenin or Vronsky, but God is above them and you don't see Him clearly because He doesn't walk in your midst and takes no part in your balls and parties.

Our rulers thought they knew *something* about economics and their knowledge adorned the books we used in our studies – as if life had not disavowed their methods, their approach to money and prosperity. Life continued to punish their subjects, but they remained beyond punishment and retribution. They had no idea we suffered as a result of their policies. Why should I talk about them and their policies, their indifference towards their subjects and slaves in whose midst I was living because I had no choice? Memory is neither omnipresent nor omniscient and very few people recall what happened in those days which I can't even see on the horizon. I see and feel them in a corner of my memory; this is a sort of children's corner where I play from time to time, whenever in the grip of melancholia and nostalgia.

I'll speak about water which is a far more interesting subject than Stalin whose mortal remains found their eternal peace beside the Kremlin wall – after the 22d congress of Communist Party. With a sigh, his mortal remains said goodbye to the mausoleum and built their nest by the wall, in their new tomb where they at last came to terms with the Earth they had ill-treated for years and decades. I don't know if there's a lot of water in Stalin's new abode, but I do know that water permeates our life to the point of making it liquid and almost

transparent. At some point I thought that water was everywhere and Thales agreed with me when he said many centuries ago, 'Water is best.'

According to Aristotle, he thought that water is the original substance out of which all others are formed; and he maintained that the Earth rests on water. Whenever I swam in the Black Sea or in the Baltic, I thought about water that allowed my body to bob up and down as I looked at the sky where a cloud might obliterate the splendour of the sun. I was the Earth and the water nursed me like a mother in whose bosom I had been born like the rest of Creation – in accordance with Thales' theory.

Even when I was far from water, I thought about it because you're never far from water; and yet nothing prevents you from going to a desert where dromedaries reign on account of their capacity to go without water for a long period of time. I thought about water because I was thirsty; and I couldn't forget that my body owed its very existence to it, being liquid to some extent. Why do people die if there's no water within their reach? Why doesn't one drink half of one's body, whenever dying of thirst in the middle of a desert or an ocean? Not a drop to drink. There are lots of drops within your body, but you overlook them as you look at the sea and its salt water you refuse to drink, thinking it won't agree with you. Everything agrees with you, but you stubbornly disagree with everything and everybody; and so you die, leaving your watery body behind as if to erect a monument to your misery.

I would pour some water into a beer glass the size of which did not really matter and I looked at it for hours and hours as if studying the world and its mysteries. The beer glass held the whole world in its bosom and I had no alternative but to contemplate this world I had put on my chest of drawers, making it look rather small and easy to handle. 'You'd better divide your work into smaller, more manageable sections,' my father used to say when he saw me struggle with mathematics or physics or psychological problems. So I would divide the world into smaller sections in order to handle it more easily; and yet I didn't need the world beyond which I went as soon as I had an opportunity to do so with impunity.

I used to say to the world, 'You're here, within my reach. I can spill you on my silk shirt. I can also spill you all over the floor. I don't want you to touch my body so I spill you on the floor. Or is it better to get rid of you altogether? The kitchen sink awaits you with impatience. Why should we disappoint it?' I knew I could see the world not only in a grain of sand but also in a drop of water and there were many worlds within my reach: the beer glass was still on the chest of drawers. But I was reluctant to deal with the worlds imprisoned within it, for somehow they were related to the world in which I lived and didn't prosper, contrary to my parents' aspirations. I needed *other* worlds to which I directed my steps whenever my schedule allowed me to take a break and say to myself, 'I need a clean break with reality.' The beer glass was a kind of prison from which our everyday reality couldn't escape, even if I decided to spill it over the floor: the floor was another prison, another guardian of the present. Let it remain on the floor from which it is doomed to disappear, drying in the sun or just in the air where our clothes dry rather quickly whenever we are in no mood for using our machines.

Pythagoras thought that in a compact world we can count on structure and harmony, for such a world displays an *order* in the relations of its component parts. But in our universe the order is a thing of the past, considering that Giordano Bruno accustomed us to innumerable worlds and infinity. How are you supposed to handle infinity that can't be imprisoned within a glass or even within a swimming pool? You can swim within infinity, if you feel like it, but you'll never be able to handle it like a tool or weapon. My beer glass was rather small and I admired its structure and harmony, even though I had poured some running water into it, leaving

aside not only beer but also mineral water. I was reluctant to use a wine glass for my purposes: I thought the world was unworthy of a wine glass.

The world was limited and I could cross its borders all the more easily as no one really knew what I was up to and why I was determined to leave the world. No one knew I despised it because I saw little point in opening my heart to anyone, be it my friend or my father. Actually I had no friends either at college or anywhere else and I was at pains to get my points across whenever my fellow students or our tutors deigned to notice my existence. I would utter a sentence and wait for their response: a word, a smile, a gesture, a frown, a friendly look. Only silence and immobility greeted me as I stood there, waiting for something that might have happened in a parallel world or in heaven where saints and angels do not fail to take notice of you, whatever you do or say.

My facial expressions were also foreign to my fellow students and whenever I did something they did all the time, they would pay me the double-edged compliment of saying my work was ‘excellent for a beginner’. To them, I remained a beginner throughout our stay at the Conservatoire. I am pretty old now and I think I have learnt their ways and know how to come round to their points of view. I have even come round to thinking it is all right: the world, its ways, its news, its horrors and sorrows. All right, I’ll stay in *this* world and forget about my escapades, my space odysseys in which I used to meet *my* fellow creatures and look at *my* smiles, my mirrors.

The point is I’d rather deal with chaos, infinity and innumerable worlds, leaving aside or behind my neighbours, colleagues and fellow citizens whose smiles I cannot see: what I do see is their backs that don’t smile, whatever their owners do or say. Even when their owners roar with laughter, their backs don’t smile as if determined to frown upon my acts and movements in general: for some reason, I’m under the impression that human backs make faces and frown instead of smiling and saluting those who face them during a conversation or a walk in the woods. Perhaps other people can deal with human backs and shoulder blades more successfully, but I’m doomed to die without seeing a smile on a human back.

Anaximenes says that nothing is more important than the air because it is the fundamental substance out of which everything and everybody arise in the course of time. Time is so generous it permits the air to engender everybody – even the creatures whose very presence on Earth doesn’t seem to tie in with nature and other creatures, species and groups. They die, of course; nevertheless they can enjoy a few moments of earthly happiness, which is a gift of God, in a manner of speaking. The soul is air; the fire is rarefied air. When condensed, air becomes first water, then, if further condensed, earth and finally stone.

From water I eventually switched to air and I told myself, ‘It is air, it is air,’ as I held a few stones in my hands. My hands were also air; so were my lungs and even my liver. Thales and Anaximenes spoke to each other in my dreams as follows: ‘Why do you think that everything is air? Do you think you’re air?’

‘I am.’

‘Is there no water in you?’

‘No, unless I condense air.’

‘Do you condense air when you drink water?’

‘I do.’

‘Does your mouth condense it?’

‘My mouth and my stomach do the job.’

‘But water doesn’t need air to be born into this world.’

‘It does. Just as our soul, being air, holds us together, so do breath and air encompass the whole world.’

‘I think that water does it – it is in its line of business.’

‘Can you prove it?’

‘I can. Look at this ocean.’

‘All right, I’m looking at it. And while I’m doing so, please look at *everything*. And you should breathe in deeply and then breathe out slowly.’

‘I’m sorry if I’m breathing garlic odours all over you!’

‘It doesn’t matter – I’m used to garlic odours. Breathe in, breathe out. Such data is invaluable to a true philosopher.’

‘That just goes to prove what an idiot you are!’

3

In *Meno* – one of the Socratic dialogues – Socrates affirms that we know everything because our soul is immortal and immortals can’t help coming across everything and everybody in the course of their long and fruitful lives. Even if you’re reluctant to learn something – you don’t like the violin, for instance – you’ll play it sooner or later and the quality of your performances is bound to be compared to that of Oistrakh or Heifetz. So you have to grin and bear it, listening to the applause which sets your teeth on edge.

In the dialogue, it is a slave who proves to us that we can answer any question, provided we take the trouble to recollect the answer to this question, buried in one of our memory’s tombs. You make this effort and the tomb opens up of its own accord as if the last judgement was scheduled for tonight, replacing both the twilight and dinner. Prodded by Socrates’ questions, the slave – he knows nothing about geometry – comes to see for himself what answer suits the problem announced by Socrates: How to find a square double in area to any given square. I, for one, have no idea what Socrates is talking about and, try as I may, I won’t find any answer to this problem – not even the *wrong* answer, come to think of it. The slave, however, solves the problem by recollecting the prior knowledge of which his former lives are brimful, thanks to the teachers he used to have in Athens, Sparta and elsewhere.

I’m unable to solve the problem given by Socrates; and yet this doesn’t mean I can’t recollect my former lives where I found Anaximenes, Thales and Plato whose shadows pursue me through *this* life of mine. At some point I regarded water as a primary source of life on Earth and I wasn’t mistaken, judging from what Thales had to say on the subject. When, for the first time, I read *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, I knew I was right too.

Alone, alone, all, all alone,
 Alone on a wide wide sea!
 And never a saint took pity on
 My soul in agony.

Whenever I am truly alone, I feel surrounded by water, by its glittering eyes: like Argus, water is covered with eyes that watch you round the clock, taking advantage of the sun, the moon and searchlights. The air is also my companion in misfortune, and at times I’m under the impression we exchange hugs and kisses as I breathe it in and out, sitting in one of my armchairs or lying in my bed, protected by its canopy.

Socrates keeps asking me questions. ‘What can be found under the floor?’

‘I don’t know.’

‘Don’t you feel any movement? Do you think your house is motionless?’

‘I don’t think so.’

‘What *do* you think?’

‘I think the walls I see are reeling before my eyes.’

‘Have you ever heard about floating villages?’

‘No.’

‘If you go to Angkor, you’ll see a village like that.’

‘No – I’ll devote my time to temples only.’

‘That’s beside the point. Why do you think your walls behave in this way? And what about your floor?’

‘It’s moving too.’

‘Why is it moving? Don’t you feel you’re sailing down the coast?’

‘I do.’

‘And you can’t sail unless there’s some water under your house. Am I right?’

‘You are, as usual.’

‘And what about the Earth? Don’t you feel you’re sailing down the coast whenever you venture outdoors?’

‘I do.’

‘Look at the trees growing around your house and down the street. Aren’t they swaying in the wind?’

‘They are.’

‘But there isn’t enough wind to fly a kite. So why are the trees swaying? Suppose you’re on a ship. You look at the nearest mast that sways from side to side, backwards and forwards. Does it do so because the ship is sailing down the coast?’

‘Yes.’

‘And what about the Earth? Doesn’t it too sail somewhere?’

‘It does.’

‘But if the Earth stood on earth, the trees we’re talking about wouldn’t sway like that, would they?’

‘No, they wouldn’t.’

‘Do my words mean that the Earth stands on water?’

‘They do – no doubt about that.’

‘Do you remember it now?’

‘I do. Thank you, Socrates.’

I thought the world was the air I was breathing so I didn’t have to worry about communication and the problems caused by it in everyday life. I just had to breathe in the person I wished to communicate with and our relationship would start to grow inside my body; and it was sure to grow and prosper as long as I held my breath. I fell in love and kept a lot of women in my lungs that were large enough to accommodate the whole world. Doesn’t God do the same to the creatures He created a long time ago? When we feel the presence of God, we are in His lungs because the Almighty too has to breathe in order to survive eclipses, cosmic explosions and our wars, their destructive power.

One day I felt I couldn't rely on air any longer; water was unreliable too. You look at a girl who drinks a glass of water in your presence; you think you've been befriended by this girl. After all, you're part of the water she has drunk while looking at you. You think she is in love with you already; all you have to do is take her by the hand and go to the nearest church. But she pays no attention to your amorous glances and dances with somebody else, turning her back on you. And yet only yesterday she looked at you in a friendly way as if to offer you a glimmer of hope. Where is this glimmer now? In your lungs, in your heart, in your bowels, in the clouds floating overhead?

Anaximander held that all things – humans and animals included – come from a single substance; but that's not water, contrary to what Thales said many times as he tried to demolish his opponents' arguments. It is neither air nor water, as a matter of fact; nor any other substances we are acquainted with and encounter in parks, on the seashore. This substance is infinite, eternal and ageless so it's useless to ask how old it is. Whatever we subject to our scrutiny is either old or young, otherwise we would be hard put to explain why we choose this and not that: this woman instead of that one, for instance. But if we adopt Anaximander's point of view, we won't be able to distinguish between this woman and that, proposing to all of them at the same time and leaving the church only for a breath of fresh air.

What to do with this substance? How to use it? How does it use our bodies and souls? Let us not drag in God for once – there are other substances in the world ruled by God, angels and archangels. Is this substance different from God Who is everywhere – at least in the books written by pantheists? Suppose it is something else for many reasons, one of them being connected with Satan and His behaviour in days of yore. Suppose this substance is on Satan's side and so it's pointless to remind it that God emerged victorious in the struggle between good and evil. 'This is a war which neither side can win,' the substance would say defiantly.

How do humans come into being from a substance you cannot grasp for all your efforts? You try to grasp it, but it's boundless and you can grasp only an object lying on your chest of drawers or elsewhere. You can also grasp an idea; the substance I'm writing about is an idea I cannot grasp. John Paul II says that God walks by your side, which makes things easier for you because you rely on someone who walks by your side. If you feel you're falling, you can grasp God with both hands as if He was a rail or something like that. What to do with a substance about which you know nothing or next to nothing? You say it's boundless and ageless; so is God. But at least He walks by your side and that makes all the difference.

'Into that from which things take their rise they pass away once more, as is ordained, for they make reparation and satisfaction to one another for their injustice according to the ordering of time.' There are many poems in *Through the Looking Glass*. A character comes in and says: 'Do you want me to recite a poem for you?'

'Is it a long poem?' says Alice.

'It is long and beautiful.'

And so the character recites his or her poem, hoping to move Alice to tears.

You rise and come into being.

Are you there? Are you everywhere?

Are you a god or a human?

You might be a plant, for all I know.

You should go back, for God's job
 Is to ensure fair play between
 All the creatures that are born.
 They're born and so they should die.
 They return to where they came from.
 You come from a tomb and go back to it.
 There are tombs everywhere. People
 Come out of them and sink into them.
 What else are we supposed to do?
 I sometimes just look out the window
 And watch the comings and goings
 Of everyone in the cemetery.

A run-down cemetery, full of tumbled gravestones. Is that what Anaximander meant? If you wish to become immortal, you have to spend an equal amount of time in your grave. That's why you can't become immortal. On the other hand, you won't spend the whole of your existence in your grave because that would be unfair: life and death should make reparation and satisfaction to each other for their injustice. Indeed it's not fair to live on Earth while some of your fellow creatures remain under it – in their tombs or in the substance from which they're supposed to emerge. So you make a hole and put your body in it; somebody throws a few lumps of mud over your body and says you're dead and buried. As soon as you disappear underground – you're *forced* to go underground – your counterpart promptly rises from his tomb, if you're a man. If you're a woman, a woman takes your place on Earth so as to redress the balance, doing justice to justice.

Actually Anaximander must have spoken of four elements: fire, earth, air and water. If water got the upper hand, there would be only water on Earth, assuming that our planet is able to survive such an onslaught, such an invasion. You wish to spend the day swimming and sunbathing, but you can't sunbathe unless you float all day long on your back. Water, water, every where. But that's not your idea of sunbathing because it is somehow associated with beaches, sand and the figures you can trace on it. Besides, you like to feel the sand between your toes. So God boils the water and the beach you're dreaming about makes its appearance in your neighbourhood, not far from your garden where your favourite flowers rise from the dead at last.

How did you pray to God in those days? 'Could you boil the kettle for me? Thank you very much. No tea, thank you. Please leave the kettle on the stove. I know you don't want to spend hours slaving over a hot stove, but I didn't ask you to do that. Just leave the kettle on the stove until the water vanishes into thin air. It's not in thin air yet because I can't see any beach in the area where I'm staying today. I'm on holiday, you know.'

'How many days' holiday do you get with your new job?' says God.

'Don't you know *everything*?' you say to God.

'Why should I spend my time on your holidays?' says God.

'But you asked me this question, didn't you?'

'Out of idle curiosity.'

'So You won't increase the number of days I might spend on beaches, will you?'

'Why should I?'

‘Epicurus and Spinoza are right – You don’t care about the Earth and earthlings.’

But the kettle is on the stove and the fire says to itself, ‘They use me when they need my services. Am I their slave? It is I who should reign in the universe because I can make all water vanish into thin air. And I can make thin air vanish into another thin air. These airs will become thinner and thinner until no air remains on Earth. And if there’s neither air nor water on Earth or anywhere else, I’ll become the Emperor of the universe. I’ll burn the Earth too because I don’t need it. Why should I tolerate this tomb in my room?’

And earth replies to fire: ‘What are you talking about? I’m not a tomb, far from it. I’m a garden – the garden of Eden, as Adam used to say when he wasn’t too hungry. But Adam ate too much and a diet that is high in fat can lead to obesity. Of course he mostly ate fruit, but fruit can also be high in fat, especially if it’s loaded with knowledge. You can’t burn me because I’m non-flammable. Do you often watch horses gallop on my surface? Their hooves throw up clods of earth as they gallop across field and woods. A few clods can extinguish you forever if you grow too insolent. I’ll ask an archangel to throw a few clods on your insolent mouth. You’ll die and the same archangel will bury you in my womb. And I’ll see to it that you remain in my bowels until Doomsday – no rebirth, no metempsychosis.’

‘Have you forgotten justice?’ says air. ‘Do you remember what Russell says about it? “This conception of justice – of not overstepping eternally fixed bounds – was one of the most profound of Greek beliefs. The gods were subject to justice just as much as men were, but this supreme power was not itself personal, and was not a supreme God.”’

‘If it’s not a supreme God, I can do whatever I like. I obey only the Almighty, and conceptions, whatever their significance and value, do not concern me in the least. My sole concern is to ensure the safety of bonfires and fireplaces. I also have a number of concepts in my safe and they’re as valuable as justice and Greek beliefs.’

‘I’m not a supreme God,’ says justice, ‘but I’m extremely powerful. You shouldn’t be offhand with justice, otherwise I’ll put you in prison and throw away the key. I allow you to fight each other because life has no meaning without strife. Spenser embroidered upon this concept of mine in the following verses:

‘The earth the air the water and the fire
Then gan to range themselves in huge array,
And with contrary forces to conspire
Each against other by all means they may –

‘And Milton chimed in with Spenser’s view of the situation:

‘Hot, cold, wet and dry, four champions fierce
Strive here for maistry.

‘In my turn, I’d like to contribute to your understanding of the subject:

‘You strive and die and are re-born.
Each of you walks along my path.
When I see any of you falter, I make you

Lean on me and thus redress the balance.
And if you dare to grow aggressive,
I strangle you to death in your baths.'

'I don't like this poem,' says air. 'It's not really beautiful.'

'At least it's not too long,' says water. For once earth keeps silent as if weary of the discussion that doesn't lead anywhere, not even to struggle for life.

Xenophanes believed all things to be made out of earth and water; fire was excluded from the club for bad behaviour and air had no opportunity to join the club. 'At last we're alone,' said water to earth.

'Yes. I've been waiting for this intimacy since the Creation,' said earth.

'Do you mean to say you're in love with me?'

'Yes, I am in love with you.'

'Why have you never asked my hand in marriage?'

'Because fire has always got in the way. Fire's an interfering old busybody.'

'You're right. Whenever I wish to say something to you, someone uses a cigarette lighter.'

'And bonfires? Burning woods?'

'So many historic buildings are damaged by fire each year.'

'Do you remember the last fire?'

'The one started by children playing with matches?'

'That's right.'

'Of course I remember it. I was thinking about you. "So many earthquakes," I said to myself. And I also said to myself, "What she needs now is a lot of tender loving care." And the fire broke out.'

'Forty people helped to put it out.'

'The dry weather has increased the risk of brush fires.'

'Now we've nothing to worry about – fire's no longer a member of our club.'

'I'm so grateful to our president for kicking it out.'

'Incidentally, I like the word "out". Is it a word?'

'I think so. It doesn't really matter.'

'I was running out of patience.'

'So was I.'

'Actually we need neither fire nor air.'

'Do you breathe?'

'No,' said earth.

'Neither do I,' said water.

'We're totally self-sufficient.'

'I am essential to terrestrial life,' said water. 'I participate in virtually every process that occurs in plant and animal organisms.'

'Why are you talking like that?' asked earth. 'You're a modest, mild-mannered woman, without a trace of self-importance.'

'Am I? You have a tendency to underestimate the role I play on Earth – on *you*, as a matter of fact.'

‘I love you,’ said earth.

‘My influence should never be underestimated. You’re surprisingly ignorant about my qualities.’

‘I hate you,’ said earth.

There was a sense of foreboding on Earth, as if fighting might at any minute break out. And it did break out to validate the sense of foreboding for which our earthlings are renowned throughout the universe and its outskirts where a dozen universes await their births, their struggles for life. Now water lords it over earth; now earth gets water firmly under her thumb: water agrees to whatever earth asks. Fire joins the fight and thus rejoins the club from which our air has never been excluded. Life goes on in accordance with Empedocles’ theory; and yet the pacifist movement is gaining increasing support among young people. ‘Peace,’ they shout. ‘Stop fighting, you four – shake hands and make peace with each other!’

In my youth or rather in my childhood I was keen on natural sciences and did my best to find out how I thought and where I had come from. For many years I believed I had been bought in a shop and was surprised when my father eventually told me the truth. This absolute truth deprived me of my research in the course of which I was supposed to choose an appropriate shop and guess how much I cost as a newborn babe. When my parents decided to get rid of an upright piano in favour of a grand piano, of an old Bechstein, I realised I might have been less expensive than our new source of musical delights. I questioned my father on the subject, but he didn’t say a word for fear of hurting my feelings: I was a highly-strung boy. So I had no alternative but to fall back on my thoughts – on my search for the source of my thoughts. Where had *they* come from? Not from a shop, although some people’s thoughts often come from bookshops where such individuals buy only those books that can be quoted on a rostrum or in a ballroom.

I also thought about the Earth: her birth and origin, her fate and soul mate. Was the Earth in love with the moon? Jupiter was too far away to make love to the planet on which I was born in the middle of the last century. The moon wasn’t within the Earth’s reach either, but no one could maintain it was completely *out* of her reach, especially that everybody kept talking about spaceships and space odysseys. Sometimes I thought the Earth was just a huge box of matches which, in the near or distant future, might destroy whatever I was in love with: Moscow, trees and my grand piano. Whenever I saw *The Last Day of Pompeii* – Brulov’s renowned painting – I also saw an impish grin and a hand striking a match at the centre of the Earth.

I disagreed with the scientists who wrote that the Earth wasn’t as flat as a pancake: once and for all, I opted for Ptolemy’s theory and even now I wouldn’t mind eating this pancake at dinner, provided the ritual is accompanied by caviar and vodka. I knew that three whales were to prevent the Earth falling into chaos or a cosmic sea from which no one had ever been born again, in spite of the doctrine of eternal recurrence. I was in love with those whales and *Moby Dick* has never been my favourite novel, for all its literary qualities and external majesty. I was afraid that two whales wouldn’t hold the Earth high enough, letting it sink into the ocean where no life and no speech of welcome awaited her.

I’m acquainted with an amateur car constructor who spends his life in a garage where his cars seem to talk to each other about how beautiful life is, provided you’re born. I’ve never constructed a car, but a crane adorned my room in Moscow, and I dreamt of a television set I might create some day, using a box my father had given me as a birthday present. This box was full of resistors, transistors and what not; a tiny screen stared at me whenever I opened the box, but I wouldn’t return its stare. I was ashamed of my incapacity to put the semi-conductors together, which would have permitted me to surpass myself. I realised it was easier to make the Earth

and the moon than an ordinary television set: I couldn't just turn this box into a pancake and spread it with a thick layer of caviar.

In my room, the Earth made love to the moon pretty often – almost every night, especially if I wasn't asleep and so could watch their lovemaking to my heart's content. Today I can't even make the moon, let alone the Earth and Venus that remains in the sky, staring at me whenever I look up to avail myself of the star-studded beauty. And the television set I bought recently is so ghastly I wonder if I didn't chance upon it in the Soviet Union where one was precluded from enjoying the quality of Japanese electronic devices. There were some exceptions to this rule, but I wasn't one of them: I was forced willy-nilly to stick to the rule.

Seven years ago, I bought a cordless telephone; I didn't even open the box. Why should I open such boxes? These aren't chocolate boxes, as far as I know; and I know a lot about such boxes, even though I seldom, if ever, open them. I need no other proofs of my utter incapacity to do anything with whatever fills them in expectation of a skilful pair of hands, of an intricate brain. Like Socrates, some years ago I came to realise I had no natural aptitude for this kind of thing and I put all those boxes away – out of sight, out of mind. Now they're in my mind only when I write about them and I don't write about them every day; I think this is the first time I've written about this predicament of mine. After all, every man is regarded as a handyman – at least by some women. Well, I'll have to find other women on the planet I played with so often in my youth.

Did I recall at some point that Mind was more important than the rest? And what is the rest, may I ask? Arms, legs, eyes, skin, hair. I never describe them because I'm wholly preoccupied with Mind and its frolics. My characters are headless and bodiless; only their brains live and prosper in my books where they look for their author and find him, or rather his brain. What does it matter who is bigger or smaller? Socrates speaks of a large man who stands by a small one; and one horse is taller than another horse. So what? I'm interested in their brains, not in their legs, even if it is a horse I'm dealing with at the moment. Anyway I ride neither well nor badly: I don't ride at all.

Many poems are devoted to the soul, the body and the mind. Here is my contribution to the theme revered by both philosophers and poets:

My soul. I'm not an earthly creature, not at all. And yet

I like the Earth. I often look at it from afar.

I'm like an astronaut who flies where no bird

Can fly. He doesn't forget the Earth, his house.

I see the gods who also have their dwelling places.

Where are they? Out of your reach. Why don't you

Fly? Are you the body no one can lift?

God says to angels, 'Try not to lift heavy weights.'

My mind. Why do you insult me? I'm not the body;

Yet I'm part of it. I wish I could get rid

Of this country bumpkin who can't think without me,

Without my thoughts and ideas. Why should I

Serve him? God is unjust, but I'm not Satan

And there'll be no revolt in heaven this time,
 Especially since I'm not in heaven but on Earth.
 I walk with the body; and yet I'm in no mood
 For walking. I want to sit down and meditate.
 Why don't I have an hour for silent contemplation
 Every morning? I'm staring out over my lake,
 Lost in contemplation. This is the only lake I know.
 Why doesn't the body drown in it? Louis II did.

My soul. It is I who usually say what you're saying.
 As far as I know, you haven't been upgraded
 To the status of souls. Don't pretend you're one.
 You're just the mind and you often indulge
 In the pleasures of the flesh, for you're fleshy.
 There's a terrible smell of putrefying flesh.
 Souls have nothing to do with putrefaction:
 Even the air is too vulgar for our substance,
 Even the ether is too material and hideous.
 We're nothing and everything: the gods
 And God Who doesn't look at humans.

My mind. I think you're just a mortal soul, not
 An immortal one. You speak of our flesh
 And its pleasures because you know them.
 You know them better than I do, for I think
 And you don't. I think while you wallow
 In the luxury of three-star restaurants.
 You also wallow in the luxury of five-star
 Hotels where you swim and go to saunas.
 You often deter me from good and make me
 Angry. An angry mind is a bad counsellor.
 My parents worry I might be led astray
 By my unsuitable friends. I tell them
 You're no friend of mine, but they don't seem
 To believe me. My God, what a mess!

'Wing' is one of the keywords of my life and even Maxim Gorky, whom I can hardly bear, seems to come up to my expectations when he says you cannot fly if you're fit only for crawling. When I read this line for the first time, I thought he had spoken about this possibility because flying wasn't really out of the question. Later on, I

read his essay on Tolstoy where he speaks of immortality: 'Tolstoy might have believed he was immortal. After all, there's an exception to any rule and nature must take care of her dearest and nearest children.' I knew I was too naive, but naiveté is neither a shortcoming nor a sign of madness: naive individuals don't *always* land up in lunatic asylums. And those who believe in the immortality of their souls are respected and even worshipped by their fellow citizens. Why not believe in the immortality of the flesh? We shouldn't forget exceptions and the gifts our Mother Nature showers her children with whenever she feels like it. (We are allowed to forget all rules from time to time.)

For a while I felt a pair of wings inside my soul – a pair of rudimentary wings that didn't enable me to fly. I was rather fussy in those days: only Helens of Troy and Apollos walked around me as I headed for a theatre or a concert hall. Many streams of particles were flowing into my soul and my body swelled, ached and tingled as if it had been a soul in its own right. Once again I might have confused the soul with the body. I don't feel anything now, which seems odd: I'm not dead yet. The soul may *not* be immortal, but at least it is believed to remain within the body until the latter's death. Why should it leave a teenager high and dry? I stopped feeling my soul at the age of 17.

Plato taught me the importance of beauty whose influence shouldn't be confined to museums and human relationships. Beauty is not distant, contrary to what many people think as they look at Botticelli's pictures and Greta Garbo. It walks in our midst; it bumps into us, making our bodies stagger and collapse in a heap. Our souls stagger too and the wings we have been dreaming of for many years begin to grow at last, determined to prove that men and women can fly as far as the stars.

You go on a holiday; you drive your car instead of taking a train that doesn't have to defy slippery roads and suchlike. No wonder you have a crash on the way to a seaside resort. The impact of the crash reduces your car to a third of its original length. That's what happens when you come face-to-face with authentic beauty. First you're reduced to a third of your original size. You're frightened by the awesome majesty of the beauty you have come across in the course of your wanderings. You wonder how this marvel can appear in the world where ugliness holds sway over whole districts, cities, countries and continents. Why and how has it managed to withstand the pressure under which even Apollo would throw in the towel?

You cringe at the sight of beauty and ask yourself if you're not already in the other world where such beauties walk up and down the City of God without making anyone embarrassed and terrified. Then you realise you're still on Earth, in the midst of your fellow creatures whose presence reassures you a little bit: you're not yet ready for other worlds and the gods. You're no longer frightened by the beauty you see in front of you; on the contrary, you feel better and better and your body gradually returns to its original size. What's more, it *grows* on account of the wings that are born inside it, not far from the armpits. The wings push the body because there's not enough room for them and the body reacts to their longing as it swells up, aches and tingles.

There are lots of walls in the City of God and these walls protect its inhabitants from Satan and his stooges who are prepared to invade the City at any moment, by day and night. Demons don't see the colours that shower the elect with their gifts; they see the City in black and white as if watching an old film focused upon the struggle between good and evil. Demons know they're black; they also know that the inhabitants of the City and God Himself are white. 'Well, it's just another game of chess,' says one demon to another.

'That's right,' says the other demon.

'Where's our King?'

‘He’s in bed with our Queen.’

‘We could kiss each other instead of playing this stupid game. We’re bound to lose anyway.’

‘Of course we are, but our aim is not to win the game at all cost. Even a low level of noise interferes with God’s concentration. And our noise thwarts His plans and leads the saints astray.’

‘You should illustrate your point with a diagram on the blackboard.’

‘I can’t see any blackboard in the neighbourhood.’

‘But there’s a whiteboard right in front of us.’

‘Where?’

‘Look at these walls.’

‘At the city walls?’

‘That’s right. Aren’t they white?’

‘Do you want me to write my diagram on *them*?’

What could the demon inscribe on the walls of the City of God? Another Platonic dialogue? For all his munificence, Dante didn’t allow our Greek Philosophers to live in Purgatory, in the so-called Middle Kingdom, thereby barring their path to Paradise forever. Indeed they haven’t got a ghost of a chance of reaching Paradise and its gate, being chained to the walls of the *nobile castello* situated in the upper regions of Hell. But Hell doesn’t turn into Paradise as we climb a steep flight of stairs to its front door or rather to its own gate on which Dante’s pen inscribed the words that every sinner knows by heart. Even the *nobile castello* smells of sulphur and Plato suffers whenever he inhales this unwholesome air. He thinks, ‘What a pity the world is made of air. I wish I could swim underwater instead of breathing day and night. I wish I could become a fish.’

Born before the Christian era, Plato doesn’t know that the rivers in which he might swim like a fish are poisoned because Satan doesn’t oppose the dumping of nuclear waste at sea. The same goes for the rivers and lakes where many sinners swim and dive to the detriment of their health. Within the bounds of the Nether Kingdom, oil spills are common, as is the dumping of toxic industrial waste. So Plato hasn’t got a ghost of a chance of swimming in pure, uncontaminated water – even if he does eventually turn into a fish.

Not only the void greets philosophers who climb or fly throughout their lives in the hope of reaching the City of Wisdom where they may learn at last the difference between good and evil, good and bad, bad and worse, worse and Hell. Parmenides offers us his version of the void from which one never returns empty-handed because one is supposed to meet a goddess there.

I’m longing to learn my origin and the real name of Justice.

We often speak of Justice, but we have no idea what we speak of.

What indeed is Justice? And Right? What about Right?

We can’t learn these notions on Earth where there are only errors.

There are Eros and errors on Earth, and Eros prevents us from seeing the truth.

So we have to go upward in order to see things as they are.

What do real things look like? Only Heaven can tell us that.

How to go to Heaven? In a shuttle, in a spaceship, in a celestial boat?

Parmenides was born before the advent of spaceships and rockets

So he speaks of horses, wheels and a chariot on which he relies

As he goes from the surface of the Earth to the goddess
 Who greets him on the paths of Night and Day, of Evil and Good.
 ‘Young man, who comest to my house companioned
 By immortal charioteers with the steeds that bear thee,
 I greet thee,’ she says. Parmenides greets her in his turn.

An unforeseen difficulty has arisen and Parmenides is quite aware of it, judging from the way he insists upon the existence or non-existence of ‘is’, as he puts it. Is there anything beyond the door that flies open as his chariot gets close enough to it? He meets the goddess, but she cannot fill up the whole world, for all her beauty. Is there only the void about which Plato speaks with gusto? Good is part of this void; so is Evil. The same goes for Right, Justice, Paradise and Hell. But Parmenides doesn’t agree with this view, for he attaches a lot of importance to ‘is’ that is far more important to him than a mere ‘it’. There must be something in the world, otherwise one is bound to ask oneself the following question: ‘*Is* the game worth the candle?’ And this question is bound to pester one as long as one believes there’s nothing in the world, not even ‘it’ or ‘am’.

Parmenides was depressed and in a confused state of mind; his moods seemed to go from one extreme to another. Now he thought there was nothing at all; now he contradicted himself as he said in a quavering voice: ‘There is everything. And everything is *is*. And this *is* is everlasting, indivisible and motionless.’ And he wrote a letter to one of his friends: ‘You say that whatever sees the light of day is in the habit of moving and can perish at any moment. What’s more, it divides itself and multiplies as if it had to replenish the Earth. But the Earth is already full to the brim with whatever has seen the light of day.’ And he said to his fellow-men: ‘What is, is. You call this a tautology, and so do I, but you don’t think clearly enough to see what that admission leads to. If you give to *is* its full and proper force, you’re precluded from saying that what is suffers any process of becoming or perishing, change or movement.’

‘You contradict yourself,’ says a man. ‘You say that something may come into being and see the light of day. So it does become, contrary to what you’ve just said.’

‘I’ve just put the finishing touches to my doctrine. Now I’m satisfied with it and I’m certain that it is complete.’

‘All right,’ says another man. ‘So nothing comes into being because it is already there. No point in becoming anything or anybody because you’re already everything.’

‘That’s right.’

‘And what about us? Did we ever come into being?’

‘Nothing and nobody come into being. We neither change nor perish nor move.’

‘I feel like taking a walk in the woods,’ says yet another man.

‘Even if you move, you don’t really move. And if you die, you don’t die. You’re everything and everybody.’

‘Does anything exist at all?’ asks the first man.

‘What can be spoken and thought of must be. It *is*, as a matter of fact. It is the same thing that can be thought and can be.’

‘What about unicorns?’

‘They *are*. And they are *you* because you think and speak about them. Anyway, you’re everything, even if you don’t *always* speak about everything and everybody.’

Parmenides thinks that the substance he enlarges upon may not come into being, for life and Paradise are not always synonymous. Why should you make an effort and cross a large area of arid, featureless desert at the end of which there’s the Earth and whatever lives on it? You may remain where you are: in the void which, however, doesn’t look like the one described by Plato, for no wisdom lies at the bottom of it. It’s just what is usually defined as non-existent and whatever doesn’t exist can’t offer you advice and explain the mystery of everyday life. When Hamlet says ‘to be or not to be’, he doesn’t reflect on what to do before coming into being, for he is *already* on the surface of the Earth and consequently has to give in to the world’s demands all the time. His mother puts a question to him and he has no alternative but to answer her question – out of respect and politeness. His father’s ghost says he should avenge his father’s death and he obeys his father, if only in thoughts, for it is no easy task to kill one’s uncle.

But suppose Hamlet isn’t born yet. He is also a ghost in his own right and many people see him at midnight and also in the daytime when he reads and writes letters. ‘Our ghost is reading again,’ says Polonius.

‘And he wrote me a letter,’ says Ophelia.

‘No point in answering it,’ says her father. ‘You can’t marry a ghost, can you?’

‘And what if this ghost comes into being at last?’

‘He’ll never come into being. Yesterday he gave me a hesitant smile. He’ll always stay on the threshold of our life.’

‘Did you see his father’s ghost last night?’

‘I didn’t. His father must have died in the Hereafter at last.’

‘When we talk about Hamlet’s father, we mean that Hamlet *was* born at some point.’

‘He was born as a ghost and it’s up to him to decide whether he should be born once again to join humanity on the surface of the Earth.’

‘He’s *already* on the surface of the Earth.’

‘Not quite. He lives in one of the holes depicted by Plato in the *Phaedo*.’

‘Tell me more about these holes, father.’

‘Not now, my dear. That’s another story.’

So Hamlet may remain where he is – in one of these holes – until Doomsday and even beyond without feeling any remorse whatsoever, for ghosts are *not* duty-bound to avenge their fathers’ deaths and misfortunes. ‘If my uncle turns into a ghost,’ says Hamlet, ‘I’ll murder him after a slight hesitation. But now he is a human being and I’m in no mood for killing a creature whose flesh may bleed at any moment.’

‘But our life is meaningless without murders,’ says his father. ‘We either kill or talk about killing. Ghosts seldom play cards and frolic on beaches.’

If Hamlet eventually makes up his mind and becomes a *real* character in Shakespeare’s play, he will never perish, according to Parmenides who might say that Hamlet has *always* been on the stage – even before Shakespeare’s birth, for you neither come into being nor perish, otherwise you are *not*.

To some extent Hamlet is everything and everybody: his father and mother, Ophelia, Polonius and his father’s ghost. He is Shakespeare and Plato because Plato can neither perish nor come into being. They all stand

together on the stage where our drama has *always* being enacted using music, dance and mime. ‘You should murder your uncle,’ says one cell of this huge, boundless creature.

‘Why should I murder one of my cells?’ says another cell.

‘Because I’m dead,’ says the first cell.

‘You are *not*. Cells don’t die. Nothing does.’

‘Why do you say then, “To be or not to be”?’

‘Just for the fun of it. Immortals often think about death. I’m weary of life. Borges says that immortals forget their youths. Homer forgets the *Odyssey*, for instance. I don’t forget anything because my memory can neither perish nor come into being. It’s as eternal as I am. It’s just another cell – another prison cell, if you wish.’

Sometimes I get the feeling I’m not born yet, in spite of the fact that I remember my life and those who have taken part in it so far, playing their own parts and not those of their ghosts. At least that’s what I think this afternoon, for sometimes I’m convinced we are all ghosts whose existence depends on other ghosts or the gods about whom we speak just for the fun of it. What do we know about them or about Him, about the Almighty? We know that He is neither this nor that. He is neither him nor her nor it. What is it? Another ghost? Are we duty-bound to avenge His death?

5

Once you push your psyche, it keeps going under its own momentum. I’ve no idea *what* I pushed in my youth or rather in my childhood when I first felt an overwhelming urge to go beyond walls, clouds and the Milky Way. Was it my mind I pushed with my own hands? Was it my spirit or my soul? When I first read about the ideas of which Plato knew much more than anybody else, I recognised my urge and my cosmic odysseys that still guide me towards the exit from this world. And yet I never say to myself ‘to be or not to be’: I am and I will not perish as long as I adhere to Parmenides’ doctrine.

What have I forgotten in this world? – as the Russians put it. Why should I buy the book that has gone to number one in the bestseller list? I bought it two months ago as if to put my eternity or immortality to test. ‘If I read it through,’ I said to myself, ‘I’m eternal, for only immortals can waste their time on such books.’ Needless to say, I lost interest halfway through the book and I never finished it in spite of its growing popularity.

In the first chapter you realise that something goes wrong and you say to yourself, ‘I can see by the look on her face that something is amiss. A parallel world, no doubt.’ The heroine has never missed a single episode of her favourite soap opera. That’s what she actually says to herself as she makes her way to the hotel where she has an appointment with her client. And then she says to herself, ‘I don’t remember this episode. I must have missed it. She partly lives in a parallel world about which you’ll learn in 44 hours if you go on reading the book. I don’t care about this parallel world, but I do care about literary style that leaves a lot to be desired – as far as the book in question is concerned. Every sentence should be a parallel world, otherwise it doesn’t exist. Why should I read a non-existent book?’

I was wondering why anyone should read it. I finally came to the conclusion that those who did read it didn’t exist either. ‘These ghosts are reading a ghost book,’ I said to myself, ‘and as long as they read it, they won’t see the light of day. And if they’re not born yet, they’ll never be born because they are *not*. They’re not even ghosts, as a matter of fact. I’m prepared to write about the ghost that Prince Hamlet catches a glimpse of

and talks to outside his castle and its walls. But why should I write about non-existent ghosts? Their double absence shouldn't trouble me in the least.'

And yet I was on the brink of a nervous breakdown. I'm not a ghost and every day I'm supposed to meet or see the people who read this book and enjoy it to the utmost. How to deal with them? Should I dismiss them as idiots or ghosts? Some ghosts are so intelligent I begin to wonder whether they deserve to be elevated to a subject worthy of serious study. And ghosts are certainly a subject worthy of serious study; so are idiots, to some extent. So these people are neither idiots nor ghosts. Who *are* they? They're just a few words in a newspaper. What kind of words are they?

Two Norwegian day traders who outwitted the automated trading system of a big US broker have been cleared of all wrongdoing by the country's highest court.

The two men were handed suspended prison sentences for market manipulation in 2010 after they worked out how the computerised system would react to certain trading patterns – allowing them to influence the price of low-volume stocks.

Financial Times, Thursday May 3 2012

Of course I'm at a loss to know how to deal with this piece of information and I don't regret my ignorance of the words used in it. Day traders, trading patterns, low-volume stocks. I know only that those who read the novel I touched upon 10 minutes ago are day traders, trading patterns and low-volume stocks. They outwit only other day traders whose computerised systems react to trading patterns and bestseller lists. The lowest of the low. How to define their thoughts? Low-volume stocks. How to define their brains? Trading patterns.

The article says, however, that the Norwegian day traders are beating the big financial houses at their own game. So the readers I mentioned in the previous paragraph can't and shouldn't be compared to these traders for whom I have a soft spot. The people like that deserve to become a Platonic idea that may be formulated thus: 'Those who beat the big financial houses at their own game.' And what about those who read bestsellers? No idea.

'It is literature that chose me, you know,' those writers usually say. It did not, to tell the truth. Actually, literature did all it could to keep them at bay, but they continued to knock on every door, however remotely related to literature. The noise was so deafening that literature just had to give in for fear of growing deaf. Some scribblers do not knock, however, and so literature says with a sigh: 'I wish he'd knock instead of just barging in.' (Let us leave women out of this chaos.) The door- or gatecrashers write bestsellers and their readers turn into ghosts as they enjoy themselves in the company of parallel worlds. 'What is it?' says a pedestrian as he points with his walking stick at such a ghost.

'One of the readers,' says another pedestrian.

'I see. I won't see him in a few days' time, though. Halfway through the book he'll become a non-existent ghost and Parmenides will strike him out.' Incidentally, I stopped reading the bestseller after listening to it for six hours. I said to myself, 'If I buy the book, I'm sure to skip a lot of pages – I can't read nonsense for a long time. But if I buy an *audio* book, I'll listen to every sentence until I die of boredom.' I neither died nor turned into a ghost, as far as I can tell. I said to myself, 'I must try to stop the rot before I go mad.' I'm not mad, not yet.

Is the whole of history continuous and imperishable? I stand next to Stalin who is reluctant to die like his victims, for he knows already that nothing and nobody can die – neither tyrants, nor victims, nor dogs. ‘Why do you condemn the murders I perpetrated?’ he says. ‘No murder makes any sense because no one can die. It’s the height of folly and a tragic waste to gallop into war and build concentration camps.’

‘But you did have them built, didn’t you?’

‘Perhaps. I gave orders and my servants obeyed me. But what’s the use of giving orders if nobody dies? My victims come to me and say, “You thought you might kill us. We are here, by your side. We all are inside the mass of a well-rounded ball depicted by Parmenides. Somebody kicks this ball from time to time and we feel pain.” How could I inflict suffering on the Soviet people? I’m inside the ball. To kick it, you must be outside it. And nothing is outside the ball so suffering doesn’t exist. Even God can’t kick the ball because He is inside it as well.’

To kill somebody, you must move your hand holding a revolver or a Kalashnikov, and if your bullet is prevented from flying towards your potential victim, your potential victim will not die. And there’s no motion inside the ball; nor does anything move outside it, for the ball is everywhere and so there’s nothing outside it. Your bullets don’t fly towards your victims either inside or outside the ball. Your bullets remain in your revolver and your potential victim smiles as he takes a sandwich out of his bag and starts eating it before your very eyes.

A middle-aged man stands in front of you and eats a sandwich while you fiddle with your revolver, trying to put matters right.

‘Is it right to murder people?’ says the man.

‘You’re a criminal,’ says the potential murderer.

‘I’m not because I can’t move. How can you commit a crime if you can’t move?’

‘There’s such a thing as a Martian death ray.’

‘But those rays can’t move. Nor can your bullets. Those rays are no better than your bullets.’

‘I’ll strangle you with your own scarf.’

‘You can’t get closer to me because there’s no void in the ball where we stand. We can’t even lie in this ball. Do you ever manage to get any sleep?’

‘I sleep on my vertical bed. Sometimes I fall into a lovely deep sleep.’

‘So get a good night’s sleep and you’ll feel better able to cope.’

‘I envy some of our neighbours. There are several *horizontal* beds in the neighbourhood and they sleep on them.’

‘They sleep so well they never wake up.’

‘But life is probably a deep sleep.’

‘It is not. At least it’s not a *deep* sleep. Don’t we have dreams? By the way, I had a very odd dream about you last night. You were holding a revolver.’

‘I’m still holding it. I can’t get rid of it, to tell the truth. I don’t want to kill anyone, but I’m doomed to hold this revolver till Doomsday.’

‘Do you want me to sing you a lullaby?’

‘We can neither move nor murder.’

We’re neither torturers nor victims.

What's to be done in this world?
 No murders, no pleasures, no goals.
 We've stood here for centuries
 And nothing happens, nothing at all.
 There are neither nights nor days.
 We see a sort of eternal light.
 Is it the light of God, His bounty?
 I wonder why I speak of nights.
 How do we know there's darkness?
 Since we do know it, it exists.
 Where does darkness waste its time?
 Not outside the ball, as we know.
 What do we know about the world?
 There must be *something* outside it.
 I've always believed in something;
 I've no idea whether it's somebody.
 I'm not sure our dreams are sweet;
 Yet I think sleep is better than life.
 So why not sleep till Doomsday?'

'Thank you for the lullaby. It's odd, isn't it?'
 'What?'
 'I heard your lullaby, didn't I?'
 'I suppose you did.'
 'I heard your song, its melody. Don't melodies move?'
 'I suppose they do. You didn't hear just one note, did you?'
 'I didn't.'
 'And that's what we're supposed to hear – just one note.'
 'That's right. I've never thought about that.'
 'We talk to each other, don't we?'
 'We do.'
 'And our words move, don't they?'
 'They certainly do, otherwise we'd hear only one letter.'
 'Which letter would you like to hear eternally?'
 'That's beside the point.'
 'There's *some* movement inside the ball.'
 'I agree with you.'
 'And this movement allowed Parmenides to write his poem. His quill wasn't motionless, was it?'
 'Was it a quill he wrote with?'
 'That's beside the point.'

You know Darkness because it is inside you, standing or lying close to Light that's supposed to symbolise Day or God. It is said that pupils contract in bright light and dilate in darkness, but this cannot be true in the light of what has just been said. Your pupils neither contract nor dilate. Light and Night live together, and you don't really know what time it is now. Is it 2 p.m.? Is it 3 a.m.? Why should you say 'goodnight' to anyone? Of course you can sleep in the daytime – after a hearty lunch, for instance. But you can't say to your friends, 'Driving through the total darkness was a slightly surreal experience,' unless you're determined to talk nonsense most of the time. There *are* some cars in the ball where you live without being able to pass away peacefully in your bed, but you can't drive them anywhere, as you already know. There's no motion inside the ball so the cars remain where they are and nobody tries to remove them. Oh, by the way, the inhabitants of the ball don't know what a tow-away area means.

Love and hate also live together within every inhabitant of the ball. If you happen to fall in love, you instantly feel repulsion and realise you can't live with the person standing or lying in front of you. Of course you can have extramarital sex with this person, but you'd better not have premarital sex either with this person or anybody else. In other words, you'd better not marry anybody for fear of a forthcoming divorce. To cut a long story short, there are only love-hate relationships within the ball. If you have a friend, you know you can't trust her, for sooner or later this person will betray you. Betrayal and fidelity live side by side within the ball and they never quarrel, contrary to what might be presumed. What's the use of fighting? Sooner or later fidelity is sure to patch things up with betrayal, even if the latter holds a revolver in its hand.

Of course there's such a thing as eternal love and many of us are acquainted with the individuals who never divorce and live happily till Doomsday, in spite of everything. But within the ball you expose yourself to hate that doesn't leave you alone, being always by your side or sitting at your dinner table. If you're in love with your wife and have no intention of parting with her, you don't invite hate to dinner or lunch; anyway, such an invitation doesn't make sense within the ball. Be that as it may, hate is sitting opposite you at your dinner table and you can't chase it out because you don't really know if this table and room belong to you and not to hate. Besides, you never forget that you're doomed to remain motionless, whatever you do or long for.

Hate looks at you and doesn't say a word as if waiting for you to break the silence. 'Why do you look at me like that?' you ask.

'How *do* I look at you?'

'You seem to suggest you're more important than love.'

'We compete for the government contract on equal terms.'

'But don't you know that love is far more important than you? Don't you ever listen to the Pope?'

'I do. I can't help hearing him.'

'Doesn't he say that love will triumph over hate?'

'He does. So what?'

'Are you hungry?'

'I am.'

'Our table is empty. Is it a dinner table? What do you think?'

'It might be a writing desk, for all I know. Dinner tables are usually covered with dishes.'

'I'm in no mood for writing and I'm hungry too. I envy our fellow countrymen – they sit around dinner tables.'

‘So what? They can’t eat. Do you know Tantalus?’

I may fall in love, but I know that hate isn’t in another realm and betrayals are just around the nearest corner I cannot miss because I continue to walk along the path of my life. Why do I walk along this path that holds no promises and says nothing at all, even if I ask it to speak to me?

6

One of my femmes fatales lives in Moscow. Once I went to my friend’s office and spent two hours there, talking to him about contemporary music and Schoenberg. When I came back I realised my femme fatale wasn’t at home because there was a concert that night and she couldn’t live without concerts and picture galleries. So I waited for her in the room where we often kissed passionately, when we had nothing else to do.

She returns to her flat – I no longer have any flat or house in Moscow – and says to me: ‘I lost your money.’

‘How so?’

‘Your money was in my pocket.’

‘Why was it in *your* pocket?’

‘Because I put it in my pocket.’

‘Why did you *put* it in your pocket?’

‘Because I need your money.’

‘All right. So it was in your pocket.’

‘I went to the cloakroom. I forgot I had your money in my pocket.’

‘You put my money in your fur coat?’

‘What are fur coats for?’

According to Empedocles, our limbs keep wandering in search of ordinary women and men who will not steal our money, putting instead a tray on our blanket: a coffee pot, two croissants, honey, jam and ham. ‘It is impossible for large members to survive and be alive in separation, which is Empedocles’ account of generation under Love,’ says Aristotle. I can’t survive without those women’s limbs and bodies. And even their souls are vital to my health and the depth of my reasoning: I often think of women as I embark upon my journey through the stars.

Another woman – I don’t know whether she is a femme fatale or not – will come to my abode in two weeks’ time. The feelings of hate grow stronger every day; so do the feelings of love. So many femmes fatales lodge in my bosom I can’t disentangle them. They’re on the point of becoming a Platonic idea – that of a femme fatale. I don’t think this femme fatale will steal my money and the Khmer statuettes I put on my chest of drawers; but she may steal my soul, for all I know.

Why not bathe in this stream of *blameless* Love? Even if you blame this Love for stealing your money, you remain within its bounds and take advantage of its warmth or heat, for Greek philosophers often talk about heat that is supposed to generate the world or at least a part of it. You bathe in the stream and you’re happy; yet you know that sooner or later the heat you feel is bound to freeze hard and solid. You can’t do anything about it because love and hate go hand in hand through the city where you live and die.

I love the women I welcome in my house and my life tells me it has no meaning whatsoever without love. ‘Love seems to have permeated every section of society,’ says love.

‘A foul smell of stale beer permeated the whole building,’ I say to love.

‘What are you talking about?’ says love.

‘I’m disappointed,’ I say.

‘Why?’ asks love.

‘Because the women I fall in love with think only in terms of money.’

‘Money is also love,’ says love.

‘Is it?’ I say.

‘It is,’ says love.

I meet a woman somewhere: in a concert hall, in a theatre, in the streets, in a park where many women walk and talk to men and other women. So I begin to talk to one of them too, as if I had nothing else to do in the park where you can breathe and purify your lungs contaminated by pollution. Why don’t I go on walking alone and looking at the sky and trees that are so beautiful they take your breath away? But love says to me, ‘Angela’s so cheerful and lively – she’s like a breath of fresh air when she visits. Why don’t you invite her?’ So I catch up with Angela and start talking to her about my flat and furniture; and also about my wine cellar and the bottles it protects from thieves and hot summers. And Angela says, ‘All right. I’m free tomorrow night.’

‘I’ll be waiting for you,’ I say.

She comes and sits in one of my armchairs, just opposite the armchair in which I’m about to settle myself down with a newspaper. I forget about Angela because there’s an article I desire to read and this article is devoted to Russian oligarchs whose money is scattered in various heaps around the world. You just walk among these heaps, forgetting about trees, flowers and lakes, unless there’s some money by the lake you choose for your walk. That’s right, there are many heaps of money around Swiss lakes and even if you swim in them, you see only money and not the mountains for which both Switzerland and France are justly renowned throughout the world.

But Angela says, ‘Are you going to read this newspaper in my presence?’

‘Of course not,’ I say. ‘It’s impolite to read newspapers in front of a beautiful woman.’

‘So don’t read it. Just talk to me,’ she says.

‘What can we talk about?’ I ask.

‘We can talk about money, for instance,’ she says. ‘Are you a Russian oligarch?’

‘I’m afraid I’m not.’

‘Why do you live? Your only purpose in life seems to be to enjoy yourself. But how can you enjoy yourself if you’re not a Russian oligarch?’

‘You can be a Swiss oligarch,’ I say.

‘But you’re Russian, aren’t you?’

‘I am.’

‘Why didn’t you buy a penthouse at the Time Warner Center?’

‘Because I’d rather buy something in France or in Switzerland.’

‘All right, buy something in Montreux. There’s a real estate agency there. And there’s a woman in this agency. She works only for the Russians. So just speak to her in Russian and buy a villa by the lake.’

‘I’m afraid I don’t have enough money for those villas.’

‘But you’re a composer, aren’t you?’

‘No, I’m a pianist.’

‘A jazz pianist?’

‘No.’

‘So become a composer. It’s easy, isn’t it? You know music because you’re a concert pianist. So you just compose it instead of playing Mozart. And in two months’ time you’ll buy an apartment at the Plaza Hotel.’

I felt I was a loser, but I didn’t know whether I was a *born* loser or not, which had to be elucidated in view of the role my parents had played in my life. A friend of mine – he is of Russian origin, but lives in Germany – blames his lack of confidence on his mother, saying she oughtn’t to have slept with his father on the day of his conception. He blames his parents for practically every mistake he makes as he advances through Dante’s forest and into the mountains associated with Purgatory. He thinks that after his death he’ll land up in Purgatory because ‘I’ve never done anything wrong and so I have a clear conscience’.

‘But you blame your parents for your birth, don’t you?’

‘Of course I do. They should have thought long and hard before making this important decision.’

‘Are you speaking of your conception?’

‘That’s right. My mother should have told my father, “Let’s not sleep together this night. If we do, I’m sure to give birth to a son who’ll be unhappy in Germany.”’

My friend is a born loser and whatever he does immediately turns him against his parents whose fault or crime grows bigger and bigger as he reflects upon the night when he was conceived. I don’t blame my parents for my birth because I don’t know exactly if I have been a loser *all* my life. Was I a loser in my cradle, in my mother’s womb? What did I have to lose in my mother’s womb? My birth, perhaps. Why didn’t I lose it? The fact that I didn’t lose my birth may prove the opposite of what I’m trying to convey: as a general rule, my projects do not *automatically* fall through, leaving me speechless and breathless. In my mother’s womb I was resourceful and smart, otherwise I wouldn’t have been born. Or would I have been smarter had I remained unborn? There’s such a thing as a stillborn baby.

My teacher used to say I was one of the smartest kids in the class. So when did I become a loser? At some point I was left to rot in my flat, in my room, in my bed. A bad workman blames his tools, but I don’t blame anything or anybody; I admit it was entirely my fault. However, someone did leave me to rot in my flat and elsewhere. Who was it?

I’ve been treated unjustly and abused for many years so I don’t know when all this began: my memory is short and consequently unable to find this beginning and its causes. It may even have begun at primary school in spite of my teacher’s praise and encouragement, for my schoolmates never singled me out for special treatment. They neither regarded me as a leader nor beat me up. I’m not always indifferent to what is going on and I shudder with disgust as I walk into a bookshop and see the books I would put in the nearest rubbish bin if I had enough money to buy them all. But there’s a shortage of rubbish bins and the books remain on the shelves from which they depart only if they can find a private library where other bestsellers look cosy and inviting.

No English book of mine has ever been published and when one knows what books *are* published in English-speaking countries (and elsewhere), one recoils in horror, for one has nothing else to do. In this case, ‘one’ is myself; and yet I continue to send my books or rather some excerpts from them to various agents who don’t always answer me, deeming it inappropriate to answer such an author. Here is an excerpt from the letter I append to my summaries:

I write mostly in English. A Russian who has never lived in an English-speaking milieu cannot be absolutely sure he handles his linguistic tool with precision and panache. And what a marvellous tool it is! I don't think I would ever have been able to express myself with such meticulousness in any other language, including my mother tongue. No wonder I have written seven novels in English. Some of them I have already translated into French and Russian. But I am eager to have my works published in England because their English versions are the most faithful representation of what Kafka referred to as 'my world'. They also bear testimony to my love for the English language and literature. Of course, this private homage may remain private. The point is I am allergic to privacy in literature. In the Soviet Union many writers had no alternative but to share the fruit of their labours only with their writing desks. In the Sixties I heard the expression 'to write into one's writing desk' so often that any allusion to this underground ritual makes me shudder with horror.

I am an extremely slow writer. On some of my novels I have worked for fifteen years, putting them aside for a while, taking them up again. My writing desk has grown tired of them in the process. Besides, my writing desk, for all its outward beauty, is an unreliable reader. Every writer looks for his doubles, for his spiritual and poetical brothers. My writing desk is fit for neither of these roles. So my urge to seek a larger and a more sophisticated audience is logical enough, I suppose. That is why I would be very grateful if you could advise me in these matters.

Sometimes I have the feeling that I am a time-traveller who pushed the wrong button. Actually I can't complain. Of course I landed in the wrong place – the Soviet Union. Perhaps the place was right, but the time was definitely wrong. However, I studied at the Moscow Conservatoire under Emil Gilels who was one of the greatest pianists of our century. And there were so many wonderful artists around that even now, if asked where I wished to study, I would answer, 'At the Moscow Conservatoire' – in those days or in the Fifties, in the Forties. Or at Cambridge University, attending Wittgenstein's lectures. When I settled down in Western Europe, Beckett, Borges and Nabokov were still alive. So I didn't feel lonely, although I met none of these writers. Now I have no alternative but to rely on my library which is another version of the time machine – the wretched times we live in make us wholly dependent on H. G. Wells' novel.

I am aware that my novels have very little in common with the works that are published and admired nowadays. Nevertheless I'll never 'go towards the reader'. I'm prepared to go towards literary agents and publishers, but I'll offer them the purest expression of my thoughts, not a flattering reflection of the common reader's mind. Going towards the reader would be a betrayal, in my opinion—a betrayal of the reader, of myself and of literature. I don't think that Kafka, Joyce or Musil ever so much as cast a glance at their potential readers. Their works are the enigmas that nobody can understand completely. I only hope that my novels are enigmas – small enigmas in their own right.

I can't believe that nobody in England is fond of 'mavericks'. After all, there's no counterpart of this English word in the languages I know. At least some literary agents and publishers might be interested in novels of ideas. Or in novels of different ideas.

The result is always the same so I might stop sending anything to anyone – in the near future. There's no point in getting myself all upset over it and I'm not upset, even if I feel insulted by the critics who mock my books viciously, comparing them with bestsellers and prize-winning novels.

Once I sent my novel *The Last Days of Eternity* to a London-based agency, the aim of which was to find a *real* agency for the writers whose works deserved to be printed and sold in English bookshops. I paid 500 euros and got an answer that I don't remember because I'm not good at memorising nonsense with the exception of nonsense verses. My characters were dead but, according to my reader, they had to be introduced, described and so on and so forth; besides, they weren't supposed to appear out of thin air. And what air is there in the Hereafter, may I ask? 'Your characters remain only as devices, mouthpieces for particular points of view.' Do shadows have to be described? Isn't it enough to let them talk, especially if they're widely known and sometimes revered? Kant, Stalin, Thomas Moore.

I wrote a letter to thank my reader for this nonsense and ask her if she could recommend a publisher whose frame of mind was positive enough to accept my work. The director of the agency answered my letter, saying she could recommend two sophisticated publishers; but she added, 'Please, don't say to them we recommend you because we do not.' Well, they recommend a lot of books, judging from the number of covers I see on the shelves as I enter W. H. Smith.

When I began to write this book, I suddenly recalled these covers and the bestseller I touched upon earlier as I spoke about parallel worlds and how they conduct themselves. I stopped and bought a bottle of whisky; next day I bought another bottle of whisky and my life stopped altogether, in spite of my television set and its moral support. Why should I write what others regard as complete nonsense? 'Nothing but a waste of paper,' say numerous agents as they leaf through my chapters and short summaries. Am I a slave? Am I better dead than alive? I can't protect myself when I'm treated unjustly and abused, especially if this happens on the radio. Several years ago, a few French critics scoffed at one of my novels and I could do nothing about it; I just listened to their verbal abuse.

The novel in question is devoted to Louis II of Bavaria and the way he was treated by so-called normal people who usually give preference to economics and forget about the arts. It begins thus: 'The case history I am about to embark upon is neither more picturesque nor less uncanny than any other case history. Why do I write it? Perhaps my lifelong urge to come to grips with my inner chaos is at the root of my present work-in-progress. Perhaps I am merely preening myself in front of a mirror. I do not think so. Besides, what I call chaos might be regarded by others – if they had an opportunity to spy on my stream of consciousness – as a perfect imitation of a French garden, all geometry and neatness.'

The beginning of any novel or essay counts a lot and I often stop reading if the very first paragraph doesn't open up a perspective brimming with criss-cross patterns. Every sentence should be a parallel world – or a perpendicular world, as the case may be. But critics talk about suspense and neglect suspension to which many writers of old paid homage as they viewed the same state of affairs from different angles, over and over again – to the detriment of happy or unhappy endings, suspense, sales, economics, democracy and so on. Nabokov says you're supposed to *re-read* a book, meaning that every paragraph stands on its own and you suspend not only disbelief but also idle curiosity as you gradually turn it inside out.

The critics I mentioned earlier didn't take the trouble to study my lights and shades, my non-Euclidian geometry. They saw chaotic prose instead of an offshoot of the so-called grand French style associated with the

writers most of whom I've never been able to read – Julien Gracq, among other maestros. They're unable to explore my poetry, for they wish to travel from point A to point B with no stopovers, no black hotels; yet there are also points A1, A2, A3, A4, A5. And of course those critics are always on the lookout for a breathtaking story. Here is one of *my* stories:

Absolute Monarchy achieved its perfection in Russia and China. Louis II liked to be told the story of a Russian Emperor's journey from Moscow to Petersburg. The road ran between fields and hills covered with dazzling snow that made the Emperor's eyes smart. By raising his mitten-muffled hand, the Emperor brought his sleigh to a halt and presently the peasants of the neighbouring villages were summoned and ordered to lie down along the road, on both sides – to 'darken the landscape'. And as the journey continued other peasants would be assembled and lined up on the snow to protect the Emperor's sight.

Our new president, François Hollande, does not like the rich and the resorts frequented by the rich and famous. As everybody knows, there's one law for the rich and another for the poor. The rich have to pay, as the poor French citizens put it. So Hollande says to himself and others, 'Any amount over this figure will be taxed.' And the Russians speak about his project thus, 'If you earn four million euros every year, you must give three million to the state.' And the Russians laugh because four million euros is a small amount of money: their oligarchs earn two billion dollars every year. And of course they don't give anything to the state – just 100,000 roubles.

Hollande says that getting more than one's share is 'shameful' and 'unjust', and that doing what's unjust is trying to get more than one's share. And what about the authors they publish and sell everywhere, even in station kiosks? I wish to get a greater share than all of them because I think my books are superior to whatever is published nowadays in the domain of fiction. I may be wrong because every morning I get out of bed on the wrong side and so have no right to pass judgment on others. Is our culture inferior to that of our predecessors for whom composing a symphony or a novel was a matter of life and death?

Unfortunately nature does *not* reveal that it's a just thing for the better man to have a greater share than the worse man. In the animal kingdom our Mother Nature does favour the fittest so they survive and lord it over the weak. In *our* kingdom, however, money has turned everything upside down – at least in the domain of the arts.

And what about other domains and everyday life that enables the rich to buy villas and penthouses in the States and in Switzerland, in France and in England? I used to say to myself I was the happiest man in the world because I could write and play the piano, enjoying Dante and Beethoven from the inside. In St Petersburg I know a middle-aged woman to whom I often talk about music and musicians. Once we had a talk about Rostropovich and *his* happiness that didn't include the delights one may experience when reading Dante, Shakespeare and Leibniz in the original. This lady – she is a musician herself – decided to laugh in my face instead of discussing Rostropovich and his happy life. And then she said, 'Did you see his houses and furniture? Your furniture is ridiculous in comparison with his chests of drawers and armchairs. They partly come from the Hermitage and you bought your wing chairs in Versailles – not in the chateau, mind you. You know *where* you bought them. And Rostropovich was acquainted with kings and queens, with Picasso and Salvador Dali. Who are *you* acquainted with?'

'Writing poetry is the greatest pleasure one can experience. And I write poetry in three languages.'

‘No one understands your Russian poetry.’

‘I know at least four people who understand it,’ I said.

‘You’re a lucky man if you manage to derive great satisfaction from your provincial notoriety.’

With the exception of a happy few, Russian oligarchs neither write poetry nor read Dante in the original. Nor do they read commentaries on the *Commedia* about which I wrote a book that no one has read so far. They’re happy, nonetheless, and their swimming pools reflect their happiness and caress their bodies. So do numerous lakes and the Atlantic, the Pacific; every drop of rain reflects their happiness and strokes their skins. What does *my* water reflect and caress? My bath isn’t very large and I have no wish to look at the water as I lower myself into it, inhaling the air scented with eucalyptus.

7

‘Do you have any idea who’s talking to you?’ says one of my neighbours. ‘Is it your ego, your self, your super-ego or your ID? By the way, do you have any idea what *I* am talking about?’

‘You’re talking about Freud.’

‘That’s right. Is it your ID that talks to you?’

‘Let’s say it’s my ego – I’m no longer a child.’

‘All right. So you remember that the psyche of a newborn child is primarily ID. But contact with the external world modifies part of the ID. Do you remember that?’

‘Of course I do.’

‘I get the feeling that your ID hasn’t been modified – not even a part of it. You talk like a child who doesn’t know the external world. Autism is four times more common in boys than in girls. And you’re a boy, if I’m not mistaken.’

‘You are not.’

‘You’ve pitifully failed to develop social abilities, language and other communication skills to the usual level.’

‘I don’t need your usual level, your common denominator and your market.’

‘You repeat your own words and those of Socrates. Why don’t you write a story yourself? You don’t know how to spin a good yarn, do you?’

‘I do share with you the experiences of my soul, its adventures.’

‘And those of your mind, I suppose. And those of your ego. Actually I don’t think you’ve got any ego – you can neither adapt nor change. On the other hand, you *might* have one – I’m still talking about egos – because you’re an introvert. Your ego is turned internally and functions unconsciously. You repress the world and everyday reality – this is one of your ego’s defence functions. These functions are all unconscious.’

‘You live in Freud’s cave.’

‘And you live in Plato’s hollows, in one of them. Even when you take a plane, you stay in your hollow. You see only your bitterness, not the world. You can’t even climb a tree so you’re inferior to your cat. And I’m a mountaineer.’

‘Poetry is my alpenstock.’

‘Your poetry is as hollow as your dwelling place.’

Protagoras is mainly known for his measures.
 He upheld the principles of democracy:
 Each man's the measure of all things.
 There's no way of measuring the damage
 Done to the past. I measure it
 In my own way and get no result, for
 Destruction is often tantamount to resurrection.
 You don't know what you see – a shadow,
 Nothing but a shadow, or a real woman,
 A woman in the flesh, not Helen of Troy whom Faust
 Sought and lost. Mountains are hollows and
 Vice versa. There are only interchangeable parts,
 Nothing else. We go up and touch the stars or ashes.
 They all amount to the same thing
 And the thing doesn't amount to anything –
 No point in measuring it.

Socrates, for the most part, refutes his opponents who always look for a fatal flaw in his reasoning. Polus thinks that kings are usually happy even if they murder their uncles and commit other unspeakable crimes. Socrates says that all depends on how such and such a king stands in relation to education and justice. 'Is happiness determined entirely by that?' says Polus. 'And what about Russian oligarchs?' I say to Socrates. 'Many of them are just extraordinary thieves and so they resemble the well-known diamond thief who used to double-cross his partners, giving them only worthless fake jewels.' 'A man who acts unjustly,' answers Socrates, 'a man who is unjust, is thoroughly miserable the more so if he doesn't get his due punishment for the wrongdoing he commits, the less so if he pays and receives what is due at the hands of both gods and men.'

The most famous Russian prisoner, Mikhail Khodorkovsky, speaks of Russia's courts of injustice (*Time*, May 14, 2012). 'The main feature of the Putin regime is its deceitfulness – from the very top, all the way down. Corruption, stealing from the treasury, persecution of political opponents – all these are consequences of the deep immorality of this government, a government that is more comfortable with smears and evasions than with transparency.'

Many people take part in this Platonic dialogue. Some of them say, 'He's a thief. These oligarchs are criminals. They should be shot.'

'They shouldn't,' say others. 'They should be sent to a high-security prison. If you spend any time in prison, you're labelled as a criminal for the rest of your life.'

'But they should be given a *life* sentence.'

'Go easy on our oligarchs,' say others. 'They earn a lot of money, but 30% of their profits are covenanted to charity.'

'What are you talking about?' say others. 'They send their money to Switzerland and the United States. They rob our country of raw materials and precious stones.'

‘Khodorkovsky must be happy, according to Socrates,’ say others. ‘A man who is unjust, is thoroughly miserable the more so if he doesn’t get his due punishment for the wrongdoing he commits. So Khodorkovsky is happy – much more so than Putin. He should be freed from prison through the agency of his doctor.’

‘That would be too cruel, according to Socrates,’ say others. ‘Let him stay in prison till doomsday. Prison days are said to be the happiest days of your life.’

‘But he’s not guilty, is he?’

‘He was on trial for fraud and tax evasion.’

‘His society built many schools in our regions.’

‘And many concert halls.’

‘The fraud in question depended on hundreds of bank accounts being opened on behalf of straw men. And these straw men weren’t his cronies. They’re now awaiting trial for drug-smuggling.’

Two years ago, in Leipzig, I took part in a concert dedicated to Khodorkovsky or rather to his suffering. After the concert I talked to Arvo Pärt whose symphony was performed by a local orchestra. ‘Do you know why they sent him to prison?’ he asked me.

‘For tax evasion?’ I asked.

‘He said to Putin, “You’re a crook.”’

When I came back to Versailles, I talked to another friend of mine, Michael Rudi. ‘Why did you take part in this concert?’ he asked. ‘Khodorkovsky’s a crook,’ he added.

‘I know that I know nothing,’ I said.

Whenever I go to Russia, I notice that the political reforms have led to major structural changes in the economy, otherwise there would be nothing in the shops where one couldn’t find anything in the Eighties and even at the beginning of the Nineties. Now, most of them are open round the clock and I often go to some of them – at 2 a.m., for instance – to buy smoked fish and German beer, especially if I happen to meet a friend with whom I feel like talking till dawn, in accordance with the Soviet custom. But I don’t know whether Putin is a tyrant or not and I don’t really care because I’ve no intention of settling down in Russia where I was born and humiliated throughout my childhood and youth.

Plato says that if a tyrant ‘suspects some people of having thoughts of freedom and of not favouring his rule, can’t he find a pretext for putting them at the mercy of the enemy in order to destroy them? And for all these reasons, isn’t it necessary for a tyrant to be always stirring up war?’ What is very clear in this novel of mine is my passionate hatred of tyrants and Stalin in particular; yet I hate Hitler and Lenin even more because anyone who treats humanity like that must be sick and perverse. Stalin was a traditional tyrant – like Nero, to some extent; but he acted on a larger scale and had no qualms about killing millions of his subjects.

As everybody knows, Stalin trusted Hitler and thought the Soviet Union wouldn’t have to defend the result of socialist reforms in the west where only friends could be seen from the Kremlin and its windows. Plato’s suggestion turns this point of view upside down: Stalin knew about Hitler’s forthcoming aggression, but did nothing to stop it for the simple reason that the war offered him the easiest way of disposing of his enemies. Of course, generals are seldom killed during a war so they had to be disposed of through trials that were instrumental in bringing about the prison reform act: prisons were replaced by concentration camps and firing squads. And what about other Soviet citizens, other personal enemies to whom Stalin couldn’t say: ‘Go to the nearest wall and wait for the bullets to come’?

So he stirred up a war, or rather he did nothing to prevent it: the Nazi-Soviet pact carved up the Baltic states in 1939 and was regarded by Hitler as an invitation to Russia. Stalin put his enemies at the mercy of the German army to destroy them once and for all; even the prisoners of war were sent to the Gulag as if they could never get rid of their status. But when Stalin's anger was aroused, he took no prisoners. 'He must, therefore,' says Plato, 'keep a sharp lookout for anyone who is brave, large-minded, knowledgeable, or rich. And so happy is he that he must be the enemy of them all, whether he wants to be or not, and plot against them until he has purged them from the city.' From the city, from the country, from the Earth.

Plato also says that tyrants usually associate with the wise – with their cronies and poets who praise tyranny and write hymn books in which God is substituted for Stalin, Lenin or Hitler. Plato doesn't admit those poets into his city and so 'they go around to other cities, draw crowds, hire people with fine, big, persuasive voices, and lead their constitutions to tyranny and democracy'. Actually, for Plato tyranny was almost synonymous with democracy that he disparaged nonchalantly, taking no notice of *our* attitude towards this form of social life.

'Whatever happens in Russia, there's a tyrant somewhere,' think Westerners and Easterners, 'and so the Russians will always be slaves.' And poets make a major contribution to this bias directed against Russia, its inhabitants and their future. Even Milosz said that Russia would always be full of tsars, but he wrote no poems on the subject, probably because Russia didn't deserve the fruit of his poetical élan.

I don't know what Russia is or may be in the near future,
 In the distant future I cannot see from where I'm sitting now.
 Where am I? I'm not drunk and so this question
 Has no meaning. You can't always ask yourself where
 You are and where you come from and why you live instead of
 Lying in some grave or other. There are so many graves
 And one of them awaits you or says goodbye.
 Well, there'll be another grave in a minute or two:
 There's no shortage of graves. So you may choose one
 And lie there until somebody comes and wakes you.

Plato knows better what happened in Russia in the course of the 20th century. He speaks about Stalin the Father and says he was fathered by the Russians, by workers and peasants who believed in him, forgetting God and churches. Some believe in ghosts; others believe in saying what they think. But mostly people believe in God and tyrants; yet tyrants and God aren't interchangeable, whatever some theologians say when looking into Yahweh's conduct.

Plato couldn't have foreseen what took place in my motherland where suffering knew no limits. The sky was the limit to what the Soviet people had to endure for decades – as long as Stalin and his cronies lived and ruled the country. To some extent our workers and peasants were 'free from the rich and the so-called fine and good people'. But they weren't free from the *new* rich – from ex-workers and ex-peasants who had turned nasty and presumptuous. At least everyone was free from the so-called fine and good people. There were exceptions to this rule, but there were just exceptions, nothing else.

Our people couldn't even get angry and if they did, letting themselves go, they had to hide their anger behind closed doors. Every day they had to play games of cops and robbers and hide-and-seek. They had to rob their country, otherwise they wouldn't have survived within its borders, but they kept our cops at bay so as not to perish in the Gulag. And they would hide their sentiments and moods, being aware that government officials were seeking to unearth some fresh evidence of their disloyalty. So they ordered neither Stalin nor Brezhnev to leave the country and disappear from their lives and also from their suffering. (I shouldn't resort to tautologies, should I?) A father *might* drive a son and his troublesome fellow revellers from his house, but no Soviet citizen was Stalin's father; yet our workers and peasants did father him, in a manner of speaking. But all our fathers, with the exception of Gorbachev, *could* drive our dissidents from our motherland; and they did it, in spite of the fact that they always preferred sending them to concentration camps and lunatic asylums.

For many centuries Russia was ruled by aristocrats and Plato voiced no objection to what he called either timocracy or timarchy led by a Tsar, as far as Russia was concerned. Then there comes a change and Plato explains that 'the cause of change in any constitution is civil war breaking out within the ruling group itself'. That's exactly what happened in Russia in 1917 when the Tsar abdicated, allowing the Provisional Government to replace him at the head of the state. He was forced to abdicate by other aristocrats who didn't know how to master their fears and pacify the angry crowd. They knew that any crowd was like a child and you can pacify your crying child with a bottle. So they showed a bottle to the crowd and obediently the workers hit the bottle. Actually they'd hit the bottle long before the aristocrats showed them anything, but this time they hit a lot of bottles, as it were, and soon they covered the streets with their sleeping and snoring bodies. But as soon as they woke they began to cry again and the aristocrats had no alternative but to ask the Tsar to abdicate so that they could take up the reins of government immediately after his disappearance. Shortly afterwards they disappeared in their turn and the Bolsheviks took up the reins of government. And the Russians learnt that the flesh on a dead body decays very rapidly. Floating in dirty rivers were corpses, already starting to decay. Burial grounds were far and few between. The Russians would fish the corpses out of the rivers and burn them, scattering the ashes at sea.

The so-called Russian Revolution was just a coup d'état carried out by the Bolsheviks whose thirst for adventure and power couldn't be quenched either by the Tsar's abdication or by the civil war that broke out after their coup. What took place in the early Nineties was neither a military coup nor a revolution – not even a palace revolution; yet Gorbachev did abandon the nest, leaving the chicks to die, as he thought. He wasn't a tyrant but a bird that took care of its chicks, guarding against the accidents due to their fondness for vodka and port. 'The commonest cause of cirrhosis is alcohol consumption,' he used to tell his cronies who never failed to use this sentence in their speeches. So the Soviet citizens started to turn their attention to new sources of energy – to moonshine and eau de cologne.

Suppose you make a speech in which there's a sentence you mustn't utter because someone will be murdered if you utter it. You make your speech, disregarding the danger to which you expose a man or a woman you've never come across in your life. You may likewise *know* this person who is probably one of your friends that you used to embrace and kiss in your palace or even in the streets, in public. You utter the sentence and this person disappears from the face of the Earth: you're talkative and never stop talking, once you succeed in gathering momentum for your report. 'Once you push him, he keeps going under his own momentum,' say your colleagues and cronies. And then you make another speech and some of your colleagues and cronies disappear in

their turn. And the number of death sentences grows as you continue to read what's written on the sheets of paper lying in front of you. Now there are several death sentences in every speech you make and you make three or four speeches every day, every night.

Lenin spoke and wrote about the redistribution of land, but Stalin redistributed the same land, turning it into a number of collective farms. Both were killed by their cronies or enemies, apparently; at least Lenin was wounded during one of the speeches he made at a factory where workers listened to him as if he had been able to give them bread and butter. He gave them nothing; he just talked and talked and people kept disappearing from the face of the Earth and from their own rooms. Or they were sent to another face – to the dark side of the Earth where they burnt the candle at both ends and suffered from hunger pangs until death would finally release them from years of pain.

In his youth Stalin robbed banks and broke safes because he and his party needed money without which neither the Russian Revolution – or rather the Bolshevik coup – nor his own survival could be regarded as facts. The films they showed in the Soviet Union made no attempt to be historically accurate, turning Stalin into a brilliant student who studied philosophy, mathematics and music and never disregarded physical exercise. In his quest for physical perfection, he would spend hours in the gym, flexing his muscles and rippling them. He learnt to read at the early age of three and, as soon as he finished Tolstoy's *War and Peace*, he said: 'I wish the majority well.' In other films he said: 'I'm the only friend of the people.' And the people called him 'our friend' and 'our father'.

He used to attend performances at the Bolshoi Theatre: operas, ballets and the concerts held in his honour. Once he saw and heard Mussorgsky's *Boris Godunov*. Act IV, Scene 1. The square before the Cathedral of Basil the Blessed in Moscow. A crowd wanders aimlessly about the square. A police officer nips about among the crowd. Preceded by a procession, the Tsar now leaves the Cathedral. The Boyars distribute alms. Boris comes into view, accompanied by Shuisky and other Boyars. The people fall to their knees and sing:

Our father, give us bread!
Bread! Bread! Bread for the hungry!
Bread, bread, give us bread,
Father, for our Lord's sake.

Stalin turned to Molotov and said, 'Why do they sing about bread? Didn't I give them bread last year?'
'Of course you did,' said Molotov. 'And you gave them bread the year before and three years ago.'
'And I'll give them bread this year,' said Stalin. 'And I'll give them butter as well. I'll say to them, "Have some bread and butter."'

'When I was in England,' said Molotov, 'I was served scones with butter and jam.'
'All right, I'll give them jam. But I won't give them scones – our bread is better.'
'Of course it is,' said Molotov.
'And I'll say to them, "Mash the potatoes and then mix in the butter and herbs."
'Our potatoes are better than theirs,' said Molotov.
'These people never go to the cinema,' said Stalin. 'So they don't know anything about our harvests.'
'Our kolkhozes are reporting a bumper harvest this year,' says Molotov.

‘Have you forgotten last year’s? The harvest, I mean?’

‘Of course not. How could one forget a bumper harvest?’

‘The long hot summer has led to a record harvest this year,’ said Stalin.

‘And last year,’ said Molotov.

‘Didn’t it rain all the time?’ said Stalin.

‘It did, but our heroic peasants – ’

‘Of course,’ said Stalin. ‘Did he really kill the child?’

‘Boris Godunov? Mussorgsky thought so,’ said Molotov.

‘I hold children in my arms,’ said Stalin. ‘I lift their bodies and show them to the crowd. How could I ever kill a child?’

‘You can’t imagine what it would be like to have your child die – it’s quite unthinkable,’ said Molotov.

‘You’re right – they *are* my children, all of them. Their parents too are my children, by the way.’

‘You’re their father,’ said Molotov.

‘Why is this hammer knocking in my ears? Why did he compose such an opera?’

‘He was duty-bound to stigmatise Tsarist Russia,’ said Molotov.

‘Of course,’ says Stalin. ‘But hammers have nothing to do with music unless one writes an opera about blacksmiths.’

‘You’re right as usual,’ said Molotov.

‘I saw nothing in that corner,’ said Stalin.

‘You mean you didn’t see the child?’

‘I didn’t see him. Did you?’

‘Boris had a high temperature and was delirious,’ said Molotov.

‘Yes, he saw it sway and grow. It drew near, trembled and groaned. Or should I say “*he* grew and groaned”?’

‘Who?’ said Molotov.

‘The child.’

‘It’s just “it” – nothing to worry about,’ said Molotov.

Lenin and Stalin thought they were surrounded by ‘its’ that could be disposed of light-heartedly as if they were mere pawns on the chessboard of the world. You remove a pawn and put it on the table where your chessboard obeys your orders and even fawns on you, gratifying your wishes whenever you touch it. Then you throw the pawn in your wastepaper basket as you say to yourself, ‘I don’t need this pawn any longer.’ Your wastepaper basket is full of pawns and gradually you realise there are only pawns on your chessboard: even kings and queens turn into pawns as soon as you touch them. And then you remove them from the board and they end up in your wastepaper basket that is huge enough to accommodate all the inhabitants of your country and even some foreign nationals.

‘How can you treat them like that?’ says an angel. ‘They’re human beings after all.’

‘Much of this meat will end up as dog food,’ you say throwing a great many pawns on the floor. And your dogs eat them.

‘The ducks started quacking loudly when I threw them some bread,’ said Stalin.

‘What kind of bread was it?’ said Molotov.

‘You’re not acquainted with Christian rites, are you?’ said Stalin.

‘I’m not. I’m an atheist to my fingertips.’

‘And I studied at the Tiflis Theological Seminary,’ says Stalin.

I thought I had to buy a book on Stalin, which might have enabled me to draw a longer parallel between his doings and Plato’s writings. But I couldn’t bring myself to enrich my library in such a manner so that I had no alternative but to fall back on the Encyclopaedia Britannica where I lighted upon the following description: ‘(Stalin) was more ruffianly than clerical in appearance and outlook. He was short, stocky, black haired, fierce eyed, with one arm longer than the other, his swarthy face being scarred by smallpox contracted in infancy.’

A member of the London agency to which I sent my novel *The Last Days of Eternity* wrote that my characters remained only as ‘devices, mouthpieces for particular points of view’. I’m supposed to describe the physic of a character who killed a woman and got away with it. All right, here it is: ‘Thomas had a very powerful, muscular physique.’ Is that enough? Do I have to describe his face as well? Well, here is a description of his face: ‘His face was scarred by smallpox contracted in infancy. As a matter of fact, he looked like Stalin and so was more Stalinist than clerical – in appearance and outlook. Physically strong and endowed with prodigious willpower, he learnt early on to disguise his true feelings and to bide his time. And then he strangled this woman.’ Is that all right?

8

I sit idle whenever I happen to be robbed and humiliated, and raindrops do all they can to refresh my clothes and body. But when snowflakes replace raindrops in the course of this eternal struggle for life, I seek shelter, for I know they opened a shelter to provide temporary housing for the city’s homeless. Who are *they*? I don’t know, but I do know there’s such a thing as a shelter where one can sit down for a much-needed rest, and this hope puts my mind at rest. If I find nothing of the sort – no shelter to speak of – I head for the nearest beach, for any upturned boat can provide shelter, putting one’s mind and body at rest.

PART TWO

1

Rich businessmen talk about their villas, swimming pools and jewels. And critics talk about great writers who live in our midst and shower us with their presents. Thanks to them, we come to know the world we live in and the cosmos where there are so many stars, suns, moons and comets. And critics speak of stardust whenever they discuss the work of a great contemporary writer they single out for their praise. All of them are only the shadows on Plato's wall I'm looking at, but I don't have to look at it for the rest of the day, for the rest of eternity. I can fly off like a bird, even though I have no wings and no nest awaiting me somewhere – beyond the sea or in the nearest woods. All I have to do is buy a ticket and go to Cambodia to visit Angkor about which some of my friends – and some of these friends are oligarchs – talk to me whenever they deign to ring me up.

I don't know if Stalin read Heraclitus and Parmenides, but his policy did justice to Heraclitus' river and Parmenides' motionless sphere. 'War is father of all and king of all,' says Heraclitus, 'and some he reveals as gods, others as men, some he makes slaves, others free.' The war on which Stalin put such an emphasis set him on the throne where only the gods are allowed to sit; on the other hand, the same war made a lot of slaves whose very lives depended on the god – or on God – sitting on the throne and giving orders to the power *before* the throne. (There was no power *behind* the throne.) But even Stalin wasn't entirely free on account of his persecution mania that lorded it over him as long as he lived and talked from the throne he would have abandoned, had Hitler's army invaded Moscow and the rest of the Soviet Union. This victory remained in a parallel world and Stalin realised that his reign was akin to Parmenides' sphere or substance apart from which nothing can exist in the universe: there's no room for anything else. The One will never be divided into two separate substances. The One is the One – end of story.

'But Heraclitus is always threatening to take over if civil unrest continues,' writes a famous biographer of Stalin (I can't remember his name). And what he calls civil unrest did go on, if we take into consideration the so-called Doctor's Plot directed mainly against the Jews among whom there were doctors, scientists, poets and other artists. A famous Soviet dissident, Vladimir Bukovsky, remembers that one Jewish boy in his class at school was beaten up every day at break. The teachers didn't intervene, but simply told the boy afterwards to go and clean off the blood and dirt.

Everything is in a state of becoming and flux and nothing is stable; but there's one substance that persists. Out of this substance all things evolve by natural transformations and Stalin knew he was this substance giving birth to all things with the exception of capitalists and the Germans. All Soviet citizens – those born before the Russian Revolution included – had evolved out of his body and mind, but they were in a state of flux and so he had to keep an eye on them. And he did keep an eye on them: in January 1953 it was announced that the Jews were planning 'to wipe out the leading cadres of the USSR by medical means'. And then Stalin died and was put in the Mausoleum where he resumed his Parmenidian stance, for there were no rivers inside the Mausoleum and even outside it, on Red Square.

I'm fed up with this nightmare and I'll wake up, notwithstanding the pressure I am under: the dead never fall asleep. And the world I live in follows in Parmenides' footsteps as if it was lying in the Mausoleum, dead but not buried.

I go to my agency and speak to my agent about my plan of which he approves as he opens a brochure and starts looking for a cheap package tour to Cambodia, Phnom Penh and Saigon: there's no direct flight to Phnom Penh from Paris. He issues a ticket; I pay and go out, thinking about the forthcoming trip to the other side of the Earth, to the great Beyond I think about day in day out. Why read newspapers and magazines? They talk nonsense and nonsense rejoices when someone buys a newspaper and starts reading it. Instead of nonsense I had a brochure on Angkor in my hands, but I decided not to read it because I never prepare the ground for the pleasures lying in wait for me, especially if these pleasures are related to sightseeing. My uncle used to say: 'Close your eyes – I've got a surprise for you.' My uncle is no longer by my side, but I follow his advice and close my eyes before landing in front of a monument I've yearned to see for many years. Then I open my eyes and realise the monument is staring at me; and I return its stare.

In my youth I saw *Le monde du silence* (*The World of Silence*) – a French film focused upon the world one can see and hear under the surface of the water. What can one hear in this world? The bells of the *Cathédrale engloutie*? Recently I played this Debussy prelude near Munich – at the end of the first part of my recital. What did I play and hear? The world of silence, the world of the Russian churches destroyed after the Revolution? The temples I saw in Angkor?

There were lots of people at the airport and I joined the crowd that had gathered near the gate indicated on my boarding pass. Then someone split the crowd into two groups and I didn't know which group to join: no one spoke about Cambodia – at least the voices I heard as I walked around spoke neither of Phnom Penh nor of Angkor. And I thought one couldn't help speaking of Angkor at the gate from which a plane was to fly in the direction of the faces I had seen many time on TV and in books. Besides, I have a Khmer statuette at home: a friend of mine – a woman who owns a collection of such statuettes – gave it to me 30 years ago. So I've lived with this statuette for many years without feeling any particular bond between its face and mine. But I felt it was beautiful and this feeling counted much more than any analysis or study.

Then I heard a man saying, 'This journey is pointless. You have to spend more than a week at Angkor. I wouldn't mind living there. What are five days in comparison with my whole life?' I thought I wouldn't bear the very thought of spending my whole life far away from Europe where I've got my museums and monuments without which I can't feel at home anywhere. And I was surprised to learn that many French citizens ran restaurants in the town whose name I cannot memorise; it is situated near the temples of Angkor. Every night we had dinner in one of these restaurants and the heat we suffered from the whole day would finally give way to darkness and relative coolness.

On the plane I recalled how Alice used to travel in the kingdom of the looking glass. I didn't have the book in my pocket so I had no alternative but to rely on my memory that spoke to me about the trains jumping from one space to another at short notice. Well, our plane didn't jump from Paris to Saigon and I felt cooped up inside it as I thought about the superman who was able to leave any plane or helicopter and fly through the air on his own.

At the outset of our flight – the plane was still on the ground – I asked a stewardess, 'Why did the pilot say Saigon? Aren't we going to Ho Shi Min?'

'The Air France employees never say Ho Shi Minh,' she said.

'And what about Hanoi?'

'We never fly to Hanoi,' she said.

‘Did you say Leningrad 30 years ago?’

‘I wasn’t born yet,’ she said.

‘I was born in the Soviet Union, you know.’

‘Were you? How exotic!’

‘Do you find empty shops exotic?’

‘Not exactly.’

We had to interrupt our conversation when we saw a queue waiting for us to finish it: we were standing in one of the aisles. It is difficult to court stewardesses who always fiddle with trays and bottles. They usually have no time for love unless a handsome young passenger cannot sleep and feels like talking until breakfast. But I did fall asleep and so I never saw this stewardess again: another stewardess brought me dinner, breakfast and a glass of water I had asked for. Was my stewardess – the one I saw on the ground – a superwoman endowed with a pair of wings she cunningly hid inside her uniform? How many superwomen are there in our midst? And what about supermen?

You ask yourself a series of idle questions as you fly from Paris to a distant city about which you know nothing or next to nothing. The only thing I did know about Ho Shi Min was its name that I couldn’t spell correctly, but I didn’t realise it at the time. I just said ‘Ho Shi Min’; I didn’t have to write it down. But I did have to write down Phnom Penh as I filled in a form a stewardess gave me after dinner. I just wrote ‘Pnom Pen’ and fell asleep, unconscious of my mistake because I knew it was better to be more or less unconscious before falling asleep – otherwise you’re sure to spend a sleepless night.

During the flight – even in my sleep – I wondered why so many people were flying to Vietnam where communism might put spokes in their wheels. When I spoke about it to my Parisian friends, they said in unison: ‘But Vietnam is like China nowadays. The Vietnamese are caught between two opposing ideologies.’ So some French citizens go to Vietnam in the hope of making a fortune there; and others are plagued by nostalgia.

I mean to say the aircraft was packed with nostalgia-stricken and money-minded people, and even now I think about my last mistress – she isn’t yet my *late* mistress – who suffers from claustrophobia and has a sort of epileptic fit when she finds herself in identical circumstances. And if she doesn’t get her own way she has temper tantrums. Luckily for me, I don’t see her any more and I take no notice of the messages she leaves on my answerphone.

After breakfast I switched on the television and began to watch the film I had heard about from my Parisian friends. I had also read about it in newspapers, for Oscars are invariably discussed in the media, even if they’re awarded to ghastly films and mediocre actors and actresses. This French film got many Oscars and I was watching it out of curiosity: I thought it couldn’t live up to my expectations. So I had no expectations of any kind; I just watched this Oscar-overloaded film in order to kill time and space.

I was surprised; and I realised that even in this day and age there were artists attuned to beauty, elegance and even greatness. It’s not for nothing that the film in question bears the promising title – *The Artist*. The film’s plot hinges on the destiny of an actor whose fame was linked to the silence of the movies made at the beginning of the 20th century – up to 1929, if I remember rightly. This actor must have spoken in everyday life, otherwise he wouldn’t have been able to do a lot of networking. And he must have done a lot of networking: he was famous in the world where sponsors and agents count more than talent and art.

Be that as it may, the actor didn't survive the advent of talkies. He didn't survive it as an actor and also as a man; at least he was twice on the point of committing suicide. But his dog put her paw down and he was saved in the nick of time. I think the dog received an Oscar too and I daresay she fully deserved it. So did the actor who had been virtually unknown before the honours bestowed on the film. In short, I greatly enjoyed it and both time and space were lying at my feet, dead and almost buried.

At Charles de Gaulle airport I purchased a bottle of whisky I hoped to drink in Cambodia so as not to spend seven nights fully conscious, tossing and turning in the beds provided by my tourist company. But in Saigon – I do know how to spell this name – I had to disembark with my luggage so that there was some liquid in my suitcase and I couldn't hide this liquid anywhere. Anyway even my pockets were searched at every airport I set my foot in; I didn't even try to put the bottle in any of them. I suppose it would have stuck out even if I had succeeded in doing something of the kind.

A man asked me to open my suitcase and said, after turning its contents upside down, 'You can't take this bottle with you.'

'So I'll remain at your airport as long as necessary.'

'How do you mean?'

'I mean I want to drink this bottle and I don't know how long it'll take me to empty it.'

'Have you never drunk a bottle of whisky before?'

'Of course I have, but I'm not in the habit of drinking a bottle of whisky in one gulp. Dolokhov does it in *War and Peace*. Have you read *War and Peace*?'

'You mean the war we fought against the United States?'

'Not quite.'

'What are you talking about?' he said.

'I'm talking about a bottle of whisky.'

'Which bottle?'

'Any bottle.'

'We should talk about *this* bottle,' he said touching my bottle with his left hand. Was he left-handed? I often ask myself superfluous questions. I tried to damp down speculation about the officer's hands and I succeeded this time.

'Let's talk about this bottle,' I said. 'What can you say about it?'

'I've already said what I have to say. You can't take it with you.'

'Do you like whisky?' I asked.

'I do.'

'Anyway you won't be allowed to drink this bottle on your own.'

'I won't drink it,' he said.

'Neither will your buddies, I suppose. This bottle will land up in your Politburo.'

'What are you talking about?' he said.

'Let's not talk about this bottle any more,' I said. 'I'll just check it in.'

I followed the customs officer – I don't really know who this man was – and found myself in front of a woman I had seen upon my arrival at the terminal. I said 'hello' to her once again and she refused to check my suitcase in. I said, 'Never mind'. Why did I say that? I was afraid my bottle might get broken in the process: it

had to travel all the way to Phnom Penh, ill-treated by baggage handlers and the aircraft itself. I began to open the bottle, but the woman didn't allow me to go on with the rite which every self-respecting drunkard enacts several times a day. She put her hand on the cork and called in another officer who took the bottle and examined it carefully. I held out the receipt from Charles de Gaulle airport and he took it. I still wonder why I didn't throw it away.

'What is it?' he asked.

'Can't you see? Here's the amount of money I paid for the whisky. Do you need the date and the hour? Here they are. I couldn't have bought the bottle outside the duty free shop.'

'Why? Do you buy whisky only at duty free shops?'

'Of course not. But I had no time.'

'You had no time to buy a bottle of whisky?'

'I know,' I said. 'A bottle of whisky is more important than Angkor. I should have bought and drunk a bottle of whisky in Versailles. Of course, I would have missed my flight.'

'What are you talking about?' he said.

'I'm talking about whisky and the way to drink it. You miss a lot if you drink whisky instead of going to airports. Aircrafts can't wait for you eternally.'

'You won't miss your flight this time if you hurry up.'

'I won't leave without this bottle.'

'You have to leave because you don't have a visa.'

'Can't you grant me an entry visa? Actually I've no intention of going out.'

'Don't you want to visit our city?'

'I do, but I've got no visa.'

'Our city's very beautiful.'

'I know, I know.'

'Do you prefer this bottle to our city, to our country?'

'Of course not. But I'll drink this bottle at your airport if you don't let me take it to Cambodia.'

'Do you think they don't have whisky in Cambodia? We've got a lot of whisky in Vietnam.'

'No doubt,' I said.

'So you'll buy a bottle of whisky in Cambodia.'

'I won't because I want this bottle.'

'You can't have it.'

'Show it to your superiors!'

'I have no superiors. I'm superior myself.'

'I'm sure you are.'

'And I say you can't take this bottle with you.'

At this point, another officer interrupted our conversation as he wrenched the bottle out of my interlocutor's grasp and began to examine it so thoroughly I thought he would drink it then and there in one gulp, imitating Dolokhov's feat. Actually, Dolokhov drank a bottle of rum, if I'm not mistaken. 'Is this your bottle?' he asked, glancing at me.

‘It is,’ I said. What else could I have said? This bottle didn’t belong to the officer I had spoken to before, did it? ‘Not yet,’ I said to myself.

‘Wait for me at the gate – I’ll bring it to you.’

This officer, who must have been the chief of the police, kept his promise and I drank the bottle near Angkor, in a town whose name I can’t remember. But before going to Angkor, we went on a sightseeing tour of Phnom Penh where the Royal Palace displays a charming mixture of European and Asian architecture: Napoleon III kept giving presents to his Cambodian counterpart. I don’t remember what he actually gave to the king of Cambodia, but there was a horse in the midst of the presents, and that horse looked like a monument, not like a living horse. But in Cambodia – I’m speaking about Angkor – everything seems to stay in between life and death: the faces you see are both alive and ghostlike. I saw no faces in Phnom Penh – no *stone* faces, I mean. Even if a woman has a look of utter devastation on her face, she doesn’t look like a bas-relief.

Next morning we boarded a minibus and set out on the first stage of our domestic journey. I wasn’t taken aback by the narrow bumpy roads we had to cope with, jumping in our seats and trying to adjust our bodies to what is traditionally called ‘local colour’. There were many local colours around us, but for a while I paid attention only to the one situated under my seat or rather under the minibus where I felt cooped up. And yet I don’t suffer from claustrophobia.

Beautiful women were conspicuous by their absence and I realised I wouldn’t find a companion in misfortune, even if I made some concessions and lowered my aesthetic standards. There was a woman I came across at the airport – at the last airport, I mean – but she seemed to be growing fatter and fatter the more I looked at her. I said to myself: ‘It’s not a good idea to try and give her a seductive look.’ Actually I’m not sure I’m capable of seducing anybody with my eyes, let alone with my physique. Of course I can always write a poem and recite it in the presence of the object of my desire, but at the airport I was in no mood for writing poems and I dropped everything – for the time being, as events turned out.

On the way to Angkor we saw a few ruins that didn’t really impress me because we were *on the way* to Angkor and what we saw had little in common with the temples I was yearning to visit and explore. And when we did reach Angkor and I cast a glance at the first temple while our guide was drawing something on the sand, I was disappointed because I had expected a more majestic site. The temple was somewhat akin to chamber music – to a quartet written not by Haydn or Mozart but by one of their pupils who was unable to harmonise the sounds he had within his reach. And I got the feeling that too many sounds *out* of his reach and they had no opportunity to come closer to him because he was too immature to handle them. In other words, they were afraid of him.

Our guide, whom I hated at first – his explanations were too abstruse, too long – gave us a sheet of paper thanks to which the temples we were to visit in the course of our tour could be found and memorised. I mean their names could be memorised and used at dinner or after our return to France where many friends were likely to ask me what temples deserved *their* attention: many of my friends were eager to visit Angkor and enjoy its legendary past. As I look at this piece of paper now I realise some names have disappeared, having been erased by heat and friction: there are many pieces of paper in my pockets and they don’t always hit it off, destroying each other as I walk up and down the streets or visit museums and temples.

Luckily for me, I bought a book on Angkor. I bought it in the open air, for I didn’t go to bookshops in Cambodia where there must have been some bookshops, given the number of tourists whose eagerness to deepen their understanding of the Khmer culture knew no bounds. A young man said to me: ‘Can you see how

much this book costs?’ The back cover of the book was level with my eyes; I looked at it: \$27.95. ‘And I’ll sell it to you for 20 dollars,’ he said.

‘No,’ I said.

‘You don’t want to buy my book?’

‘No.’

‘You don’t want to know more about Angkor?’

‘No.’

‘You don’t want to know *anything* about Angkor?’

‘No.’

‘Do you think it’s enough to look at our temples?’

‘Yes.’

‘You’re wrong.’

‘Perhaps.’

‘If you buy my book, you’ll know everything.’

‘Ten dollars,’ I said.

‘Fifteen dollars,’ he said.

‘Ten dollars,’ I said and he agreed with me, having come round to my point of view.

I open the book and look for the temple, the outlines of which are floating through my mind or my soul or my body: I often confuse these attributes of my being. Roluos: Preah Kô, Bakong, Lolei. I recognise the temple I’m about to enlarge upon.

‘Although hard to imagine as such nowadays, Lolei was an island temple, in the middle of the Indrataka *baray*, some 15 km SE of Angkor and nearby Bakong and Preah Kô.’ Lolei *might* have been an island temple, but now it is just a temple I failed to appreciate when I saw it for the first time on my first visit to Angkor. Our guide was drawing something on the sand – three structures, three epochs – but I was itching to get closer to the temple and study it inch by inch. Finally I abandoned our group and took a few faltering steps towards the temple; the heat wasn’t yet too high, but my body felt it and I listened to my body.

‘The artificial island on which the temple was built is today a large terrace 90m x 80m. This originally supported an enclosing brick wall with four *gopuras*, but all of these have disappeared.’ I often speak of disappearances, of the dead, but today I don’t feel like taking a walk in the void where ghosts tease you mercilessly about your failures and even about your triumphs. Why read this book? I look at the photographs and recognise the temple I visited on the first day of my stay in Angkor. Isn’t that enough? You recognise someone or something and you say nothing to yourself: any recognition speaks for itself.

On my way to the temple I said to the fat young woman who was listening to the guide: ‘I’m fed up with his diagrams. You can find them in any book available in France, at the Louvre library.’ I look at the photographs printed in the book I bought for 10 dollars and I remember Angkor and even the woman to whom I said something on my way to Lolei – the first temple I saw in Angkor. Why did I speak to her? At that point I thought I could try and seduce her in spite of her weight and vulgarity, in spite of the heat and my determination to see every detail of the temples we were about to visit and memorise for the sake of our future and posterity.

When I saw the second temple, Preah Kô, I reconciled myself to the fact I had spent 12 hours on the plane where there had been too many money-minded people. ‘This elegant small brick temple, with six towers and

some fine lime mortar decoration, was the first temple built by Indravarman I in the capital city of Hariharalaya. Its surrounding moat is large in proportion to the temple buildings, and should have included the Royal Palace, of which no trace has so far been found.' I liked the temple I'm talking about. What am I talking about? The temple, the Royal Palace, a royal family, my life, the times I've crossed? 'Every time is just a street,' as some philosopher put it. 'You may go along it; you may cross it as well.'

When I saw the third temple I began to cry. Bakong. For several days I tried to locate this temple on the map that our guide had given me, but I failed as usual: I'm helpless in these matters. I have a lousy sense of direction and all my girlfriends are aware of that. I say to them I've never lost myself *completely*, which means I can find my way even if I'm lost and there's no one to say where I have to go.

I climbed all the stairs I could spot in the area related to the temple under discussion and I saw whatever there was to be seen – at least I thought there was nothing else on the site where the members of our group used their cameras to memorise their visit to Angkor. In this way they assisted their memory that was too lazy to take in and store the towers and bas-reliefs in the midst of which the other tourists walked and talked.

During my walk amidst these ruins I encountered a few French tourists guided by a man who said at one point: 'This is a remarkable bas-relief because it's not completely destroyed.' And everybody looked at the bas-relief; so did I. Later on I said to three members of our group: 'Do you want me to show you a bas-relief?'

'There are many bas-reliefs here and we've seen all of them,' said someone.

'Have you seen *this* bas-relief,' I said pointing to the bas-relief singled out by the guide I had followed.

'Yes,' said someone.

'No,' said other people. And I said to myself, 'From now on, I won't show anything to anyone.'

I realised the Khmer culture was a mixture of majesty and elegance and I didn't contradict myself as I went to other temples and sites where trees and other offspring of nature often intruded upon the ideas and labours of master builders, as Ibsen would have put it.

A master builder is downstairs. What he looks at
 Soars into the sky like a firework, like the soul.
 Where's my soul? Amidst these stairs I climb to see
 The heavens or stones. I see some stones
 And I cry. I pick up a pebble and look at it.
 I neither cry nor think about my former lives. Yet
 They're within this pebble and on its surface;
 They're everywhere. I am not.

2

The members of our group talked a lot about the swimming pool situated in the courtyard of our four-star hotel. Actually I still don't know whether it was a four-star or a three-star hotel: the guides we consulted in our leisure hours disagreed on this point. But that didn't really matter, given the other tourists' propensity to look for swimming pools wherever they go – even within the most inadequate areas where only deserts and sand feel at home. And they find swimming pool or puddles where they swim and play with each other, sending a great

many drops of chlorinated water into the air. Sometimes I happen to be in the way of those drops and so I also take part in the delights related to water, if only modestly: after all, I am shy and unassuming.

Before my departure from Paris, I had no idea we were to stay in a hotel that would have been wiped off the face of the earth, had it not boasted a large swimming pool where both children and grown-ups can disport themselves. They do, if my memory serves me right; and if it does not, I may call on my reason that knows exactly what happens when tourists see a swimming pool on a sunny day. Even if they have no bathing suits in their bags, suitcases and trunks, they plunge into the water and stay in it as long as the sun doesn't oppose their plans. Of course, it may hide behind some clouds, but tourists remain in the swimming pool they've set their hearts upon because raindrops don't really jar with the water they enjoy as they swim to and fro, shouting and laughing. It is true that raindrops are not chlorinated, but they don't mind their insipidity and go on thrashing around the pool that puts up with their whims and moods.

I had no bathing suit in the suitcase I brought to Cambodia and I discussed this problem with a man on whom I could rely because he was no longer young and therefore had no wish to laugh at an old man whose body was no longer used to swimming pools and their delights. He said I could wear my briefs and I took his advice, turning a deaf ear to my inner voice that always warns me about my neighbours' cruelty and sarcastic dispositions.

The woman whose body I singled out at the airport finally made her appearance in the area where only swimmers showed their muscles and demonstrated their skills and styles: the butterfly stroke, for instance. She jumped into the water and I suddenly felt her presence; and yet she didn't touch my body whose clumsiness was as obvious as her agility. She asked me where I had come from and I said I was of Russian origin because I'm still not ashamed of being born in Moscow, even if some people don't like Putin and criticise him whenever they think about Russia.

'So you're Russian,' she said.

'I am.'

'What about your profession?' she asked.

'I'm a concert pianist.'

'Do you play with orchestras?'

'Sometimes I do. But I mostly play alone.'

'Do you like living alone?'

'I didn't say I was living alone, did I?'

'You didn't.'

'As a matter of fact, I do live alone.'

'So do I. Do you like being alone in the house?'

'I don't know.'

'Neither do I.'

'We're not alone in this water,' I said.

'We are not.'

'Do you live in France?' I asked.

'Of course I do. I was born in France.'

'I was born in Russia and I left her.'

‘I’ll stay in France till doomsday,’ she said.

Next morning we left the hotel at 7 a.m. and the sun didn’t yet show open hostility towards our architectural, aesthetic and metaphysical longings. On the day before I had gone beyond the physics of the outside world and I knew I wouldn’t be disappointed by the temples we were about to visit: they belonged to the same state of mind and culture. I wasn’t paying much attention to nature which didn’t seem as luxurious as might have been presumed and that reminded me of Egypt where temples and pyramids coped with space on their own, unassisted by trees and leaves.

The temple we saw at the outset of our morning tour had been left in its ‘natural state’, as my book put it, so that we were given an opportunity to witness a marriage of stones and roots: the trees literally embraced the ruins as if to demonstrate their love and fraternal feelings. But, as all guides point out, the trees we touch and photograph are agents of destruction; nature and human creations are bound to conflict with each other and this status quo is disastrous for the unity about which Greek philosophers always speak at length and with gusto.

We heard the sounds usually associated with the instruments we use to repair houses and roads that are always in bad repair, especially in Russia, Ukraine and Belarus. Some workers were trying to help the ruins withstand an allied onslaught: tourists and nature are united against their common enemy. Of course, tourists are keen to visit and photograph ancient monuments, but they use them as a material for their delights instead of leaving them in peace or looking at them from afar with respect and veneration. A Russian guide told her group that the Americans used Ta Prohm in one of their movies where Angelina Jolie rested her head or whole body against one of the trees to demonstrate her beauty and love for nature. At that point I realised I had lost *my* group whose members continued their excursion without bothering about my absence and indeed my very existence.

For a while I was wandering about the ruins and trees, and the hammers I had already heard continued to interfere in the Earth’s internal affairs: once again, humans proved to be unable to leave the Earth alone. The more I walked, the stronger my feelings grew and, by the end of my walk – I was near the gate through which we had got into the site – I realised we had to give up our attempts to conciliate between the two sides involved in the conflict. If nature is bent on destroying the site, we just have to say and sing with The Beatles: ‘Let it be.’ We can’t know for sure what *should* happen in the world to which we belong by mistake, due to the ominous intervention of some demiurge or other. (Our Gnostics speak about this demiurge in their spiritual heritage.) Why do we always arbitrate between the opposing sides? We don’t even know what is what and where oppositions take place and armies clash on battlefields instead of listening to the harmony of the universe.

My walk, however, wasn’t over yet: I suddenly remembered we had to leave the site by the opposite exit or entrance. I had to retrace my steps, heading for the exit about which our guide had said a few words. Where was the west? And what about the east? Which entrance was I supposed to reach in order to leave the site and find the minibus where the members of our group must already have been waiting for me? On my way to the east or the west I lost my way several times as I wandered among the trees where no ruins were hiding in the hope of a fraternal or erotic embrace. Eventually, I found an exit used by some camera-toting tourists and even children whose eagerness to see the ruins of Khmer culture was laudable and remarkable. The minibus was nowhere to be seen; there were even maxibuses near the gate or the hole I had reached at the end of my peregrinations, but our minibus seemed to have disappeared without a trace.

Once again I entered the site and began to walk in the opposite direction, which was rather easy because, like Diogenes of Sinope, I’m used to going in the opposite direction – in relation to what other people say or

write. A quarter of an hour later, I reached the opposite exit and got out, hoping to see our bus and hear the voices of the tourists who were delighted to heap reproaches on their fellow travellers. But I neither heard nor saw anything except the voices and faces of the people I had never met in this world and even in the worlds I visit in the course my escapades.

So I retraced my steps once again and I got the impression, to which I was already used to some extent, that the workers and tourists had to leave the site once and for all, allowing the ruins and nature to engage in a congenial tête-à-tête. I talked about it to the fat woman – as soon as I found the bus and my seat in it; she was sitting next to me and so I could talk to her without unduly raising my voice. ‘Why don’t we leave them alone?’ I said.

‘Because the ruins would disappear as a result of this duel. You enjoyed this visit, didn’t you?’

‘Of course I did. Don’t you think the stones are more beautiful than Apollo?’

‘I like human faces,’ she said. ‘Nothing is more beautiful than human faces.’

‘Well, Venus is probably as beautiful as stones – Apollo isn’t really a masterpiece.’

‘I like faces,’ she repeated. ‘I don’t agree with you at all.’

‘I don’t mean I hate human faces,’ I said, thinking about her face that was rather beautiful; and yet the ugliness of her body was *not* counterbalanced by the excellence of her features. Nevertheless, I was on the point of paying her a compliment; our minibus pulled up and we set off to visit yet another masterpiece of the Khmer art.

This, the State Temple of Jayavarman VII and his immediate successors, is one of the most enigmatic and powerful religious constructions in the world. The temple is extremely complex both in terms of its structure and meaning, having passed through different religious phases from Pantheon of the Gods, Hindu worship and Buddhism. It uses, uniquely, a mass of face-towers to create a stone mountain of ascending peaks. There is some dispute about the number of towers. There were originally 49 towers even though Paul Mus thought there should be 54. Today only 37 are standing. Most are carved with four faces on each cardinal point but sometimes there are only three or even just two. The central tower has many more.

Michael Freeman, Claude Jacques, *Ancient Angkor*

Luckily for me, I didn’t read this piece of information before the visit: I would have looked for the faces from the very start, curious about *their* features and powers. My ignorance allowed me *not* to see them for a while. I was walking towards the temple quite innocently, prepared to find yet another series of anonymous towers. And then I saw them darkly, as if in a dream; it *was* a dream or another world I hadn’t set my foot in, for all my journeys and voyages. I never boast about having reached *all* the worlds available to dreamers and daydreamers, but I often hint at my capacity to leave this world without burning my boats. Be that as it may, before this visit I had never used any boat or bridge with the help of which I could have reached the Bayon.

The faces and their eyes didn’t look at me, needless to say; they couldn’t care less about the tourists whose intrusions didn’t really disturb them except when someone was leaning against their stones for the sake of photographs and photographers. Angelina Jolie wasn’t of their number and I thought she shouldn’t get too close to these faces – not to lose face, so to speak.

Did they smile? Did they impart to us the truth or just a Platonic idea? Were they the gods or God? They reminded me of Egypt and the neutrality I felt as I looked at the Egyptians gods and goddesses. But these were actually less neutral than the faces I saw as I walked around the terraces and turrets on which there were faces, half-smiles and a multitude of truths. And I had no idea what truths I was looking at: Plato is of no help in these matters because he saw only the gods created by Greek sculptors and was, moreover, ignorant of Asian lore. At least he didn't know Buddhism as well as we do.

'They who know truth in truth, and untruth in untruth, arrive at truth, and follow true desires.' Needless to say, I don't know truth even when I see one in front of me, within my reach. I could have leant against these faces just for the fun of it; I didn't because I was determined to leave them alone, in peace. I knew there were true to some extent; for all I know, they might have symbolised the truth during my visit to the Bayon. I saw their truth, but I didn't know it; and I might have seen untruth in their truth, for I'm unable to see any truth, however small and tame. I may look at it, though.

'They who imagine truth in untruth, and see untruth in truth, never arrive at truth, but follow vain desires.' I mostly follow vain desires, but there are exceptions to this rule; my visit to the Bayon is one of these exceptions. Once again I saw untruth in truth and so I agreed with the Dhammapada and its tenets. I never arrive at truth, but I'm mature enough to admit it. To some extent I do see truth in truth.

I think we paid a visit to the Bayon on the third day of our stay at Angkor and therefore I'd better re-write the whole episode, putting it in the right place. I'm reluctant to do so because neither days nor dates really count when you deal with eternity and its components; in other words, the right thing is always in the right place if eternity takes care of it.

On the second day of our Angkor visit, Audrey (or the fat woman) resolved to protect her skin from the sun that seemed to have fallen in love with her body in the course of their *rendezvous* in the swimming pool. So she put on a pair of grey tight-fitting trousers, offering me an opportunity to study the outlines of her legs. Her legs were even worse than her belly that she couldn't use properly, according to her own words. She gives dance lessons in the suburbs of Tours and the only dance she can neither teach nor perform is the belly dance, which is not as difficult to master for her as might seem at first glance: her belly dances whenever she gets up and starts walking in any direction.

When I first entered the swimming-pool area, I saw her body lying on a sun lounger; she wasn't yet in the water and the sun took no notice of her because the sun never falls in love with your body after 5 p.m.; that's what my father told me almost 60 years ago. I knew she had no bathing suit and I asked her if she was going to dip her toes into the pool.

'I'll have a swim tomorrow,' she said.

'You said on the bus you didn't have a bathing suit. Neither do I. So I'm wearing my briefs. Don't be shocked when you see my attire.'

'Why should you shock me? You do what you like.'

This time I didn't say anything, but her rudeness surprised me all the more painfully since I thought she was falling in love with me. I knew I couldn't hope for love at first sight, but there are other sights and other loves, and I relied on them as I thought about her eyes and even her Rubens-inspired body. It is true that I thought more about the women painted by Rubens and some of his followers; yet she was somehow present in all of my visions related to corpulent, plump – voluptuous females.

Next day I saw her *in* the swimming pool and therefore I couldn't make her body out: as every Descartes reader knows, water distorts whatever you put into it. And she put into it her body deprived of a proper bathing suit through her customary negligence. Of course I was aware that sooner or later she had to leave the swimming pool – and even her favourite sun lounger – in order to have dinner in a restaurant whose owner was a Frenchman enamoured of local cuisine. Unfortunately I fell into a conversation with a man at the bar – there was a bar near the water's edge – and I missed her Venus-like exit; when I did cast a glance in her direction, I saw only a bathrobe and two calves.

Now I could study her legs as she walked to and fro, from one temple to another, but I didn't feel like looking at her – either at her legs or at the rest of her body; and even her face was outside my preoccupations. I'm almost sure I didn't let her spot any outward sign of my displeasure and her reaction to my attitude was all the more remarkable since I did my best *not* to let her see anything: I'm a gentleman, after all. She, however, grew sad and went so far as to sit down in the middle of the road where some cars made their way to temples or to ordinary houses that had nothing to do with the glorious past. 'On realising I didn't love her any more, she fell into a dead faint,' I might have written on the sheet of paper I kept at the hotel – a short collection of my notes related to the trip.

'What's wrong with Audrey?' asked a member of our group.

'I don't know, nothing,' said his wife.

'Why is she sitting in the middle of the road?'

'I don't know.'

'Have you got your aspirin?'

'It's probably the sun.'

'Have you got your sun lotion?'

'It's too late.'

'Shouldn't she be treated for sunstroke?'

'She's sweating.'

'What do you mean?'

'Someone who's suffering from sunstroke feels dizzy and has a high temperature, but doesn't sweat.'

'Is there no exceptions to this rule?'

'Do you think Audrey's an exception?'

How did she guess I hadn't appreciated her beauty and changed my mind as to my conduct in her presence? No more seductive looks and words; no more promising allusions. We were walking in the midst of beauty and her trousers, or rather what was inside them, did not fit the ruins and trees, let alone the sky where the sun grew more and more ferocious, displeased as it was with her ugliness.

On the day before we stood in front of an anonymous tower and I felt an urge to share my emotions, my uncontrollable ecstasy, with a man or a woman. I said, 'This is divine. No wonder the gods exist in this area.'

'Do you believe in God?' she asked.

'I believe in these gods.' My answer was so predictable she made a grimace of disgust.

'I prefer human faces,' she said.

'Isn't this also a human face?' I asked.

'Do you mean to say there's nothing else in the world?'

‘Not at all. But this tower *is* a human face.’

At the time I knew nothing about the Bayon I was to visit a few hours later. The source of my inspiration dried up: I stopped talking and so she had no opportunity to contradict me in the bus where we still sat side by side as if our lucky or unlucky stars had resolved to develop our acquaintance into a lasting friendship. She was wearing a long skirt and I still hoped she was a woman that Rubens would have painted in his studio, had she been born in the right place at the right time.

Jumping from one space-time to another doesn’t necessarily disclose the writer’s preference for postmodern tricks; at least I’m not addicted to gymnastics and I recall with horror how clumsy I was at school whenever our gym instructor asked me to perform a high jump. In a way, I’m allergic to jumps in any shape or form so that my wayward chronology originates neither in my aesthetic views nor in my physical aptitudes. During my first visit to the Bayon I didn’t immerse myself in its maze-like qualities, for I had to play the game a lot of children are fond of – follow-my-leader. I’m prepared to follow Dante or Plato without whom I’ll never find a way out of my personal and universal cave, but following a tour guide is not my cup of tea, even though occasionally you *may* learn something from tour guides.

During my first visit to the Bayon I was still on speaking terms with the fat woman who, at some point, asked me to get off her back. ‘Just get off my back, will you!’ Had she spoken English fluently, she might have said: ‘Bugger off, will you?’ But her English was so rudimentary she couldn’t even ask a waiter to bring her a bottle of beer. ‘Stop harassing me! I’m tired of being pursued by you. I’m on holiday after all. My colleagues said, “After all that hard work, you deserve a holiday.” They’d smash your face in if they saw us together.’

We spent three days at Angkor – the members of our group and I – but on the eve of our departure we were supposed to visit some floating village in order to see how the Cambodians live in the world where culture and art can be mostly enjoyed in museums and in the midst of ruins. And on the day of our departure we were left to our own devices: no temples, no celestial faces. Some members of our group kept talking about the market we had driven by several times; others wished to spend a few hours in the lukewarm water of the swimming pool. Incidentally this water was almost as hot as a soup. I needed neither the floating village nor any slices of life related to it. So I said to the woman sitting opposite me at dinner: ‘I won’t go to the village.’

‘Aren’t you interested in life?’ she asked.

‘I am, but there are many lives around us. I’ve chosen another life.’

‘Don’t you want to know how the Cambodians live today?’

‘You have to live in their midst for a while to find out how they live.’

‘But this tour will offer a few glimpses of their lives.’

‘We might see these lives elsewhere.’

‘Elsewhere life is different.’

‘I’m not likely to come back to Angkor. I must make the most of this visit.’

At this point the fat woman cut in on our conversation. ‘Why do you always say to us what we should do?’ she said. ‘What right do you have to dictate how we live our lives?’

‘You do what you wish,’ I said.

My second visit to the Bayon. The driver leaves me at the Elephant Terrace and says I should walk along it until I reach an entrance to the Bayon situated at the end of the terrace and a clump of trees. The elephant is the emblem of endurance, self-restraint and dignity. Thus the Buddha himself is called Nâga, ‘the Elephant’, or

Mahânâga, ‘the great Elephant’. He descended from heaven in the form of an elephant to be born on Earth. ‘If a man find no prudent companion who walks with him, is wise, and lives soberly, let him walk alone, like a king who has left his conquered country behind – like an elephant in the forest.’

I saw other elephants at Angkor and I spoke to them, for I’m in the habit of speaking to my cat who looks like a Cambodian elephant, even though he has no tasks. Anyway all these elephants are pussycats and I adore them to the point of being eager to share their solitary lives in any forest, however distant and dangerous. I passed many elephants on my way to the legendary monument whose outline was clearly defined against the afternoon sky. I didn’t see my driver and his vehicle as I approached an entrance I hadn’t explored during my first visit to the Bayon. I was confronted with other faces which, however, turned out to be similar to the ones I was acquainted with thanks to our experienced guide; yet somehow they were different as if they had disagreed with their neighbours on some issue or other.

On my first visit I was looking for beautiful profiles. Now I realised there was a beauty beyond the one I was accustomed to; I had to go through the looking glass once more, leaving behind my habits and ingrained prejudices. To some extent the beauty I was confronted with wasn’t beautiful, for it went beyond any beauty, any mythology and any faith. What is the exact location of beauty? What is the exact location of the Holy Trinity? Do these questions make sense?

3

What else do I remember about the Bayon? I was wandering in the cave described by Plato in his most important dialogue and I wasn’t surprised at seeing only shadows around me: dancers, warriors. Now and then I caught a glimpse of the heavens and the faces I had seen on my first and second visits to the temple in the nether part of which I experienced what Plato’s prisoners had been exposed to in their underground dwelling: the danger of overlooking the truth. After a while I came out of the hell-like labyrinth, gasping for air as if I had been kept underwater – in our swimming pool, of all places – for a considerable stretch of time. The members of our group were already enjoying the floating village they had dreamt of to the detriment of the sights thanks to which I was about to imitate Dante’s exploit. Indeed, I came to the surface of the Earth and looked up, searching for the heights where the faces *I* had dreamt of day and night awaited me as if to test my fidelity and spiritual progress.

I saw a multitude of suns, but notwithstanding their number and closeness – I could touch and even embrace them – I was unable to penetrate their mysteries and define their substances. In a way, I saw only one face – the One about whom Plotinus speaks so eloquently and lyrically in the *Enneads* – and in spite of myself I was drawn into a conflict which precluded the possibility of my identifying this face, the One and the Bayon. What I was left with bore an unmistakable resemblance to Meister Eckhart’s views and his use of negative theology. Didn’t he sometimes refer to the deity as ‘Nothing’?

I saw ‘Nothing’ the other day. I might have seen
Vedanta’s ‘*neti-neti*’, ‘not this, not that’.
For some reason I saw ‘Nothing’ or rather ‘Something
Else’. I saw a face that was something else –
Not a face, at any rate. What was it? A stone? Yes and no:

Not every stone looks at you. Did *they* look
 At me? Their eyes were closed or half-closed. They
 Would lower their eyes when *I* looked at them. Did they see
 Anything? Not this, not that. What? So what?
Apsaras flew above the entire scene, indicating
 That the subject was sacred. The subject or the object?
 Everything was sacred in the Bayon. Or nothing?
 What's nothing? The presence? Not even the presence – something
 Else. What else? The unsaid, the unthinkable, the unutterable.
 You say 'Nothing' and contradict established theories
 On this subject, for nothing is also something – at least you
 Name it. Don't say anything. Don't answer questions. 'What is it?'
 You're asked. You don't say anything. And your eyes?
 Shut them. And your body? Doesn't it speak, doesn't it name
 An object, namely a body? Hide yourself in a closet.
 Your soul has been shut away in a monastery for many years. Do you
 Know anything now? What are the faces you saw in the Bayon?

I might compare these faces to Bach, to the second book of *Das Wohltemperierte Klavier*. These preludes and fugues are more austere, more ineluctable than their counterparts you find in the first book. And less 'beautiful', in the common sense of the word, which might account for their relative unpopularity. And in some respects the second book is closer to The Old Testament than the first; it is also closer to the faces I saw in the Bayon. Yet they're neither the first book nor the second – nor any other book I've come across in my life; at least I won't be able to find *their* book in my library. 'For God, who commanded the light to shine out of darkness, hath shined in our hearts, to *give* the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.' Not this. Not that either: 'And all that sat in the council, looking steadfastly on him, saw his face as it had been the face of an angel.'

I played a lot of games in my childhood and at some point I thought I should also play games when writing a novel. Now the very word 'game' jars on my nerves, even though Nabokov regards literature as a divine game; and I still read his works from time to time, once a year, just one hour. 'In this game if you give the wrong answer you have to miss a turn,' my mother used to tell me when we played some game or other, shifting counters amidst a number of squares. I wonder what remains of this happiness apart from the verb 'to miss' that I resort to often because I cannot do otherwise: I have to analyse my life so as not to repeat the mistakes I made last week, last year.

I would have missed Angkor if my friend hadn't told me I should go there immediately, 'otherwise you'll grow too old for such journeys and you won't die peacefully without it'. I wonder why my memory doesn't give a start when I read about the temples I saw a few months ago. I *must* have seen these warriors and rivers, given the number of hours I spent inside the Bayon. Is it just another parallel world? In the bestseller I couldn't read – I'm not particularly fond of boredom – the police officers opt for another uniform, but the heroine doesn't notice the fact, being absent from the world where she usually lives and kills macho men. I wasn't living in a parallel

world during my visit to the Bayon, for this temple is situated in the world where I'm writing this book, otherwise I wouldn't have seen it at all: no faces, no gods, no entrances, no dancers.

I remember the fat woman and the words she uttered as she spoke to me and other members of our group – as if her words were more important than the Bayon and the battle fought by the Khmer army. I remember my words as well; and yet I wasn't eloquent whenever I had an opportunity to talk to her because I wax lyrical only within the kingdom of love.

Date: Late 12th to late 13th centuries, construction probably starting about 1200

Style: Bayon

Reign: Jayavarman VII to Jayavarman VIII

That's all I can say about the Bayon and my journey to Cambodia.

4

'Supposing a thing remains in the same place, but grows old, or becomes black instead of white, or hard instead of soft, or undergoes any other alteration; isn't it right to say that here we have motion in another form?' I don't remain in the same place and I manage to grow older in spite of my being on the road: I've just come back from Ferrara where one can experience an earthquake on the day of one's concert. I was supposed to play in Ferrara the day before yesterday, but I didn't play there or anywhere else; I slept at the hotel I had checked in on the same day and my sleep was interrupted by a noise usually associated with a plane moving along a runway. My room didn't look like the interior of a plane and I wondered why it was making such a noise: after all, it was 4 a.m. and the hotel guests were fast asleep. They had chosen the hotel I was staying in because they thought they wouldn't be unduly disturbed at night and they were loath to leave Ferrara before seeing all the sights and eating as many meals as possible in local restaurants.

I didn't think about my head that was lying unprotected on one of the cushions I had found on my bed; but now I do think about it, for in the course of any self-respecting earthquake a lot of objects fall from walls, determined to smash whatever they can within their reach or even out of their reach. Sometimes you realise your chandelier didn't fall where it ought to have fallen on account of another jolt produced by the same earthquake. (Our earthquake lasted 22 seconds.) What would have happened if a chandelier or another object had fallen on my head or another part of my fragile body covered with a blanket? I don't like concussion because even mild concussion deprives you of wine for almost a year. Of course you can drink wine and cognac if you feel like it, but splitting headaches will get the better of you sooner or later so it's advisable not to drink anything after concussion with the exception of water, juice and lemonade.

At first I thought it was a nightmare and I asked myself why I hadn't lived through such a nightmare before: at my age one can experience only repetitions that faithfully reflect one's love for habits and rites. My nightmares are fairly humdrum and they frighten me mostly because I don't like performing in public when I'm not ready for it. And that's what I'm confronted with in the course of my nightmares: I have to play a few works I don't know by heart and the recital takes place at Carnegie Hall or at the Moscow Conservatoire where you're not supposed to have memory lapses. A few wrong notes may go unnoticed, but memory lapses are unforgivable and you're not likely to play in these halls again if, at some point, you stop and look at the keyboard in a sort of

drunken stupor, unable to resume your work on the stage. The piece you're supposed to play does not move, but it may grow older, for all I know.

A few hours later – at 9 a. m. to be exact – I went out of the hotel and took a walk around the city, looking at the ancient monuments that hadn't budged for a few centuries as if anxious to consolidate Parmenides' doctrine. Even last night they had been on Parmenides' side, flouting the theory propounded by Heraclitus and his admirers whose ingenious idea our Socrates caricatures in the *Theaetetus*. Now they were full of fissures, doing justice to the doctrine of universal flux about which I think whenever I have to go somewhere in order to play a concert or see another temple.

I've just come back from Ferrara, but I go on thinking about the earthquake and therefore something moves inside me or even outside my body and mind: the walls I'm looking at seem to shake as if they feared an earthquake or another manifestation of God's disapproval of our mores and culture. The walls of my hotel room – I'm back in Ferrara again – had quietened down before I opened my eyes and heard my friend's voice talking to me over the phone: the lines hadn't gone dead, contrary to what might have been expected. 'Your recital has been cancelled,' my friend told me in a respectful tone of voice and I asked myself if his respect had anything to do with my artistic status or was solely directed towards God's omnipotence. Then I went out of the hotel and heard two voices I couldn't have recognised; two Russian strangers talking about the earthquake and its consequences. 'What do you think?' said one of them.

'Everything will be closed today,' said the other.

'What shall we do?'

'Let's just go for a walk. We'll see the fissures and all the houses with crumbling plaster and leaking roofs.'

'Do you mean they're too old to withstand the pressure of time?'

'I'm talking about the earthquake and its consequences.'

They continued to talk as they joined a group of other tourists whose eyes were searching for damage and other vestiges of the earthquake that had already receded into the distance, in spite of the authorities' fears: they thought there might be another jolt, another sign of underground activity. I returned to the hotel and put my pyjamas into the suitcase that was motionless and didn't seem to have lost any of its contents as if it had paid no attention to the natural catastrophe. I brushed my teeth and put my electric toothbrush into the toilet bag I take with me whenever I'm on the move, betraying Parmenides, the One and immobility.

Today I'm faithful to Parmenides and my cat doesn't have to worry about his own peace of mind because I won't put him into his house inside which he travels from point A to point B, from my terrace to the garden where he runs at will when I stay with my friend in Touraine. But for all my immobility and my body's outward calm, I *am* on the move; I'm waiting for a woman to whom I was introduced in Moscow 11 years ago. At least my thoughts and fears are on the move for many reasons, and one of these reasons is related to my friend's nationality and incapacity to travel all over the world without asking for visas, without filling in a number of forms and getting invitations from abroad – from France, from the United States. I sent her an invitation, but she didn't go to the French consulate at once because she thought they needed the original and wouldn't accept a mere copy printed by her fax machine. From the earthquake my fears thus moved to the French consulate and to the employee in charge with whom I wasn't acquainted; I could exert no influence on his or her conduct and goodwill.

This young woman sings Kundry, Brünnhilde and Tosca, but these parts aren't the only clues to her character that I rely upon as I think about her stay in my house, in my room, in my bed, under my blanket. She is much younger than I am and she was even younger when I first met her in Moscow, whereas I was already old and incapable of tuning in to young women's needs and requirements. Their customs and rules were also beyond my ken and so I put my foot in it with her as I tried to kiss her on the mouth and stroke her tongue in the interval between our dinner and her departure. She neither slapped me nor called me names; nevertheless she reacted angrily and her reaction was wholly justified. She recoiled in horror and said, 'Already?' Perhaps she just wished to pay homage to Parmenides, to his immobility, and I regret not having reminded her of the One – of the unity that can't be achieved without kisses and love in general.

Next morning I called her to ask if I could stay in her flat for a while. She knew that in my native country I owned no flat, no country house, having lost everything on the day of my irrevocable departure from the Soviet Union. 'My friend's very kind and hospitable,' I said.

'I like his flat,' she said.

'Sartre used to stay in this flat during his visits to Moscow.'

'Did he really?'

'Just look at this library. There are many French books on the shelves.'

She didn't allow me to stay in her flat; Sartre never stayed in it either. Anyway, I thought I would never see her again, for I don't like inhospitable women. No wonder I wrote in one of my novels: 'I had to trek for miles through inhospitable countryside.' I was reluctant to be too direct, saying I no longer felt at home in my native country where I had to rely on my friend's hospitality and on young women who might put a foreigner up for a night or two on condition that he is handsome, intelligent and rich. I was neither handsome nor rich and she didn't put me up, saying to herself that the quality and quantity of my intelligence couldn't compensate for my relative poverty and ugliness, let alone for my old age.

Now I am at home again – I do have a flat in Versailles – and I recall the fat woman to whom I said at some point that Apollo wasn't as beautiful as a stone; later on I said she shouldn't regard me as a misanthrope. 'I don't think about you at all,' she said. 'You say whatever you like.'

'Even if you don't think about me all the time, you may occasionally say to yourself, "This old man talks nonsense." Well, I just think some stones are very beautiful.'

'Can't you talk to yourself?' she asked.

She didn't say anything on the terrace where we awaited the sunset, looking at the sun that was about to hide behind some cloud or other as if bent on playing hide-and-seek at the time when we were yearning to see its gorgeous colours on the towers of Pre Rup. No wonder I heard neither her voice nor her thoughts: she kept walking at the foot of the temple and apparently had no intention of climbing up and reaching the terrace from which one could enjoy the panorama of the countryside. I asked our guide in what direction we had to look so as not to miss anything and he said we would miss something anyway because one had to look at both the temple and nature. Actually we missed everything because the sun had finally managed to find a suitable cloud behind which its colours might have displayed their charms and softness until their disappearance under the earth.

This abortive attempt is stored in my memory beside a visit we paid to another temple at the entrance to which the fat woman bought a few scarves, delaying our departure and making the whole group miss a few elephants exposed on the terrace of yet another temple. I thought she could have bought these scarves elsewhere

– at one of the markets, for instance; but I didn't say anything to her because we were no longer on speaking terms and I had no wish to transgress this newborn rule. I talked instead to another member of our group, hoping to let off steam in the fat woman's absence. 'We'll miss the elephants,' I said.

'We won't,' said the woman to whom I was talking.

'We're supposed to enjoy the sunset at 5.15,' I pointed out.

'The sun is still far from the horizon,' she said.

'But I think our guide wants us to see the sunset *before* the sun gets too close to the horizon.'

'What for?' she asked.

'The sunbeams grow milder and that's what we're interested in – their softness.'

'In that case, I'd rather see the moon,' said the woman.

Luckily for me, I saw the elephants two days later when I toured Angkor on my own. It's better to be on your own – not only on sightseeing tours – because you don't have to make sure you haven't been left behind by absent-minded fellow travellers. They're not really absent-minded, in point of fact; they just forget about your existence and they're right to some extent because ancient monuments are more interesting than humans. The fat woman would have disagreed with me, had I voiced my opinion in her presence, breaking our mutual silence and the truce that was to last until our arrival to Paris.

I thought about our farewell ceremony; the more I thought about it, the less I knew what to say to her at Charles de Gaulle airport. I thought I might say to her, 'Thank you, I'm sorry.'

'What are you sorry for?'

'You know what I mean.'

'I don't.'

'Don't you really?'

'No, I don't. Anyway I don't care what you think or do. Bugger off, will you?'

Another way of saying goodbye: 'Good luck and God bless you!'

'Stop harassing me!'

'I just said, "God bless you!"'

'Stop harassing God!'

'Good luck.'

'Bugger off, will you?'

Finally I resolved not to say anything to the fat woman: unlike masochists and early Christians, I'm not keen on insults and swear words. Anyway it's too late to become a Christian martyr, for there's no cause for which one may sacrifice one's life in this day and age: neither God nor our fatherland deserve such an honour.

And what shall I say to the singer at the same airport and terminal? I may kiss her on the mouth because I had already performed such a feat three years ago, when staying at a hotel near the Moscow Conservatoire. I first invited her to a restaurant: I'm not a politician and so don't dare take off my trousers right after letting my visitor in and shutting the door behind her. We had dinner at a French restaurant, sitting outside at one of the round tables destined for those who fear neither heat nor cold for which our capital is renowned among her inhabitants. (Moscow is feminine in Russian – just another mother or sister.) She said she didn't like the table I had pointed at because it was too small. 'All other tables are also small,' I pointed out.

'I can see they're identical,' she said.

‘They’re similar, though not identical,’ I said as I looked at the customers enjoying their meals.

‘We can use this table,’ she said pointing at an empty table.

‘Do you really prefer this table?’ I asked.

‘I prefer two tables to one,’ she said.

So I pushed the second table towards the first and we sat down at a big double table that somehow looked like a mythological monster, even when covered with a tablecloth. Soon a waiter brought us a bottle of wine and a woman turned up, holding her lover’s hand. Upon realising there was no room for them outside the restaurant, they went in and soon came out, for the availability of vacant tables was limited, the restaurant being rather small and cosy. They looked at our double table and asked if we really needed two tables to enjoy one meal in each other’s company. ‘Are you waiting for your friends,’ asked the woman.

‘We are,’ said the singer.

‘Are they coming soon?’ asked the man.

‘They’re always late,’ said the singer as the waiter came out, holding a tray.

‘What are you having as a starter?’ asked the woman.

‘The pâté?’ asked the waiter.

‘The pâté is for me,’ said the singer.

‘So you’re starting dinner without your friends,’ said the man.

‘They’re always late,’ said the singer. ‘They’ll get the punishment they deserve.’

‘According to the Russian tradition, latecomers have to drink two glasses of vodka instead of one,’ said the woman.

‘They’ll just get the rest of the bottle,’ said the singer as she pushed her glass towards me in the hope that I would fill it before our friends’ arrival. The lovers left us in peace without saying something along the lines of, ‘Your attitude shows a selfish disregard for others.’ We finished the starters and the waiter brought us the main dishes about which nobody asked us any questions as if the frustrated lovers had announced to the inhabitants of Moscow that there had been no vacancies at the restaurant where we continued to enjoy our meal.

My dinner table is big enough to satisfy her mania for space somehow linked to a sort of persecution complex: that night I got the feeling she couldn’t bear other people’s presence, especially if her body was thereby exposed to their curiosity and tactile investigations. After dinner we went to my hotel and she sat down on the windowsill, touching her shirt as if to unbutton it or even take it off in the long run. I kissed her and she unbuttoned her shirt, which was another invitation to a dance. For some reason I was reminded of a Jewish story in which a Russian comes to a rabbi and says: ‘I’m going to marry Sarah next week.’

‘Congratulations.’

‘May I ask you a few questions? You see, I don’t know your customs. Could you enlighten me?’

‘I’d be delighted to answer your questions.’

‘What shouldn’t I do at the wedding ceremony?’

‘You can do whatever you like, but please don’t dance with your bride.’

‘All right. And what about love-making? Am I permitted to lie on her?’

‘Of course you are.’

‘Could I lie under her?’

‘Of course you could.’

‘And what if we make love in an armchair? What if we sit down I mean?’

‘Sit down, if you wish.’

‘And what if we stand up?’

‘If you do, you shouldn’t make love.’

‘Why not?’

‘Little by little your love-making might turn into a dance.’

We could neither dance nor make love on the windowsill where she had installed herself before fiddling with the buttons I didn’t touch for fear of interrupting the ritual about which she knew much more than anybody else. Her breasts came into view and I was bold enough to kiss them; and yet I was aware of her propensity to put an end to whatever I might have done in order to penetrate her body and all her mysteries. She did put an end to some of my desires and thoughts, but the windowsill continued to receive the heat of her body and the news of my so-called pilgrim’s progress: I was looking not only for sexual pleasures, but also for a sort of spiritual upheaval. Again I viewed the world in terms of Platonic ideas and I was wholly preoccupied with the essence of beauty, leaving aside the body I had yearned for since our first encounter. I desired her body and I neglected it at the same time so that I could thank Plato for the mess I was in. Would she have unbuttoned everything, had I forgotten about Plato and his doctrines?

Plato says that in one’s youth one often devotes oneself to beautiful bodies without giving a thought to the unity that presides over *all* the beautiful bodies one encounters in the world and in the Hereafter. ‘The beauty of all bodies is one and the same,’ says Plato. The young man of whom he speaks in the *Symposium* must realise that one’s ‘wild gaping after just one body is a small thing’. He comes to despise this small thing and turns his attention to a multitude of bodies – to a pyramid of bodies where, however, he won’t find what one really should look for: the beauty of people’s souls. ‘If someone is decent in his soul, even though he is scarcely blooming in his body, our lover must be content to love and care for him and to seek to give birth to such ideas as will make young men better. The result is that our lover will be forced to gaze at the beauty of activities and laws and to see that all this is akin to itself, with the result that he will think that the beauty of bodies is a thing of no importance.’

I didn’t care about laws as I gazed at her half-naked body and the hospitable windowsill on which, however, we couldn’t make love: she doesn’t like being cramped for space. (Neither do I, as a matter of fact.) What I thought about was a sort of overall beauty and suddenly the following remark cropped up in my head: ‘Long hair was traditionally regarded as a sign of femininity.’ Her hair wasn’t long; nor was it cropped, come to think of it. But she was feminine and she hasn’t lost this aspect of her personality, judging from the voice I hear when I speak to her on the phone. At least she used all her feminine wiles to get me to send her an invitation – a procedure that entails ringing up some long-forgotten colleague and spending a lot of time with his ugly secretaries. Well, I did what I could and tomorrow I’ll meet her at the airport if another earthquake doesn’t upset my plans of spending 10 days in her company.

How should I welcome her? Whenever I utter the word ‘welcome’, I see a man standing at a door, welcoming newcomers with a large smile and a pat on the arm. I can’t imitate him so I’d better use another word when thinking about her arrival and our meeting at the terminal where so many people embrace and kiss each other, exchanging a few noncommittal words. Or should I write a poem for her? This Japanese custom is no longer widespread either in the East or in the West, but I *might* read to her a poem I dedicated to another woman:

We could have met
A long time ago. But
Destiny is fickle,
The piano unreliable.

Only one woman
Inhabits the Earth:
The theory of ideas
Destroyed the others.

So I've known you
From time immemorial—
Intimately, infinitely.

We neither meet nor part.

The woman for whom I wrote this poem was a pianist and worked in public relations; I thought she could organise my life in accordance with her lofty principles and pragmatic ideas. But she disappeared and I no longer feel obliged to attach this poem to her name and fading beauty: she must be 60 now, if I'm not mistaken. Be that as it may, I should get rid of Plato who is likely to mar my enjoyment of her stay in my house, given his obsession with abstract categories and bodies. Why should I gaze upon the *sea* of beauty?

If you follow Plato's teaching, you never content yourself with one body, one beauty: you always go beyond them in search of other bodies and beauties. These finally lead you to the One or the Body that neither sits on your windowsill nor lies in your bed; nor is it suspended in the air and you have no idea how to handle such a body. And if it *is* suspended in the air, it looks like a cloud of smoke the outlines of which might vary in accordance with your moods. But that is not what Plato meant when he spoke about beauty: 'First, it always is and neither comes to be nor passes away, neither waxes nor wanes. Second, it is not beautiful this way and ugly that way, nor beautiful at one time and ugly at another, nor beautiful here but ugly there, as it would be if it were beautiful for some people and ugly for others.'

So if it *is* a cloud of smoke one happens to chance upon, it doesn't pass away, however long you may gaze at it, enchanted by its outlines and harmony (or melody or both). I disagree entirely with the saying 'beauty is in the eye of the beholder': Helen of Troy must have been beautiful for everybody, otherwise Faust wouldn't have made his journey into fear – into the kingdom ruled by the Mothers. According to Goethe, incidentally, Helen's beauty neither waxes nor wanes, nor comes to be nor passes away, and Faust takes advantage of this eternity that suits him right down to the ground.

It was time to transfer her body – the one sitting on the windowsill – to the bed that was wide enough to accommodate three bodies. It is sometimes much easier to handle two bodies than a woman whose stubbornness might become proverbial if she took the trouble to sit more often on windowsills or just in armchairs where she might also unbutton her shirt without going any further. Very few people really know how stubborn Natasha is

and will remain until she comes across a suitable partner – that is the conclusion I’ve eventually come to on the strength of the information supplied by a musicologist thanks to whom I got acquainted with her protégé.

‘Natasha’s very shy,’ the musicologist said. ‘Don’t be brutal with her.’

‘I’m never brutal with anyone,’ I said.

‘I know, I know. She works very hard and I often invite her to my country house. Her mother comes too. My garden has become a haven for people tired of the hectic pace of city life.’

‘I know, I know. I won’t brutalise Natasha.’

‘You promise?’

‘I promise.’

‘I’m sure her views on marriage are coloured by her parents’ divorce,’ said the musicologist – a lady who was stunningly beautiful 30 years ago.

‘She was married, wasn’t she?’

‘She was for a while, but her marriage ended in divorce in 1999.’

‘Why did they part? One doesn’t necessarily turn over a new leaf on the threshold of a new century. Did her husband maltreat her?’

‘He was impotent.’

‘But impotent men often maltreat their wives and mistresses – they can’t do otherwise.’

‘How do you mean?’

‘They can’t do anything else.’

‘Natasha needs constant care,’ said the musicologist.

‘I hope our conjugal life will look and sound like a dance,’ I rounded off.

We shall not dance at the airport. And yet

You dance whenever I think about you.

Your body is on a windowsill, in the air. It is a cloud –

The one described by Hamlet – and also the beauty Diotima

Stares at as she speaks to Socrates of his boys.

One Narcissus, one Helen of Troy, one Natasha.

The rest is literature or silence or nothingness.

She was still on the windowsill and I went on kissing her breasts and the rest of her body – of its upper half, rather. Actually I don’t know if I was allowed to kiss her belly and so it would be more prudent and truthful to speak about the upper half of the upper half: the reader has a right to expect truthful accounts from novelists and storytellers. The telephone rang, but it didn’t interfere with our relationship because it must have known that interfering in other people’s relationships is always a mistake; and objects seldom make mistakes, even when they behave like humans. The telephone behaved like a human: I got the feeling it was talking to me about my life and the mistake I was making in the room to which I had already got accustomed. I was just kissing a puppet whose intentions I couldn’t guess in spite of my inborn perspicacity – for the simple reason that this puppet had no intentions whatsoever. Sometimes humans behave like objects and the object of my desire – she was just an object that night – had no intention of making love or saying anything important. This puppet was sleepy and the

bed could be instrumental in bringing about the oblivion one counts upon when swallowing a pill or drinking a glass of whisky: Morpheus makes us forget our misfortunes.

And then I realised the telephone *was* a human being; after all, it didn't ring on its own initiative. Someone was standing behind it, beyond it – in the lobby of the hotel. I recalled my former girlfriend who had said she would call me in the evening to spend a few hours in my company. She called *us* several times in a row and my new friend – she wasn't my girlfriend yet – heard her desire to meet me, but she said nothing as if she had been sure I could handle the situation on my own. I just didn't answer the phone and it stopped ringing, weary of its own patience (or impatience) and obstinacy.

For a while I went on kissing her shoulders and shoulder blades, but she said at some point: 'I'm sleepy. Could I use your bathroom?'

'Certainly,' I said.

'So I'll go to your bathroom.'

'Could I keep you company?'

'What for? I'm sleepy, you know.'

She headed for the bathroom and I fell asleep on the bed that might have expected another exploit on my part. It is true I don't sleep well at home, but in a hotel room I manage to fall asleep in the twinkling of an eye, and I sleep until I hear my alarm clock or the telephone that respects neither my dreams nor the harmony I feel and enjoy in the kingdom of Morpheus.

What am I to do with this puppet today? Her plane is scheduled to arrive at 21.40 and I'll leave my room one hour before so as not to be late for my appointment with death, as Agatha Christie would have put it. Of course Natasha will not murder me – I'm sure of that; but boredom often gives us a look of murderous hatred. 'Before long, alas! this body will lie on the earth, despised, without understanding, like a useless log.' I think about death when yet another woman makes her appearance in my life that I forget now and then as if prepared to die at any moment, at short notice – in a hotel room, in my bed, in a ditch. Am I in a ditch? Perhaps.

A melody does not speak. It is as mute as the farthest star.

The star is a harmony and I let this harmony go. I drop it and it falls

With a *different* sound. It's no longer a harmony.

What's on the floor, in the sky? As below, so above.

The sky cracked but did not splinter. So did the floor, the Earth

And my family vault. Where are my roots? On treetops.

We slept in the same room and had breakfast in the morning as if nothing had happened; and we were right because nothing *had* happened and we didn't have to show anything when opening doors and walking along corridors. We didn't have to show we were in love with each other and she wasn't jealous enough to say, 'You didn't kiss me this morning.' Of course I didn't, but she paid no attention to it because she did all she could to remain unruffled as if she had been a work of art kept in a museum I was allowed to visit for several hours. And every attempt was being made to ensure that this work of art was preserved for posterity – for her future lovers, in other words.

We had breakfast and I said goodbye to her, reining back my urge to say farewell – and if for ever, still for ever fare thee well. Purcell spoke to us about solitude and I knew what he was talking about, for I am a musician and no self-respecting musician can die without listening to Purcell's music. So did Byron – I mean, he also spoke about solitude. Who didn't?

I don't know your whereabouts. And your whereabouts
Have no idea where I am. Somehow we meet
And talk. What are our talks? Words? Nothing of the kind.
They caress our bodies on windowsills, on beds
We've never slept in. A blanket is a wedding ring.
Let's wear our blanket everywhere – as long as I play
My last sonata: Beethoven, Schubert, Schumann.

I said goodbye and I called her two years later to say I couldn't live without her, which wasn't true, considering that I had lived without her all my life; and I wouldn't have committed suicide, had I not called her that morning or evening. She invited me to dinner and I came to her flat, determined to strip her clothes off at the first (or the second) opportunity. I did not because the telephone rang once again and I heard the voice I knew by heart because jealous women haunt your memory more often than modest women, men and animals. Even jealous dogs don't really pester you because they can be placated by promises of future delights such as *foie gras* and so on. Some dogs like eating flat tyres so you keep one in the boot of your car and whenever your dog feels like having dinner, you remove the tyre from the boot and give it to him. What could you give to a jealous woman?

When asked a question about death, Thales said, 'Life and death are identical twins.'

'Why don't you die, then?' asked his colleague.

'Because they're identical twins.'

What about women? Aren't they identical twins? Are there only two women in the universe? Only one *femme fatale*?

Be that as it may, I'm waiting for her in my garden, in my park, in my forest, in my room where there's only one bed: one woman doesn't need two beds for her dreams, for her love. I wonder if she loves me; perhaps she does, otherwise she would have forgotten me a long time ago, as other women did. And our last dinner? My last mistress called us every two minutes to ensure that her law was obeyed. That's what I remember clearly: two mistresses, two telephones, two nights. Actually, the woman I'm waiting for has never been my mistress. What does it matter now? Shall I listen to Beethoven's *Missa Solemnis*? Would I need anyone after that?

She said I should answer the phone and I did answer it. I left but the *Missa Solemnis* still resounds in my heart as if my heart was a concert hall where only masterpieces have been performed up to now; my girlfriends are excluded from it. They're not masterpieces – at least in comparison with the *Missa Solemnis*, and I compare everything and everybody with the *Missa Solemnis*. My fault?

You're not the *Missa Solemnis* and I don't know what
 You are. You're just a blade of grass and I
 Cut the grass. What remains is not you but a sound
 You've never heard. I'll hear it all my life. My mass, my mess,
 My requiem. Do you want to bury me
 Or bring me back to life? There are so many lives I wonder
 To which of them you'll take me, out of kindness.
 Truth, lies. Let them sleep until my birthday.

On the third day of her stay in France, Natasha asked me the following question: 'Do you know how much I paid for that bloody dinner? Your bitch spoiled everything. Do you remember?'

'I do.'

'Four hundred dollars.'

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24.05.2012

I can't say I regret whatever I do in this life which is perhaps the only life I'll ever have as a human being or even as any being or substance with the exception of bones – of my own bones – hidden in some coffin or other, in some plot of Earth. But this time I must disagree with the attitude I adopt to my decisions and their consequences: I'm waiting for a woman I shouldn't have invited to my place, although I've been thinking about her for some time. I recall her figure and especially her legs that she is used to screening from my avid, lascivious glance as she walks in my company towards a concert hall or a restaurant where she forgets her manners rather quickly. Why can't she behave properly in restaurants, I wonder?

I thought I might see her naked body cooking me a delicious, Russia-oriented meal: I like watching naked women in my kitchen that is narrow enough to bring about a promiscuous relationship without flouting too many conventions. All this happens naturally and I kiss my cook's lips and legs as she voluptuously bends over a frying pan and the *foie gras* she needs for a pigeon or another victim of her three-star inspiration. I didn't hope to avail myself of these delights on the very first day of her visit to my abode: her flight was scheduled to arrive at 21.40 and many women say they're tired after their flights, even if they land at 16.00. But, oddly enough, she was full of energy and said she was hungry as I greeted her at Charles de Gaulle airport so that the first question I asked her concerned her likes and dislikes in the domain of wine. 'I don't like champagne,' she answered and I felt disappointed: I had prepared a magnificent 1996 magnum that would have shaken her self-confidence, had she drunk it in my company. And the food I had bought for the occasion was in no way suited for the red wine she needed to cope with the strain imposed by Sheremetievo airport where queues are monstrous and controls too punctilious.

My Audi is rather old, though not ramshackle; I'm not in the habit of changing cars every year because a car is a means of transport, as one of our literary heroes puts it. 'In Moscow we no longer drive in such cars,' she said, making a grimace of disgust.

'There are only Bentleys in Moscow, I suppose,' I said.

'You're right – there are three Bentleys in my courtyard.'

'My car is a museum piece,' I said.

'Not quite – it's not old enough for that.'

'It might become a museum piece in five years' time,' I said.

'I'm sure it'll break down next year,' she said.

In life the pragmatic approach to situations is often more successful than an idealistic one. I couldn't help asking myself why she had been so rude to me at the very outset of her sojourn in France. Did she want to demonstrate that Moscow was superior to Paris in terms of creature comforts? 'Why isn't she married to a Russian oligarch?' I asked myself and I found no answer to this question. Next day I asked myself another series of questions and I was at a loss for words without which no answer is really valid, let alone comprehensible. Suppose you just shrug your shoulders and the woman to whom you talk replies with a smile, 'I understand what you mean.' She may indeed understand the general drift of your ideas, but she'll never make out all the outlines and nuances of the landscape painted by your thoughts in your brain unless you couch them in precise terms. Outlines and colours are often impervious to words, but at least the latter can give you an idea of what's going on and you'll know how to handle the situation. A shrug of shoulders may be too eloquent and invariably holds huge amounts of information; you get lost in the midst of allusions and innuendoes, wholly deprived of your personal aptitudes and abilities.

Why did she talk about Bentleys and old cars while sitting in my Audi that is neither very old nor brand new? What was she driving at? I wasn't yet in one of my black moods, but I thought she might have been more tactful inside the car I was driving along the road leading to my house where champagne and salmon awaited her alongside *foie gras*. My mood grew blacker and blacker as we got closer to our destination and yet I can't recall what she really said during this hour: I used neither my cassette recorder nor my memory on which I call sometimes, when in need of information that may get lost in the mazes of the past.

At last I opened the door of my flat and she got another opportunity to express her disgust through a grimace I was already acquainted with – in spite of myself. 'What's this?' she asked looking at my furniture.

'I collect antiques,' I said.

'Is the dust also one of your antiques?'

'My cleaning lady's very diligent about her work.'

'Is she? And the wallpaper? How old is it?'

'It's 30 years old.'

'It must be as old as you are. A feast for the eyes. By the way, you'd better sell your antiques. Of course most of the stock will go for a song, but you don't have much choice, do you?'

'I suppose you won't sleep in my bed. I've got another room you can use.'

Much to my surprise she suddenly burst into song:

'Bleib fern! Fürchte dies Zeichen!'

*Zur Schande zwingt du mich nicht,
solang der Ring mich beschützt.'*

Threateningly she pointed the finger on which she was wearing a ring. 'Who gave it to you? Siegfried?' I asked.

So you know *Götterdämmerung*, do you?'

'I've known Wagner's *Ring* by heart for many years.'

'Stand back! Fear this token! You can't compel me into shame so long as this ring shields me.'

'Far be it from me – '

Again she burst into a song:

*Zurück, du Räuber!
Frevelnder Dieb!
Erfreche dich nicht, mir zu nahn!
Stärker als Stahl macht mich der Ring:
Nie – raubst du ihn mir!*

'Do you want me to leave you alone?' I asked.

'Not yet. Where can I hang my clothes? Don't touch me! The ring makes me stronger than steel.'

'I know,' I said.

'What else do you know?'

'I'll never steal it from you.'

'Never?'

I showed her a built-in wardrobe and the room where she might spend a few nights, brooding over my self-restraint. She asked if the books I had in my library were virtuous. 'Are they reliable?' she said.

'They are. At least they won't fall on your head.'

'And what's this?' she asked pointing to a book entitled *The Gospels of the Devil*.

'It's rather funny,' I said.

'It's not funny at all.' She removed the book from the shelf and threw it on the floor. She dealt in the same way with the other books bearing similar titles and I was asked to throw them away immediately, if I wished to enjoy her company until June 4. 'I'll just put them in another room, if you don't mind,' I said.

'Show me this room,' she said. I showed her one of my terraces and she looked back as if to measure the distance between her bed and the writing desk I had installed on the terrace many years ago. She didn't say anything so I put the satanic books on the writing desk and even covered them with a newspaper, shielding the air and the furniture from the forces of evil. 'I wish you could protect me from your dust,' she said as she headed back for her room. 'Do you know what I saw when you showed me your built-in wardrobe?'

'My clothes?'

'A lot of porn movies. Don't forget I'm an orthodox woman.'

'Don't you have porn movies in Russia?'

'We do, unfortunately. And there's an awful lot of smut on Russian television these days.'

'Is there?'

'I'm ravenous,' she added.

'Give me a minute and I'll rustle something up for supper,' I said.

'Are there no other rooms? Is that all?'

'It is, I'm afraid.'

'I'd better get out of here pretty sharpish. Do you have a pair of sheets?'

'Of course,' I answered putting a pair of clean sheets on her bed.

'Are they really clean?'

'They are.'

'Do *you* take care of them?'

'My cleaning lady does.'

'She's so unreliable!' she said crossly.

'I'll hire another cleaning lady first thing tomorrow morning.'

'I hope you will,' she said as she began to strip her clothes off. Of course she asked me to leave the room and I obeyed her order, thinking we had plenty of time for stripteases and suchlike: I was quite determined to enjoy her body, its outlines and texture. Five minutes later she turned up in the kitchen where I was touching different morsels in an attempt to arrange them beautifully on a huge plate destined for starters. 'I saw your tablecloth,' she said.

'I saw it too – many times.'

'Too many times,' she said.

'I have another tablecloth within my reach.'

'I hope so, otherwise you'll eat alone.'

I did not eat alone.

25.05.2012

Ya pravoslavnaya zhenshina! (I am an orthodox woman!) In English the word 'orthodox' means that the person you speak about has more traditional beliefs than her counterparts belonging to the same religious group. When the English say 'she is an orthodox Christian', they mean her views are more traditional than those of Catholics and Protestants. The word '*pravoslavnaya*', however, broadens the scope of the traditions to which the English refer in their notion of orthodox Christians who, according to the Russian etymology, praise God in the right way – in the *only* way you're supposed to praise God. This way – and Orthodox ways in general – may and must entitle you to a sort of celebration reserved for those who are always right and whose behaviour is wholly attuned to Christ's teaching and ideals.

Ya pravoslavnaya zhenshina! I heard this sentence many times in the course of Natasha's short visit to my room and the rest of my flat which, according to her, had to undergo a metamorphosis – 'otherwise you'll always share your life with demons', as she put it. To achieve this result, I was supposed to get in touch with a Russian priest whose holiness might save my furniture and soul from Hell to which we had been bound for a long time – probably since my departure from Russia. Of course, I settled in France only after spending six years in Belgium where I lived in a house and so had to see that it was in proper repair: no water on the floor, no leaks of any kind. But this flat of mine was waiting for me with impatience and all sorts of demons began to meet in my future

room on a regular basis – almost weekly, as a matter of fact; at least the harangue Natasha gave me suggested such a horrific scenario.

‘I’m going to clean the windows this morning,’ she said on the second day of her visit. ‘You can’t see the world from where you are. You can’t see God either because God is in the world, in our midst.’

‘He might be in my room, for all I know,’ I said.

‘But the air in your room is thick. Can’t you see it’s not transparent? The furniture’s covered in dust and cobwebs. You can’t even see your furniture, if you see what I mean. Can you see what I mean?’

‘Your words are dusty because they float in my air,’ I said.

‘You must look for harmony – within yourself and also in the outside world. This is the same harmony and you can’t live without it, otherwise you’ll die very soon. I can already see your death – in spite or because of your dust. If you’re right, you’re right – you can’t be wrong if you’re right. I realised that a few years ago, thanks to my guru. He knows both Indian philosophy and Russian saints. What counts is light and light is everything. By the way, it’s a north-facing room so it doesn’t get much light. Actually I might sleep in your bed if you turned it.’

‘How am I supposed to turn it?’

‘I’ll tell you later on. You have to turn your soul as well because it’s in a very exposed position.’

‘How do you mean?’

‘The Devil looks at it and you allow Him to feast His eyes on the gorgeous views of your soul. Your soul is gorgeous – can’t you see? You’re not damned, not yet.’

‘Thank you very much.’

‘But if the Devil bites into your soul, you’ll go to Hell.’

‘I hope He’s not hungry.’

‘I am, by the way. Let’s go and have lunch somewhere – not too far from the Palais de Versailles.’ Natasha has a smattering of French.

I took her to the marketplace where a dozen restaurants seemed to beckon to her as she walked in the midst of chairs and tables, choosing the right table and the right chair, for her whole body was involved in the process – not only her palate and bowels. Soon I realised that her palate played no role in her choice of dishes: she invariably chose a chunk of meat accompanied by a mixed salad – at least during her stay in Versailles. She said she had to nourish her body and added with a shake of her head: ‘Don’t forget I’m a singer.’

This time, she said she was no longer hungry and only needed a cup of coffee: she was half-asleep and daydreaming wasn’t her cup of tea. ‘I’ve been in a permanent daydream ever since my arrival,’ she added. She was in the habit of putting finishing touches to her sentences – at least during her life in my flat and on our occasional visits to the capital of France. ‘You can’t just have a cup of coffee in a restaurant,’ I said. ‘You have to order a meal.’

‘I’ll order a cup of coffee.’

‘You can do that in a café, not in a restaurant.’

‘Let’s go to a café, then.’

‘But I am hungry,’ I said.

‘Are you? Why?’

‘Because I am hungry. What’s more, I am right.’

‘All right. Do what you wish.’

I ordered enough food for both of us and we lapsed into silence as if paying homage to the Russian saying ‘When I eat, I’m deaf and mute’. But we weren’t eating yet and our silence sounded awkward: as a musician, I’m used to talking about a *sonorous* silence. The waiter brought us two plates and she began to eat the food she had been served without forgetting my plate and its contents that seemed to appeal to her sense of beauty. ‘What are you eating?’ she asked. I don’t remember what I answered. ‘Well, I’d like to eat what you’re eating.’

‘Do you want me to order the same starter?’

‘Of course I do.’

Three minutes later, the waiter brought her the same starter and she set about devouring two starters instead of one. Shortly afterwards she stopped, however, saying she was no longer hungry. ‘I told you I needed just a cup of coffee. Why didn’t you listen to me?’ She ate the main course and asked for two cups of coffee. The waiter brought her two cups of coffee and she smiled at last as if her smiles were somehow connected to huge quantities of coffee without milk: she has no liking for cappuccino.

We went to the Parc de Versailles and I showed her my favourite fountain just beyond the Grand Trianon. ‘You looked so weary by that fountain,’ she told me two days later. ‘And I was bored to death,’ she added with a grin. She drank another cup of coffee at the Trianon Palace and asked for a second cup as I continued to sip my *citron pressé*. ‘You see, he’s treating me like a star,’ she said.

‘Who? The waiter?’

‘Not you – no doubt about that.’

‘Why do you think he’s treating you like a star?’

‘Because he’ll bring me a third cup of coffee. A gift.’

‘Are you sure?’

‘Let’s wait and see.’ The waiter brought her a third cup of coffee. ‘You see,’ she said.

‘But you’re *not* a star,’ I said.

‘I *am*. And I’d like to stay in this hotel,’ she said without adding anything. What she said wasn’t a question and I didn’t have to answer it: the sentence she uttered wasn’t interrogative, if I remember rightly. It is impolite to point at people, but they don’t necessarily say ‘How rude you are!’ if you keep silent for a while, allowing them to talk to their heart’s content. After all, you have the right to remain silent, even if you’re not a criminal. I’ve always been the silent type.

I live in Le Chesnay situated on the outskirts of Versailles and one might say there’s an air of antiseptic cleanliness about our town centre, with its covered shopping mall and perfect flower displays. At least our mall is a shopper’s paradise and I love to watch people’s reactions when I take them on a sort of sightseeing tour focused on its boutiques and grocery shops – especially if I happen to be surrounded by women. Due to unforeseen circumstances I was deprived of my customary pleasure and we went back to the restaurant where I had treated her to a meal six hours before: she thought she might have dropped her ring in the course of our lunch. No one had found the ring and we drove back to the park where I left her, saying I would revisit the Trianon Palace and meet her half an hour later at the gate through which many tourists walk in the hope of enjoying the sight of the Hameau de la Reine. They don’t *always* enjoy this sight, for the hut has never looked like a palace, but some monarchists think it is full of charm and character on account of its simplicity and back-to-nature tendency. Besides, Giselle didn’t meet her prince in a palace: he courted her with flowers after studying

the social and cultural milieu in which she lived and worked. Before becoming a princess, a shepherdess lives in a hut and Marie-Antoinette was bent on going through the whole gamut of emotions associated with simple hearts and souls.

I found neither the ring nor Natasha and I went back home in the hope of getting a phone call from her, which might have enabled me to learn more about her whereabouts. After a while, I realised I had no alternative but to call her, taking advantage of her love for mobile phones – a sentiment I’ve never experienced, being both a peace-loving individual and a peacemaker. Actually she did call me before I dared to disturb the peace: she wished to know my address. I gave it to her and she disappeared again; for an hour, at least, the silence I listened to said nothing about the hotel Natasha had checked in to, determined to keep away from my dust, lust and demons. So I called her and she said she was watching the latest films in the comfort of her own room. ‘The bathroom is huge and wonderful,’ she added and I realised that no cobwebs had greeted her in the hotel situated in the vicinity of my den – or rubbish dump, to use her definition. The hotel was a real home from home.

26.05.2012

In the morning I rang her mother up to say Natasha had spent the night at a hotel and not in my flat where ‘I’m waiting for her call because she doesn’t answer the phone’. I told her mother the story of the satanic books and, putting herself in her daughter’s shoes, she said she would have acted in the same way, being an orthodox woman and a staunch believer in divine providence. I also told her the story of the three Bentleys and she said I must have insulted her daughter before this episode, otherwise she wouldn’t have talked to me about the Bentleys and my car that didn’t live up to her expectations and standards. ‘I had no time to insult her,’ I said.

‘When did you tell her she was too old? And what about *you*?’

‘I said, “You can move a few rungs up the career ladder if you’re 38 on condition that you’ve already made a name for yourself as a talented singer. But it’s hard to start making a career if you’re 38 years old.”’

‘I don’t admire your forthright way of dealing with people. Was it kind? I’m told you’re a benevolent old man who wouldn’t hurt a fly. Why did you hurt my daughter? Do you prefer flies to humans?’

‘The music world is so awful that only teenagers can prosper in it. And they don’t understand anything, do they? They play horribly, but audiences adore them because they’re young and fresh. And they don’t die young so the gods don’t love them.’

‘She might faint, you know. She gave me a real scare when she fainted last week. She may be small but, when I have to carry her upstairs, she’s a dead weight.’

‘Upstairs? Where?’

‘In my friend’s country house. Why do you keep telling her she’s not a star?’

‘Because she isn’t. But it’s not her fault.’

‘Whose fault is it? Her mother’s?’

‘Of course it’s not *your* fault.’

‘Do you want me to dredge up details of her unhappy childhood, of my divorce?’

‘Far be it from me – ’

‘My daughter’s a wonderful actress. When she says, “I’m a star”, she plays the role of a star.’

‘Does she?’

‘Natasha’s very career-oriented and she doesn’t look her age.’

‘I know. I just put her in the picture – ’

‘Your speeches don’t sit well with her. Many women sacrifice interesting careers for their family, but Natasha will manage to successfully combine family life and a career.’

‘I’m sure she will – no doubt about that.’

‘That’s why she spoke to you about the Bentleys. She was offended and on the verge of tears.’

‘I may be cruel, inhuman and demoniac, but any demon needs time to harm poor humans and animals. We just said “hello” to each other and I rolled her suitcase as far as the car park.’

‘What are you talking about?’

‘About our meeting at the airport. My car was at the car park so I took her there.’

‘Who?’

‘Your daughter.’

‘Where’s the car park?’

‘Inside the terminal.’

‘How far is it from the spot where you met Natasha?’

‘I don’t know. Two hundred meters.’

‘How long did it take you to get there?’

‘Two minutes.’

‘Do you think the Devil can’t destroy humanity in the space of two minutes?’

‘I’m a staunch believer in God’s omnipotence. Incidentally, your daughter asked me if I’d been baptised.’

‘What did you answer?’

‘She also asked me if I believed in God.’

‘What did you answer?’

‘I could have answered the first question, but the second is a tough nut to crack. I don’t discuss my belief in God with my neighbours.’

‘So you believe in God, do you?’

Neither her mother nor I could think of anything more to say and the conversation lapsed into silence. After a while we said ‘goodbye’ to each other and I rang off, thinking Natasha might call me after all, if only to try and solve the problem of her baggage.

I don’t remember when I first hit upon the idea of sending her back to Moscow – to her *real* home about which she talked to me with gusto, saying she had always been happy in her apartment situated within the ‘rose of the winds’, as the Russians put it. For some reason, many Muscovites mention this rose when enlarging upon their creature comforts and the purity of the air they inhale and exhale in their native city justly renowned for its pollution. I pay no attention to their boasting that might jar on you if you listen to what you’re told and even endeavour to get involved in the discussion: you’re bound to lose, wherever you happen to live. Muscovites are always right and their city is now the best city in the world on account of the number of oligarchs who live there instead of settling down in Paris or Venice or New York. Some of them do live in New York, but they always speak proudly of their roots: but for these proverbial roots, they might not have earned several billions of euros in such a short time.

Anyway I thought I should send her back without further ado and I put her in the picture about what I was planning to do in the very near future – within a few hours, to be exact. She said she had no intention of leaving

France prematurely. 'Why not book me into the hotel where I was last night? Actually I wouldn't mind staying in a better hotel, but I'm not interested in you for purely mercenary reasons. Besides, you're so stingy it would be foolish of me to count on your generosity.'

'If you leave Versailles today, I'll have to buy a new ticket for you,' I said.

'I know – you didn't pay much for the ticket I've got. Such tickets can't be exchanged or money refunded.'

'There's a flight at 15.15,' I said.

'I'll stay in Versailles,' she answered.

At this point I began to talk to myself and I said to myself that the whole thing was a put-up job: she hadn't lost anything and had come to France only to meet some friends or boyfriends or potential husbands with lots of villas, Bentleys and other status symbols. Then I began to talk to her; and I went on talking to her for some time. 'The ring was just a pretext,' I said.

'What?' She didn't even say, 'How do you mean?'

'You didn't lose anything last night. You were just putting on an act. *Albertine disparue*.'

'What on earth are you blathering on about?'

'You speak French, don't you? You must have heard about Proust.'

'Do you mean to say I didn't lose my ring?'

'I don't think you did.'

'If you weren't driving this antediluvian vehicle, I'd knock your block off. A karate chop. You stole my ring!'

Immediately she rang her mother up and went on in the same vein: 'He tore the ring from my finger. He threw himself on my body and we struggled violently. I tore myself free and fled. He seized me again. I escaped but he caught me and we struggled once more. The man's a complete shit. Why should I smell this shit? Why should I sit by its side? It's not a man, actually. Just "it", you know.'

My car didn't know what to do with our bodies, for it was on the horns of a dilemma: it might have brought us to our destination or broken down in the middle of nowhere. We arrived home safe and sound, and she began to talk again as if eager to talk to a piece of shit or just to 'it', sitting in an armchair.

She probably talked to me (or to it) about Christianity and the harmony I had to seek in order to escape from the Devil's clutches, but I didn't feel like listening to a load of claptrap for which she might have got a Nobel Prize, had anyone listened to her carefully: she is a born storyteller. She tells you what will happen to your soul and body in this world and elsewhere; she seems to have travelled through the Hereafter as comprehensively as Dante did a few centuries before. And yet no one could have spotted her figure anywhere: she was trackless, so to speak. 'No one will find me because I'm omnipresent,' she said all of a sudden.

'Are you omniscient as well?' I asked.

'I am. Don't I know your destiny? Don't I know you'll perish without me?'

It took hours of negotiations to bring about reconciliation between the two sides. At home we listened to the *Missa Solemnis* performed by Toscanini in 1940 and I said we needed no other harmony to come to terms with our common destiny: I was still yearning to contemplate her naked body. Then we listened to my recording of Tchaikovsky's *Romeo and Juliet* and she said I should devote my life to symphonies and operas instead of writing novels, poems and essays. 'You're a born conductor. You hold the audience in the palm of your hand.'

I'm swept along by the eloquence of your orchestral sound and your visions. You're a visionary artist and you might save the world if you didn't waste time chatting with your girlfriends and writing novels.'

She talked nonsense as usual, but this nonsense allowed me to kiss her many times and I was even on the point of stripping her clothes off; and yet she didn't say, 'You know I won't stand in your way if you want to unbutton my blouse and remove my trousers.' She said nothing and I let her go, thinking I had drunk too much wine to be able to accomplish my task without a hitch – a source of many nightmares from which I've been suffering for some time, notwithstanding my sexual exploits. It's scarcely surprising I was worried and sought to postpone the experience indefinitely: at my age no man can be sure about his masculine powers.

I may be wrong again, for I do remember how I finally removed her clothes one by one, and it doesn't really matter *when* and *how* this came about; what counts are my feelings, sensations and visions. This time my vision was in no way related to the future: I was too busy concentrating on the here and now; to some extent my vision proved my down-to-earth realism. She said, 'Don't get uptight about our intimacy – just do your best. I'll sleep in *your* bed from now on.'

I was disappointed upon seeing the upper part of her legs which didn't seem to live up to my expectations. The legs I saw in my room were somewhat shorter in comparison with what lascivious men are hoping for when about to buy a porn movie or a porn magazine. 'He whom no desire with its snares and poisons can lead astray, by what track can you lead him, the awakened, the Omniscient, the trackless?' All right, I'm neither omniscient nor awakened; I'm in a permanent daydream punctuated by voluptuous bodies, figures and mouths.

27.05.2012

I must speak about love and I have no idea how to go about it – not only because it's a subject that some people refuse to touch upon, being convinced that love is located in the domain of sentiments and therefore shouldn't be analysed. It is rather the *object* of my desire that makes my task painfully arduous and almost unbearable. I felt Natasha's body and enjoyed every curve of it. Her skin lent itself to my caresses with eagerness and tenderness, and I realised her skin was really beyond reproach. I had seldom, if ever, experienced such tactile sensations and love is also located in the domain of sensations, as far as I know. I stroked her thighs, trying to guess what they might look like in broad daylight; and I didn't limit my investigations to the upper half of her legs, going further and further until I reached her toes and heels.

I would add a pair of high-heeled shoes to the legs I visualised as I lay next to her voluptuous body and nothing distracted my attention from these homemade images, not even her sighs, groans and words. Several times she put my hands on her breasts and other sensitive areas of her substance, and I obeyed her orders because they were also my orders, desire and happiness.

I finally got up and pulled her towards me as if she had been unable to step on the floor without my physical or moral support. 'Please put your shoes on,' I said.

'Which pair do you want me to put on?' And she showed me two pairs of shoes.

'The black ones. Anyway, we have plenty of time for both of them.'

She didn't say, 'I'm not the sort of person who'd do a striptease.' She didn't say anything and the silence inside which many songs and operas resounded harmoniously engulfed my body, soul, mind and spine. Should I say and write, 'I've never seen a body like that?' Perhaps I should.

It's difficult to disentangle hard fact
 From myth, or truth from lies. I don't know
 If you're a hard fact or a figment
 Of my imagination. You're a myth, a goddess,
 A nymph I might have courted in Arcadia.
 Where's Arcadia? You're in yet another hotel.
 I can no longer caress your body. You said, 'I like
 The way you stroke my legs.' To strike you,
 To stroke you – there's no difference between
 Pleasure and pain, between hate and love, between joy
 And sorrow. I know I'll never see you again,
 For I'll never forgive you. Nor will you forgive me:
 My heartless words and indifference.
 You'll never know I love you unless you learn English.
 At least I'm in love with your body and the soul
 Does not exist.

We stayed at home until lunchtime and then we had lunch in a Thai restaurant I didn't like much in spite of the beauty of the waiters and waitresses who proved to be kind and efficient. Natasha hummed as she ate and, generally speaking, I wasn't in love with her manners and the way she handled whatever stood and lay on tables: cutlery, napkins, glasses, dishes. But did it really matter? Does it still matter? It does not because only her soul might keep me company today. And the soul does not exist, at least *her* soul.

We went back home and once again I stripped her clothes off; she might have done that on her own, but she asked me to assist her in the preparation for the striptease and I didn't turn down her request. Once released from its fetters, her body jumped up and landed on the toilet seat where it began turning this way and that, stuffing its various aspects into my submissive memory. What does my memory talk to me about? This facet, that facet; this angle, that angle. Should I say, 'I realised I was looking at it from the wrong angle'? There were no wrong angles that afternoon; even my apartment had no wrong angles in spite of its dust and antediluvian wallpaper. Should I write, 'The plaster on the walls was cracked and flaking'? I should not.

Shortly afterwards she took a walk around my flat and I continued to watch her closely, letting no gesture, no angle go unnoticed as if my very life depended on them. It did to some extent, although I can't indicate the limits of this extent, and even its whereabouts are shrouded in mystery. I don't think all my neighbours are voyeurs, but some of them might have got an eyeful of her curves when she stood by the window, her body bathing in the beams of the dying sun. The twilight of the gods suited her perfectly, setting off her alabaster-like skin. Did Othello say anything along these lines when praising Desdemona's beauty?

She kissed me all the time; even in restaurants she performed this ritual whenever on her way to the ladies. And she went to the ladies rather often so I ended up asking myself, 'What's she doing there?' The answer to this question can be found in many films where women rise and go to the toilets with a view to

meeting either men or other women with whom they may have sex for two or three minutes. Well, half a loaf is better than none.

In the evening we met a friend of mine who is the artistic director of two important festivals. He talked to her about the musicians whose propensity for mixing various genres had propelled them to international stardom. 'I used to be a ballerina and I still can dance,' she said.

'How lucky you are!' he answered.

'Yes, I'm very lucky. I have a marvellous voice. I'd be delighted if you could listen to me one of these days.'

'I'd be delighted too.'

'I love Wagner.'

'So do I.'

'We've got a lot in common.'

'I hope so.'

For a while she spoke of her projects, forgetting about her customary visit to the ladies. Then she got up and, without planting a sinful kiss on my lips or left cheek, proved that her memory was as infallible as her sensual appeal. Nor had she forgotten how perfidious and cruel a woman can be, if you rub her up the wrong way. We both know *Così fan tutte* by heart.

'The things she said are simply the ravings of a disturbed mind,' said my friend.

'I know, I know. But her sensuality is in a class of its own. I don't think I've ever held such a woman in my arms. And the exploration for new sources of energy is vital for my future and work.'

'How lucky you are!'

'I *am* lucky, as a matter of fact. Almost 40 years ago, a Moscow friend of mine said about the woman I was in love with: "She's your last chance." He was wrong – Natasha's my last chance.'

'Are you going to marry her?'

'Of course not. But I'll never forget the moments we spent in my room, on my terraces.'

'Her body?'

'Yes, her body and sensuality. And her mouth, her voluptuous, incomparable mouth. And her arms. Whenever I'm with her, I get the feeling she's my envelope. And I'm a letter.'

'Addressed to whom?'

'To God.'

God is not omnipotent: there are mixtures everywhere.

The Devil isn't far; nor is He near. He's somewhere in between.

That's why He's part of this mixture and part of my bed

Where you lie stark naked, where I stroke your thighs.

Your double looks at us – your devil, your demon.

Your tongue is a double-edged sword. I feel its blade

When you say, 'I love you': my body aches and I want to die.

And then you insult me and your insults pierce me like a sword.

God is not omnipotent: there are mixtures everywhere.

We headed for my car and my friend said: 'You know, Vadim rang me up this morning.'

'Did he? How is he doing?'

'Better, much better. I admire him a lot.'

'We're speaking of our mutual friend,' I said to Natasha. 'He's also a pianist.'

'He first lost the use of his legs and so could no longer play the piano,' said my friend.

'You mean he could no longer press the pedals?' she asked.

'That's right. And then his doctor said the cancer had spread to his stomach. He was operated on and got better. So he went to Thailand for relaxation and was run over by a lorry.'

'The evil eye,' she said.

'How do you mean?' (How often do I hear this question? The other day they broadcast a documentary on animal communication and I realised that humans would never be able to get in touch with each other.)

'*Porcha*,' she said. This Russian word means you're being destroyed by someone who wants you to die after suffering a stroke, a relapse and so on.

There was the faintest trace of a smile on my friend's lips. 'Do you really think so?' he asked.

'Of course. What else?'

There was the faintest trace of a smile on my friend's lips.

28.05.2012

Something always goes wrong. Our relative happiness was marred by our visit to a three-star restaurant where Natasha ordered a chunk of meat – she thought she would be served a chunk of meat – and also some salad as a starter. She said she could survive without a starter, but I insisted on her ordering *something* to keep me company and preserve the rhythm and harmony of our dinner. After studying the menu, I said she might have some asparagus and she said 'yes' without thinking twice about what she had ordered on my advice. I was about to order a pigeon, but she forbade me to eat this little bird because 'one shouldn't kill and eat such organisms'.

She ate one fourth of the starter and refused to touch the main dish: a cube and two triangles surrounded by four pyramids and a moat. A moated castle, in other words. The castle was the lamb she had seen on the menu, but she saw it on the plate only when the waiter put them – the plate and the castle – on the table in between her fork and knife. I ate too lunches and I thought I would never eat either meat or fish in any restaurant or even at home where my saucepans and plates had actually been dreaming about vegetarian meals ever since my arrival in France.

As soon as she reached my kitchen, she opened the fridge and began to bite into whatever she could lay her hands on, taking no notice of my anger and annoyance. Suddenly all hell broke loose because I realised I had been living in Hell ever since her arrival in France, in Versailles, in my flat whose patience I had put to test very often. But my flat had never suffered so many crushing defeats in the space of five days. Humiliated and scorned, my flat did all it could to withstand yet another onslaught of the woman who would misplace my things and break my glasses, leaving some slivers on the floor as if I had been supposed to cut my feet whenever I felt like walking barefoot around my castle, alias my home.

'I can't stay here any longer,' she shouted. I'm talking of Natasha now. Actually my flat might also have been itching to leave Versailles and go somewhere else.

'I feel like writing a few pages,' I told her.

'And I feel like singing a few arias,' she said.

'I'd be delighted to listen to your voice again.'

'Why did your neighbour look askance at me? I'm not a scruffy-looking girl, am I?'

'You're not.'

'I've never worn scruffy clothes, I swear.'

'I believe you.'

'Why did she look askance at me? You'd better wipe up that coffee I spilled on the carpet before it sinks in. Why?'

'I don't know.'

'She might have seen me stark naked.'

'I don't think so – she doesn't own a periscope.'

'How do you mean?'

'She lives on the first floor. I live on the second floor.'

'Why did she give me a dirty look? I'm not even your trophy girlfriend because you're neither famous nor rich. Well, I'll sing for her tomorrow. That'll teach her to give me dirty looks!'

Her vulgarity overshadowed the day's events.

29.05.2012

I woke in the middle of the night as if I had known something would happen and only my being on guard could prevent a horde of demons taking up the reins of government. I was in the Kingdom of Beauty and Virtue; unexpectedly, Strife got the upper hand, turning the Kingdom's economy upside down. Natasha wasn't asleep and, as her body happened to be lying by my side, she kissed me on the shoulder and also on the shoulder blade; and I felt both kisses because I was no longer asleep. I was no longer beyond the world where she could kiss me, showing how deeply and tenderly she loved my body and my self that she often confused with my body. She also kissed my ego, my super ego and my persona; and I had no idea what all this might come to because nothing made sense in the kingdom of her vulgarity, rudeness and bad manners.

Once again I went to sleep and when I finally woke up, she told me I had talked or rather shouted in my sleep. 'You shouted, "Monsters are still alive."'

'Why didn't you shout in your turn?' I asked.

'What for?'

'You might have shouted, "There's no need to shout, for goodness' sake! Just calm down."'

'I prayed instead.'

'Did you?'

'I prayed for an hour or so. I was holding your soul in my hands and I prayed loudly.'

'I didn't hear anything.'

'God must have heard my prayer.'

'I was just speaking of monsters, not necessarily *my* monsters.'

'You shouted, "*My* monsters are still alive.'"

And she made a speech about virtue, goodness and providence. I had this sudden impulse to shout out ‘Rubbish!’ in the middle of her speech, but I’d had my fill of shouting already. At some point she said, ‘You’re so polite – you always listen to what I say.’ I said nothing.

And then I said, ‘Are you sure I said, “*My* monsters are still alive?”’

‘Absolutely sure.’

‘Well, a saint might say something along those lines – saints are used to fighting their monsters.’

‘Are they? Anyway, you’re not a saint – far from it.’

‘I know, but that doesn’t mean I’m a demon.’

‘There’s a horde of demons inside you and I’ll exorcise you and them, I promise. And I’ll call in a priest who’ll exorcise this house. You’ll never shout again. You know what? I was woken early by the sound of the birds singing and I said to myself, “I should sing today.”’

‘I’d be delighted to listen to you. I must work today, by the way – this is *my* song.’

‘Your work?’

‘Yes.’

‘What are you going to write? A poem?’

‘No. I’m writing a novel about Plato and Greek philosophy in general.’

Two hours later I heard her voice once again and I was overwhelmed by its beauty. I was still in the Kingdom of Beauty – and in the Kingdom of Virtue as well, as far as I could judge. She was singing *Tosca*.

*Non la sospiri la nostra casetta
che tutta ascosa nel verde ci aspetta?
Nido a noi sacro, ignoto al mondo inter,
pien d’amore e di mister?*

(Don’t you sigh for our little house
which, all hidden in the green, waits us?
Nest to us sacred, unknown to the whole world,
Full of love and of mystery?)

She had already spoken to me about our nest and quest for the Grail, which is a private matter – a delicious pursuit of conjugal joy. Full of love and of mystery, the voices of things. And I thought and said, ‘*Or lasciarmi al lavoro* (Now leave me to my work).’

I told her I’d seen a beautiful Audi at my garage; she said she’d like to see it herself. ‘Could you buy it today?’

‘I should call my Luxembourg banker first.’

She said, ‘Your apartment should be redecorated.’

‘Well, you know what it’s like, Natasha, when you’ve got the decorators in. You don’t quite know where you are.’

‘I’ll tell you where you are. Anyway it’s better to buy a house.’

*Dai boschi e dai roveti,
dall'arse erbe, dall'imo
dei franti sepolcreti*

(From the woods and from the thickets,
from the burned grasses, from the depth
of the broken tombs)

Suddenly I heard her talking to someone and there was nobody at home except my cat whom I forbid to get close to the windows from which he might jump to his death. She brought him to the room where I was talking to my computer and I threw a tantrum, as might have been expected: I love my cat to distraction and I don't want him to perish because of the negligence of a fair maiden.

I went to the living room and saw my window; it wasn't shut. 'Why did you open the window?' I asked.

'It's really hot and stuffy in here – let's open other windows as well.'

'The bedroom gets a bit stuffy in the summer, but this is not the bedroom, is it?'

'I don't know. Someone might have slept in here once or twice.'

'You're not at home, so please consult me whenever you wish to perform *your* ritual.'

'Don't you want to work with me?'

'I've never played *Tosca*.'

'What about *Parsifal*?'

'I'm busy at the moment.'

'You're always busy.'

'I am.'

'Why did you invite me?'

'Because I was dreaming about your body.'

'I'm a singer, not a body.'

'You're both.'

'Is that what you call a Platonic dialogue?'

'Why not? He speaks a lot about the body.'

Or lasciarmi al lavoro. Or lasciarmi al lavoro.

I drank a cup of tea with milk and heard her voice; she wasn't singing this time. 'Come here!' she shouted. 'Come here, you bastard!'

'She didn't half shout at him!' said my neighbours.

'What's this?' she asked me. I looked at what she was pointing at with her index finger. She was sitting in front of my computer and her index finger touched its screen and my text several times.

Actually I've come to dislike the themes on which Borges built his oeuvre: labyrinths, mirrors, dreams. Only tigers meet with my approval as I re-read some of his stories and poems. I must admit I do it very seldom and whenever I do open his books I recall Mrs Nabokov and her appraisal of these works. 'We

didn't like the local colour,' she said and once again her husband's ghost made his appearance in the hall where she had offered me a cup of tea and a delicious cake.

Of course she alluded to gauchos and the stories where they kill each other and innocent pedestrians, but now even dreams and labyrinths seem provincial to me because they have been overused by Borges' admirers and successors. Once, in Japan, I read a poem of mine and was asked by a member of the audience: 'Do you admire Borges?'

'I used to like him very much,' I said.

'Did you fall under his influence?'

'Perhaps.'

'Your poem reminds me of Borges.'

The poems I write today are quite different and I don't think I would draw a parallel between them and Borges' poetical output which gets further and further from my writing desk and my computer. 'I am a dream of God' no longer squares with my style. And yet I continue to view the world in terms of platonic ideas: it is too late to change my lifelong habits and attachments. In my childhood I realised I had to look beyond whatever I saw in front of me, for my mother kept saying: 'You don't fit my image of how my son should look.' I adored my mother, but I did all I could to estrange myself from her; she might draw the logical conclusion that I wasn't really her son. I seldom if ever looked at her as if she had been a stranger in whose house I had been put by mistake: nurses often mix up babies in maternity wards.

'What did you write about me?' Natasha fixed my face with a stare of such disapproval I didn't dare to move.

'I didn't write anything about *you*,' I said. Actually I did write *something* about her, but after breakfast I resolved to reread a discarded passage – the one I quoted above; and she found it as she did her best to unearth some fresh evidence of my double-dealing.

'So that's why you invited me,' she said.

'How do you mean?'

'You'd better go to church.'

'What for?'

'You must seek divine inspiration. Instead, you describe my predicament.'

'Where *are* you?' I asked pointing at the discarded excerpt.

'There's no need to shout, I can hear perfectly well,' she shouted. 'I'm everywhere.'

'You don't speak English.'

'I do. And I understand it perfectly. Anyway, I don't need it. Often there's no clear evidence one way or the other and you just have to base your judgment on intuition.'

'On feminine intuition?'

'That's right. You don't know me yet. I can do everything. By the way, I might as well learn another language – it's all grist to the mill when it comes to getting job.'

'Where *are* you?' Again I pointed at the discarded excerpt.

'You talked to me about Borges.'

'I might have mentioned him. But I talk about him to other people too.'

'And you showed me your poems. Every Russian knows the word "poem".'

‘My poems have been read by many people.’

‘Not many people read your poems – or anything you’ve written, for that matter. You’re just a bad loser, a has-been. Well, it’s your own lookout if you no longer conduct and play the piano.’

‘I trust Eternity. Of course I didn’t see it the other night –’

‘You’ll never see it.’

‘We’ll just have to wait and see.’

‘Pie in the sky. And you talked to me about Nabokov. And about Japan.’

‘I often talk about Japan.’

‘I know the word “mother”. And I’m your mother now – I told you that, didn’t I?’

‘My mother was 21 when she got married. You aren’t married yet, as far as I know.’

‘You don’t know anything.’

‘Tolstoy used to put his relatives in his works.’

‘Did he?’

‘He didn’t use their names, though. You’re Natasha in my novel.’

‘Am I? You’re mad. I’ll write about you in my novel, “He went mad towards the end of his life.”’

‘What about Nietzsche? Was he mad *throughout* his life? Some philosophers think so.’

‘Do they?’

‘You rummage through my drawers and spy on my computer. Aren’t your actions ethically questionable?’

‘Your computer stands in my room so I do with it whatever I like. Besides, God came to my rescue once again. I knew I should read your text – He told me to do so.’

‘But you read too much into this text.’

‘I know what I’m doing. And tonight I’ll pull your soul out of your body and shake it out.’

‘A dirty old rug?’

‘I came here to save you. Don’t you need another birth?’

‘Are you really my mother?’

She asked me to take her to a hotel in Paris and not in Versailles. But first she had to call her mother, using one of my phones and not her mobile phone that she pressed against her heart. I dialled her mother’s number and she began to talk: ‘Is Sasha with you? Ask him to record our conversation. This moron wrote about me this morning. The whole book is a pack of lies. I regard it as a slander on my good reputation. I’ll sue him for slander. And he wrote a novel about a man who thinks he’s a king. He thinks he’s a king, the moron. So he writes novels about kings. And he paid a visit to the kings of Poland when he was in Krakow – I found a ticket on his writing desk. He says Nabokov also wrote a novel about an impostor, a self-obsessed king. Well, we’ve got many kings in our midst. And many paedophiles. I’m not your Lolita, do you hear? His majesty’s sitting opposite me in his favourite armchair. In his bedroom there’s a throne – a *siège épiscopal*, as he calls it. He sits on it all day long or walks around stark naked. The madcap antics of a clown. As crazy as they come. He’s got an inflated sense of his own importance. Speaking about eternity all the time. He thinks he’s eternal. I tell him eternity is related to Hell and he talks to me about Spinoza. He says Spinoza talks about eternity. And he rejects immortality, the moron. I tell him immortality is Paradise and he laughs. He doesn’t believe in Paradise because he believes only in Hell. Well, he’ll land up in Hell – no doubt about that. Spending my holiday with this naked

man – I can't imagine anything worse! Is Sasha recording our conversation? O.K. Clinically insane. And he says, "Nietzsche was also clinically insane." With his frumpy clothes and bleary eyes, he looks like nothing on Earth. No family, no children. He doesn't want to have children because the world is sad already. Why increase the quantity of sadness? Does he know what sadness is, I wonder? And he says, "I'm Tolstoy." An impotent moron. He can't do anything. Don't worry – I wasn't sexually assaulted. He can play Brahms or Beethoven, but he can't live with a woman. And he can't have children. His boozy breath can be smelt as soon as he comes into the room. I'm ashamed to be seen with him. A doddering old man. He's in a tight corner. We'll show him where crayfish hibernate.'

Another Russian idiom that means you'll be in a tight spot sooner or later. They may beat you up or kill you. Where *do* crayfish hibernate? *Muori! muori!*

PART THREE

‘There’s only one direction – towards my flat, towards my body. I’m in the centre, my body is in the centre. It’s easy to find my body. An easy target, not even a moving one. I built a thick glass door so I could see my visitors life-size. Death-size. They might kill you for a frown of disappointment. They rob you and you’re not even allowed to frown, let alone say something.’

I had a friend who got killed in Paris, not far from Versailles, almost 20 years ago. A week before his death, he left a message on my answerphone, putting me in the picture about what he had done to protect himself from Russian contract killers. I called him but no one answered the phone; and yet he was in the land of the living and even if he had already been killed by the merciless bunch of Russians, his wife might have picked the receiver up. No one did, as if my friend had just received a parcel bomb. He had not and anyway he knew he would be killed by bullets, not by a bomb or a poisoned arrow.

There was an alarm system; the alarm went off. As a matter of fact the alarm didn’t go off. They had put the alarm system out of action beforehand. The doorbell rang once or twice. It was past midnight but he wasn’t asleep; he was in bed with his wife. He ought to have stayed in bed. Why did he make for the door? They would have killed him anyway. It alarms new parents when their baby first vomits a large amount of milk, but his parents were fast asleep in two faraway countries: Russia and Austria. Their baby vomited a large amount of red milk as if giving back his mother’s milk, dyed red. Dyed red, the fibres are woven into the Carpet of Death. A machine gun fired a lot of bullets through the thick door, through the looking glass. There was a man in that looking glass – his murderer. His victim got back to his wife by crawling on all fours. He was crawling on all fours through the Carpet of Death. His wife asked no questions but gave a cry. She wasn’t surprised as if she had been put in the picture a long time ago. ‘They killed me,’ he said, whereupon he died in her arms.

Only after one has experienced pain can one know pain. Only after one has experienced death can one know death. Knowledge and action are not separated. His present went into the past. His bodily presence was also in the past – on the bed, before the door; before the shots were fired. He thought the door was bullet-proof, but nothing is bullet-proof in this world of ours. And certainly not his door, or my door. The door of my life is open; anybody can walk through it. And whoever walks through a door can also shut it behind him. One bullet, two bullets.

One of my *femmes fatales* lives in Moscow and in Paris. How many lovers has she enjoyed over the last 20 years? Numbers played an all-important role in our relationship and I’m loath now to add anything to the heaps of them towering over the time we spent together; we broke off our engagement 5 years ago. The pyramids of numbers. Her last lover – he is by no means her *late* lover – thinks only in terms of numbers; and yet his approach to them and to the universe have nothing in common with Pythagorean theories.

Once, at lunch, he spoke about his sojourn in the United States. How long had he stayed there? ‘Social realism. The Americans fulfilled many communist ambitions. Mass culture.’ ‘There are those,’ I said ironically, ‘who argue that this is not mass culture but popular culture, and that it’s critical of traditional high culture and is therefore a good thing.’ He continued with unabated enthusiasm, ‘Fast-food restaurants – gas stations for the human gut. The uniformity of purpose, money everywhere. You can trust only those who are without a vested interest so you can trust nobody. Adults look and talk like children. The omnipresence and omnipotence of lawyers, ridiculous trials – an echo of Stalinist trials with a farcical touch. The Soviet people going abroad were

instructed not to take an elevator with only one woman in it. The same happens in America now. You'd better not venture into an elevator in which there's only one woman – you'll be sued for sexual harassment. Vulgar tabloid sensationalism on television, vulgarity and stupidity, sneakers. People are dressed in the same fashion, like communists in the China of the Sixties. Another Cultural Revolution, a peaceful one. Manufacturing consent, manufacturing happiness. Their happiness can be mass-produced rather cheaply. But nobody aspires to another happiness, so everybody is happy. Publicity and prudery, smugness. Money, money, money.'

'He might have mentioned American universities,' I thought. And many other things. The luminous side of the United States, the infinity of America. But his diatribe against money struck a chord. We talked about literature and music. 'Contemporary artists don't care deeply and passionately about art and its mission,' he said. He was already using my words: 'mission', 'beauty'. 'Antonioni says that films are not made with passion nowadays. I like fanatics in art. Musil says that, contrary to Thomas Mann, he writes for non-existent people. I agree with Musil. The duty of an artist is to express himself, to explore his own mind and soul without taking into consideration the moods and preferences of his fellow citizens, of his contemporaries in general. An ideal artist is a fanatic, an explorer, not an entertainer.'

How many ideas of mine did he use in his monologues? I won't count them. No numbers. What he said was always dreadfully clichéd. He adored music, mainly 'difficult' composers like Schoenberg, Webern, Obrecht. And he spoke at length about great conductors of the past. And he compared modern wines to modern orchestras. 'They all smell of vanilla. New oak barrels. They all smell and taste and sound alike. Commercial products. Nice, charming, precise, glossy, fruity. No passion, no metaphysics. Before 1961 wines were metaphysical, not just a pleasant drink. Orchestras were metaphysical too – not suitable for supermarkets. And novels also smell of vanilla nowadays. New world order. Everything smells of vanilla. Non-local connections. Commercialism, the shoddy culture of mass commercialism. Only suffering helps to maintain a moral equilibrium in a society that is motivated by greed. There's no suffering any more, no inner suffering – just toothache. Or something so shallow that any psychoanalyst, even an amateur, can dispel or eliminate it in no time at all, removing it like a mere pimple. Sufferings have turned into pimples nowadays.'

He used my ideas and words very often as if we had owned the same computer. Was his computer connected to mine? His soliloquies sounded like jottings. He seldom developed his ideas. My ideas. He just dropped them. In a sense he was an idea-dropper. Or a maxim-dropper. Or an eavesdropper. He reeled off pell-mell my thoughts and judgements. He was getting accustomed to the inner side of my nature, to my inner suffering. His aim was to become the man he intended to swindle. He appropriated my life and began to grow inside me, within my body. Holding out my right hand, nodding my head. He needed my right hand and my nodding head. 'The ceremonies have degenerated into vulgar, commercialised spectacles.' 'Hollywood movies,' I said with a laugh, 'are anti-establishment, critical and celebratory of everyday life.' He went on, unruffled, 'The commercialisation of sport.' And he raised my arm as the words came pouring out.

Soon I detected a dissonant note in the harmony of his abuses. 'A unit trust is an attractive way of investing in stocks and shares.' 'They invest in horses which they hope will make them a fortune in stud fees some time in the future.' 'A better return on the investment.' 'A number of people invested in night storage heaters.' These notes were so frequent now that I realised he had imperceptibly modulated into a different tonality altogether. His music was still tonal, for all the love he bore Arnold Schoenberg. He was my computer, my doppelgänger. And whenever I shook hands with him I heard one of these sentences: 'Much of the money

was invested in property,' or 'You should invest instead of wasting your money'. And I nodded my agreement. And he gave me an encouraging nod as I opened my secretaire and drew my chequebook out. 'A better return on the investment,' I said with a smile. His smile.

A few months later his music grew atonal. He said somebody had let him down. 'A certain person who shall remain nameless. You're not likely to know him anyway. I'm pretty sure you don't know him.' And he enlarged upon Russian banks. 'High interest rates. And I always insist on getting my money's worth, especially *your* money. Unfortunately Russian bankers are unreliable and dishonest.'

Another person had let him down too. And yet that person had a few ships in the Arctic Ocean. And somebody else was building thousands of cars to be shipped to Siberia. But the ships had got stuck somewhere. 'I wonder where they are,' he said pensively. 'I hope they're not trapped in the Arctic Sea. Only penguins can survive on the Arctic ice-cap.' And he added optimistically, 'There are good profits to be made in Russia.' And he added pessimistically, 'A high risk of failure.' And he added even more pessimistically, 'I think that the risk of failure is too great.'

A few days later he put the finishing touches to this vista of pessimism: 'My friend will never do business with the Siberians again. It's not his fault – he's also a victim. He suffers a lot, I can assure you. He lost everything. To make money you've got to take chances. Well, money doesn't bring happiness, consequently the loss of money shouldn't make one unhappy. There are more important things – music, picture galleries, women. Your former mistress is beautiful, isn't she?'

I am no mind reader, no heart reader, no soul reader. I see only screens on which a great many words appear and disappear. And I read those words, taking them at their face value, screen value. And I don't see anything beyond those words: no landscapes of intentions, no cities of stratagems. People tell you 'A', but there's 'B' beyond that 'A'. And often 'C' and 'D' and even 'F'. The whole alphabet might be found beyond that innocent-looking 'A'. Plus a few numbers. Numbers are produced in vast numbers. I hear only A. And when I doubt the sincerity of the speaker, I ask him, 'Is it really "A" you pronounced a few moments ago?' 'Of course,' he answers. And he repeats, 'A, A, A.' But the outlines of other letters are traced in his mind by the laser beam of his consciousness; and the words 'astray', 'attack'. My former mistress betrayed and robbed me.

'You'll never get your money back,' she said. 'Siberia is a huge area. A few scraps of paper in Siberia. How could you hope to find them? Siberia is bigger than a haystack. Anyway you don't want to die, do you? Be careful or you might get yourself into trouble. Those Siberians are dangerous, you know. They're born killers and dead shots. And there are many contract killers among them. They'll do anything for a fistful of dollars. They can come over here. After the fall of communism they travel all over the world – the Siberians, their wives and their children. They're born travellers, as a matter of fact. So you ought to lie low. What's lost in Russia can't be recovered. The problem of Russia is that the Mafia has infiltrated all sectors of society.'

We all have the sixth sense, but we can't use it consciously, like a psychological tool. This phenomenon just *manifests* itself, unexpectedly sometimes. An insect quivers its wings – that's how it happens. There's an insect inside us and suddenly the insect quivers its wings. You feel a palpitation inside you. It's not your heart you feel, not the palpitations of your heart. No, it's quite different, something intangible. An insect in your body, quivering its wings. A dragonfly. You have dragonflies in your stomach.

Did I feel anything like that? A premonition, a presentiment? Once we stayed together far into the night and suddenly I felt it. A palpitation. They were talking about their dog. Telling a lot of stories. And all those

stories featured a bone and the dog. At last I realised they were playing with *me*. *I* was their dog. They were holding a bone above my head. I jumped higher and higher.

Death comes or does not come; it depends on how you open the front door of your house. You don't have to open it and if you do open it you may see death standing on your threshold. So you say, 'Hello death,' and death says, 'Hello, moron.' That's how you may meet death. He can also turn out to be a maiden, this death of yours. You greet this maiden and she enters your house as if she was your mother, your father, your chambermaid or housekeeper. But even your housekeeper doesn't take the liberty of imposing on you like that. So the person you welcome into your abode is not your housekeeper; nor is this person a man or a woman. You don't need to dine with life because you always dine with life and you don't like tautologies. Who is it, you wonder? A man or a woman rings your doorbell and you wonder who rings your doorbell. Death does. What else? Nothing else. You just survive or you don't – that's how the matter stands, or lies, or falls down. You find the matter beside your bed and you wonder how it got there. Well, it might just have fallen from your bed.

What's the matter? I know Vadim doesn't think this life of ours is important, but it matters to me. He no longer felt his feet and this partial paralysis may play an important role in the life of a pianist, especially if the pianist in question plays in public. Vadim stopped giving concerts and went to a hospital where they said he was a cancer patient. They didn't say he'd died of liver cancer, but they said he was already in a cancer ward where he might die of cancer at any minute. One minute replaced another minute and every minute was stuffed with cancers of all sorts. Then he was cured and injured in a road accident and one might say this happened within one short sentence.

Again he went to a hospital where a doctor told him, 'You remind me of the model aeroplanes I played with in my childhood. They came in pieces I had to put together.' The doctor put his pieces together, but he didn't really have his patient back on his feet again. 'Never mind,' said my friend. 'I can crawl across the floor.' I didn't ask him what he was living for and if there was an aim in his life – a platonic idea one may dream about in vain. There are many platonic ideas in my life and I have been dreaming about one of them for some time now. Who should turn up at my BNP bank but an ideal woman, no less!

No sooner had she made her appearance than I felt a dozen platonic ideas germinating in my mind as if to convince me I was on the right track at last. She seemed to personify the idea of elegance and that of beauty; her smile, though not promising anything, spoke volumes about our future. Another love story?

There are no stories, only stones; and one of these stones is Natasha about whom I continue to think as if this book hadn't been finished yet. Apparently it is not and her remarks, her insults, crop up as I recall her naked body lying on my terrace or standing in one of my bathrooms. She kept repeating that I was stingy and, when talking to her mother, she even used an expression she might have coined on the spur of the moment, in a fit of anger: '*Odesskaya gidobina*' (a Yid from Odessa is always stingy). She said I was impotent, which didn't tally with the remark she had dropped two days earlier: 'If you go on like that, you'll rip my insides.'

Several years ago, my last (but by no means late) mistress interrupted our dinner, ringing me up, putting her foot down. Many mistresses, a mini-harem. Would it be easier to have a harem? Of course harems no longer exist – at least not as sumptuously as they used to in days of yore when Solomon or a sultan had a hundred dishes on their dinner table and a thousand women in their beds. But some oligarchs do have harems where jewels hang from ceilings or Christmas trees; where beautiful naked bodies are as common as the stars in heaven and on Earth. Those stars sing and dance, their bellies performing a ritual to which I'll never get used, being

deprived of both bellies and performers: I bought my last Christmas tree ten or eleven years ago and the jewels I might buy some day are still in their boutiques, guarded by bodyguards and alarm systems.

They come, undress, dance and massage my shoulders and the rest of my body that I have mentally prepared for the rite of spring. They recite their love letters and sing *Madame Butterfly* as if to remind me they have become geishas only for my sake, determined to make me happy and immortal (or rather eternal). But they're as jealous and vindictive as my last mistress, the violinist, who said once, 'I'll cut her throat if I see you together.' In harems, inside their rooms, beside their fountains and jewel boxes, women used to cut off their rivals' noses and their victims couldn't even curse them, their tongues being removed and thrown into cesspools.

Besides, your wife or mistress might elope with a stranger: contrary to a widespread opinion, women could leave their harems and take a ride in whatever vehicle they had within their reach. They could also go swimming and sultans used to say to them, 'We want clean rivers and lakes, where you can swim without risk to your health.' Upon that eve she fled away / When Rhamazan's last sun was set –

Natasha got out of my car and made her way to a restaurant where she had dinner with her friends or friend, with the faithless Giaour or faithful Gennady or both. And no one has cut her throat yet.

Yet another love story? There are no stories, only stones or ideas. *Femme fatale*. The lady I saw at my bank is also a stone, a precious stone. What's the difference between a precious stone and a stone hurled at you by someone whose lips you can't forget?

POSTSCRIPT

Few are there among men who arrive at the other shore; the other people here run up and down the shore. But those who, when the law has been well preached to them, follow the law, will pass across the dominion of death, however difficult to overcome.

Dhammapada

Je voulais. I wished to say this and that and ‘that’ was perhaps further away from this place, from this Earth and world. I bought two pens this morning and I can write about everything. A man is dying nearby, a neighbour. He might have died this morning: there are too many cars in his driveway. I wished to write about death in general, not about *his* death. I wished to write about the *idea* of death. At the beginning of Part Three I wrote something about death. I don’t think I could write anything better on the subject, on the object. I look at myself in the mirror I put on my terrace. I’m an object as long as I look at myself. I’m a subject whenever I touch myself and think about myself. I’d better not think about myself too often.

Je voulais. I wished to contradict Plato, Socrates and immortality. Death is the separation of soul and body and Socrates sings an oratorio to celebrate his body’s departure. I love my body and I wouldn’t part from it for all the tea in China. Give me all the tea you’ve got in your shops, but I’ll refuse to give you my body. I can live without your tea, not without my body.

Socrates thinks that the soul or mind thinks better without the body. I don’t wish to think; I need my body and if you take it away, I’ll shout endlessly and my tears will scorch your bodies.

Knowledge is recollection, he says. I’ve lost my memory many times and I don’t recollect anything except death. If you ask me what death is, I’ll answer you immediately. Don’t ask me anything.

Socrates thinks he’ll meet better people in the Hereafter. What would I say to Plato? ‘You’re wrong.’

‘Crito, I owe a cock to Asclepius; will you remember to pay the debt?’ When you recover from an illness, you’re supposed to pay a cock to Asclepius. Is life an illness throughout or only in parts? You fall ill, recover and pay a cock to Asclepius. But do you really recover? If you don’t, you shouldn’t pay your debt to Asclepius. Only when life is over, you can ask someone to offer a cock to this god. And what if you’re longing to take your own life? To whom should you give a cock? To yourself? Why should you do so if you can’t take advantage of your own generosity? So you eat the cock and gear yourself up for another death. And then you just eat another cock.

I’m neither a seer nor a thinker. I go beyond myself and everything else, and there’s no harmony. No inner life, no outer life. There’s a life of sorts and I don’t know whose life it is.

‘Don’t give me China and its tea; give me 400 years.’

‘I’d like to see your photograph album,’ she said. I showed it to her: my parents, my friends. ‘I’d like to have *your* photograph,’ she said. I’ve got a big photograph of mine, but I don’t remember where it comes from. I keep it in one of my built-in wardrobes. She found it and said, ‘Wonderful. I’ll hang it in my room.’ ‘It’s much bigger than your suitcases,’ I said. ‘You’re so handsome. When was it taken? Where? In Japan? You’re getting fatter and fatter, but I don’t mind. I don’t like skinny men.’ The photograph is still in my wardrobe.

What do we feel as we look at a photograph? Does our reaction to it depend on its whereabouts? Indeed any photograph can be seen from different angles unless we are unable to move our eyes and bodies. Suppose the photograph in question is lying on a writing desk amidst a few sheets of paper. Of course we may discard the sheets because they have nothing to do with the photograph: they feature poems, not human features. And yet they *might* have something in common. The photograph; the sheets of paper covered with letters, lines and poetic images. What is the link I’m looking for? The images? These images are not of the same variety, are they? The first variety is made up of faces, necks, necklaces and shoulders. Poetry, on the other hand, may paint a black picture of life by means of letters, commas and question marks. What I light upon, therefore, is another question mark: I can hardly see the difference between a poem and a photograph because both of them depict life and nothing else. Only colours are different: black, white, blue, red.

I paint you in black and white, but you might be blue, green,
Brown. What’s beyond these colours? A woman,
Brünnhilde, another death, another idea or determinism.
Too much philosophy and a face. Eternity is not a photograph, a picture,
A mixture of life and death. It is either life or death – or neither...nor...

I look upon the world as a bubble. It is a bubble, nothing else. And also toil and trouble. I like bubbles in my bath, but why should I live in a bubble? In which one? There are so many of them. And in every bubble there’s some trouble. And probably toil. And what about a glass of champagne? Shall I live in it? In all its worlds? What if the king of death picks it up and drinks it?

She ordered the lamb and I said she wouldn’t get a chunk of meat she was dreaming of. ‘Why don’t you want me to order it? Is it too expensive? I know you’re not stinking rich, but you might be more generous. After all, you’re having dinner with a beautiful, sexy woman. All the waiters and their male customers are green with envy. My former husband *was* stinking rich – he used to bring me bags of dollars. I was fed up with these bags and I left him. I’ve never been very money-minded, you know.’

Once the dinner was over, she said, eyeing the bill, ‘This meal must be miles too expensive.’ She snatched the bill out of my hand before I had a chance to look at it and said, ‘My husband used to pay twice as much at the Metropol. He didn’t stint on caviar.’

She was always behind me in the car, the right door being jammed. (There were no *right* doors during her stay in France.) I was driving her to yet another hotel and she said she had recorded our conversation – for her archives and solicitor. I said we might have dinner in a Belgian restaurant I went to rather often. She said, ‘O.K. But first you should find a hotel and pay for it.’ I said we should book a table first. She said, ‘O.K.’ I pulled up in front of the restaurant and soon joined her in the car again. We went in search of a hotel and found none. ‘I don’t want to eat with you,’ she said. ‘Drive me back to Versailles. I’ll go to the hotel where I spent one night.’ I said I had to cancel our reservation. Again I drove my car to the restaurant, got off and cancelled our reservation. I got in the car and drove off. ‘Do you know where your hotel is?’ I asked. No answer. ‘O.K. We’ll speak of it in Versailles.’ When crossing the Seine, I looked back and saw nothing except my car. I was already on the motorway so I had to drive as far as Versailles to make a U-turn. I went to a restaurant instead – not to a Belgian restaurant, needless to say. One hour later I called her and she said, ‘I’m having dinner with my friends. Why did you steal my luggage?’

I brought three suitcases to the hotel where she was staying. She was out. I drove back home and found a message on my answerphone. Her mother’s voice. ‘Natasha forgot her black shoes at your place. Bring her the shoes and cash.’

At some point she said, ‘I love you.’ We were in bed. At some point I said, ‘We’re meant for each other.’ Did I mean it? Of course not, but she believed me. Two days later she said, ‘You said we were meant for each other.’ ‘Do you *always* mean what you say?’ I said. ‘You said, for instance, “I love you.” Did you mean that? Of course not. So what?’ And then I called her hotel in the morning and she said, ‘I wrote you a letter.’ ‘Can you read it?’ I asked. ‘When shall we meet again?’ she asked. ‘Can’t you read it?’ I said. I had no wish to meet her. ‘My voice isn’t suitable for it,’ she said. ‘What’s wrong with your voice?’ I asked. ‘I’ve just woken up,’ she said, ‘and I shouldn’t recite my letter on an empty stomach. I cried the whole night after your departure. Then I wrote this letter and calmed down. Now I’m happy again.’ I called her an hour later and she read the letter out loud. I love you. She did mean it. I love you, I love you, I love you, I love you, I love you, I love you, I love you. Ad nauseam.

She bought a lot of orchestral scores. ‘I’ll sing and you’ll conduct,’ she said. And she went on, ‘Nobody knows this music. That’s how I’ll make a name for myself and for you. And we’ll buy contemporary furniture – yours is rotten. You need a few mirrors as well.’

Just then, her mobile phone rang. When? ‘I’m coming back soon...A Parisian holiday...I’ll come back soon...Thank you. Looking forward to our meeting at the airport...You might find it difficult to believe, but I swear the guy just sent me a ticket, booked a double room and paid for it. Must have heard me somewhere. Another member of my fan club. I haven’t seen him, not once...A taxi waiting for me at the airport...I swear.’ She swore she had never seen me before.

For a while we walked around the Butte de Montmartre. 'I know this restaurant. My friends invited me, twelve years ago. Let's have lunch,' she said. 'Not here. The cuisine must be awful and the glasses are even worse than elsewhere,' I said. 'You're a real stick-in-the-mud,' she said.

'Last night I talked to my mother about the kings of Poland,' she said. 'We're descended from Polish royalty, you know.' 'From which monarch are you descended? An elective monarchy, you know.'

'I decided to give you another chance, the last one,' she said. 'I don't need this chance,' I said. She glanced at me. What did I read into her glance? Nothing at all. Her glance isn't a book. Is it a bad book? Why should I read bad books?

I stopped talking to her at the end of our lunch. 'If the sight of a few wine glasses offends you, then I think you've got problems!' she said. 'I'm fed up to the back teeth of being criticized all the time. Can't you stop talking?' I said. I hoped she'd take the hint and leave me alone. 'I love your recitals,' she said, 'but in person you're a crashing bore.' She ordered a bottle of wine, drank it and paid for it.

Then I heard her voice once again:

*Wie Sonne lauter strahlt mir sein Licht:
der Reinste war er, der mich verriet!*

Did I really betray her? My radiance, her radiance. Like sunlight. We were going back to my car. A long way, a long walk. I continued to play hide-and-seek with her. She always won. Our twilight streets. Old people often rely on pets for comfort and companionship in their twilight years.

A *femme fatale* is more valuable than an ordinary woman. Conjugal happiness. You're married with three young children. All your household goods are insured against accidental damage. It's a bit bourgeois, isn't it, living happily ever after? A *femme fatale* makes you withdraw into yourself. No yoga classes. You just write a diary, a postscript, instead of going on with your narrative. The last leitmotiv one hears in the *Götterdämmerung* is called *Liebeserlöschungsmotiv*. You're redeemed through love. Who? Siegfried is dead, so is Wotan. The audience? The younger generation? After all, this leitmotiv first makes its appearance in the third act of *Die Walküre*. Brünnhilde breaks the news to Sieglinde: '*Ein Wälsung wächst dir im Schoss!*' (A Volsung is growing in your womb!) By way of an answer, Sieglinde rapturously sings this leitmotiv. Is she redeemed through love? Or is it her son the leitmotiv hints at? And what about the end of the *Götterdämmerung*? Both Sieglinde and Siegfried are dead. What does Wagner have in mind? A multitude of Siegfrieds, the younger generation?

What if we they are beyond redemption? Perhaps God needs my suffering more than my felicity.

Neither sunshine nor moonshine. All is asleep.
Sounds, lights and life have dwindled away.

The guitar strings are loosened. The deep
Sorrow of an old lost song holds sway.

I did all I could to shake her off, but I failed. She shadowed me through the streets and squares. I drove her back to the hotel and paid the bill. The receptionist said, 'Look how lovely she is! What a beautiful woman! I'd sacrifice everything for her!' 'I've got your umbrella,' I said. 'It's in the car.' 'You can keep it,' he said. 'I won't keep it,' I answered.

I picked up the umbrella and went back to the hotel. 'She loves you,' cried the receptionist. 'Bye-bye,' I said to him. What else could I have said?

What could she have given me? Her love? Any love? She said, 'Yids are not Russians. What's your country?' My country is not your country. There are words that should be used only to say they *can't* be used.

Do we dare to utter the sound *that which in no way is*? What should this be applied to? That which in no way is. So it isn't, is it? Why do we think we can use this name or whatever it is? That which in no way is. Yids. *That which is not* can't be applied to any of those who are. Yids are not. The word 'Yids' can't be applied to any of those who are. And what about *her*? Don't we have to deny that anyone who tries to utter *that which is not* is even speaking? Or living? Is it possible to say, speak or think *that which is not* itself correctly by itself? Unthinkable, unsayable, unutterable and unformulable in speech. And in life.

I can't believe you would sink so low as to utter unutterable words. But you may rise: even in you there's a particle of God.

Plato once gave a lecture on 'The Good'. Most of those who attended expected to hear a practical talk on the 'human goods' recognised by Greek society, like wealth, health, strength and happiness in general. When it turned out to be about mathematics – arithmetic, geometry and astronomy – and the thesis that Limit is the Good, a Unity, it seemed to them utterly paradoxical, and some were contemptuous, others angry.

W. K. C. Guthrie, *Plato's 'Unwritten' Metaphysics*

Why did Plato disclose his esoteric doctrine to the Boeotian crowd? He was naive and unable to realise that his ideas were linked to his brain and a handful of followers – not to the population at large. He thought a born prince might become a philosopher, bringing into existence 'the ideal polity about which the world is so incredulous'. He was mistaken, of course, and his disastrous relationship with the younger Dionysius, tyrant of Syracuse, proved it beyond a reasonable doubt.

Why am *I* tempted to disclose the intricacies of my style and poetic ideas? I'm not Plato after all, but my naiveté knows no bounds. Plato is not the only naive artist in the history of the world.

I wish I could submit my life to mathematics for approval. And I should impose a ban on my journeys through the looking glass. I am here and my body doesn't budge from where it has been sitting for two hours at least, for eternity. Do I belong to the Unity analysed by Plato? What's this Unity? Only the world, only the ideas? What if you kill yourself? Would the world be destroyed by your thoughtless deed? Where does my inner life end? Where does the outside world begin? On my skin, in my brain? Where is Plato's Limit? Inside my room, beyond it? Am I allowed to look out of the window? Should I forget the rest, whatever it is?

So I have no alternative but to fall back on my memories, on my youth and childhood, on my Soviet life. They lied about our prosperity which was beyond the clouds but not in heaven, contrary to what might have been presumed: nothing was in heaven as long as the Soviet Union lived and flourished like tomatoes in someone's garden. The Soviet Union could be likened to a tomato forgotten on the floor of someone's kitchen – of *my* kitchen, for instance.

You die, live and see no difference
 Between a dance and a stance, a woman
 And yourself. You dance with her;
 She answers. Is she a vegetable
 Or a piece of fruit? You dance with nature,
 With Spinoza's God Who knows what
 To do in the world deprived of gods
 And whatnots. Your hair is always
 Full of knots, tangles and triangles.
 And your screw is awaiting a turn.

So I lived in the Soviet Union where you could eat caviar – until 1957 – and fall in love with whoever you found suitable for the ritual of which the Soviet literature didn't speak very often. You were supposed to fall in love with machines and production and things like that.

Once I forgot my copy of Plato's dialogues in a restaurant where we had our meals almost every night and Audrey picked up the book and brought it to my room where I was about to indulge in an afternoon nap. She knocked at my door and I said, 'Please come later.' I thought the knocking was produced by a chambermaid who had failed to do her duty in the morning, during my absence, my sightseeing ritual. I heard the knocking once again and I shouted wrathfully, 'Come later!'

'I've brought your book,' she said. I recognised her voice and said to myself, 'I don't know the chambermaid's voice. Well, I know who it is.' When I have a doze in the afternoon, I get quite confused and don't even know what day it is so that chambermaids knock several times, for two minutes at least, before I decide whether I should open the door or remain under my blanket. This time I decided to open the door. I made up my mind at

the moment I heard the words ‘your book’: I was planning to read it after dinner, a glass of whisky in my hand. ‘I thought you might need this book,’ she said. ‘Thank you very much. I’m sorry I didn’t open the door earlier,’ I said. ‘I hope I didn’t wake you,’ she said. ‘Not at all.’

Das Lied von der Erde. I shouldn’t forget the Earth. I wish I *could* forget her.

*Wenn nur ein Traum das Leben ist,
Warum denn Müh’ und Plag’?
Ich trinke, bis ich nicht mehr kann,
Den ganze, lieben Tag!*

A bottle of whisky. A dark peaty brown, a strong peaty smell, peaty soil. Trinke, drinke. Traum, draum, dream.

*Die Sonne scheidet hinter dem Gebirge.
In alle Täler steigt der Abend nieder
Mit seinen Schatten, die voll Kühlung sind.
O sieh! Wie eine Silberbarke schwebt
Der Mond am blauen Himmel herauf.*

The Sun always sinks either behind mountains or behind the Earth. And the Earth welcomes the Sun, saying, ‘I know you must sleep somewhere. Why not in my lap or rather at my feet? There’s a carpet at my feet, on my floor. Humanity won’t see you at night-time – they don’t need to. They work only during the daytime, but they may study at night because some people study economics. You earn a living during the daytime, but you study at night to earn more money in the future. Evening falls, evening or *Abend*. They always fall when the time comes and the time always comes because it comes and goes – it has nothing else to do. Or it just walks by – it depends on how you see the world and on where you see it from. There are shadows of course because night is drawing nigh with its coolness and moodiness. And the moon of course. Why do you always speak of it as if you couldn’t live without its light and romantic appeal? You’ve got enough lamps, I suppose – electric, street and bedside lamps. You can even read at night, especially if you live in St Petersburg, in the month of May, in the month of June. In the meantime the moon continues to float like a silver ship or a silver coin. Let it float till dawn or rather make it fall into your pocket. *Der Mond am blauen Himmel herauf.*’

Higher, lower. A few steps. Eternity is here, up there, everywhere, complete, unfinished. I’ll finish Eternity, Time, Space, Face.

The Face. In Angkor I decided to entitle this piece – this piece of music – *The Face*. Whose face? My face, your face, God’s face. I don’t know you.

