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VALERY ALEFF

A POSTSCRIPT

2013

PART ONE

I

This book is unfinished and whatever remains unsaid depends on my diseases of which I know nothing because I'm sound in body and mind – at least within my own brain. I think I'm healthy, but my body may conceal a lot of diseases and they're certainly about to come to the fore today or tomorrow in spite of my moods and inherent optimism. And they may hamper the efforts I make towards this world and the letters and figures I count upon so as not to die without uttering a few words of truth, a few numbers of eternity lurking in the wings as I continue my Hamlet-inspired monologue. I say 'to be' but restrain from going any further because any 'not' engenders a turmoil in my body that is exposed to the diseases they speak of in newspapers and magazines sold in the shops where I buy not only magazines but also tinned soup and smoked trout.

Am I already dying? I wished to start writing this book on the threshold of death because one has different thoughts indoors and outdoors: only on thresholds can one *fruitfully* indulge in musings focused upon the Hereafter. Of course the Hereafter is never far away – even if one stands on the threshold of *life*, of a new era. This era may last only for a few seconds and then the Hereafter comes into the open and tells one a few home truths; and one becomes less than one and even less than zero as a result of the Hereafter's calculations. After all, the Hereafter and death are good mathematicians, although they don't add anything to anything. They only deduct something from whatever happens on the threshold of an old era: there's nothing older than death.

I don't know what my other thoughts are and how I can use them to penetrate the regions where I haven't yet enjoyed myself; and yet there are regions that aren't designed for joy and its manifestations. And if one laughs in those regions, the laugh that resounds everywhere is bitter and no one, not even those who are used to tragedies, is willing to share in the fate of the person whose laughter can be heard everywhere with the exception of the Hereafter. It is hysterical laughter one often hears in the regions I've touched upon and I hope I'll never visit, either in my nightmares or in the course of my walks around the city where I settled more than 30 years ago. I am still myself and I'd better take advantage of this state of affairs and note down my states of mind that are sure to disappear in the near or distant future about which I know nothing. I just know it is distant or near, for sometimes everything seems to be near, within my reach; and sometimes even the horizon is unable to catch up with my receding thoughts.

I let them go, especially if they're focused upon death and its paraphernalia: coffins, flowers and tombstones on which some people put these flowers so as not to offend the dead who watch them from their tombs, even if the cemetery in question is rundown and seems to be forsaken by both the dead and the quick. I rise from the dead and walk around the cemetery to get used to the Earth, to its surface that I scarcely remember after spending so much time in the bowels of the Earth or in the heart of it, in its intestines. There's a woman within the bounds of the cemetery which may turn out to be boundless, for many people think the Earth is nothing but a huge cemetery where they dream about life and fly in the midst of angels. I don't think about angels and flight; my thoughts are different, even though some of them coincide with what others do and turn their attention to as they live through their days and nights, thinking they'll die some day without leaving anything behind them.

Why should I leave anything behind? I look neither forward nor behind and only my feelings guide my bones through the labyrinth of life which looks like a sheet of paper lying on a writing desk. That's why I write what I shouldn't write because there's no point in writing, walking, thinking about this and that; but that and this show up somewhere and I go in their direction to see what's going on. Actually nothing goes anywhere and I go

back to my bed in which I'd like to put my body, my bones and my thoughts so as to get some rest that is free of talk, angels and my fellow creatures who usually set my teeth on edge: they talk too much and the noise they make is insufferable.

I've got a dull ache in my shoulder and right arm, which may be due to the injury I sustained a few years ago when skiing in Diableret, not far from Gstaad. I seemed to be rooted to the spot, but you never can count either on material or physiological roots: they often let you down. My skies moved forward; my body didn't follow them as if enamoured of its imaginary roots. They slipped on the snow and my body fell down because it had found no other way of stopping the skis. My right arm hit a boulder and for a while I groaned with pain without even trying to scramble to my feet and hurry out of the cursed spot.

As you get older you have all sorts of aches and pains. So some of my friends say that the pains I suffer from are of rheumatic origin and that my fall has nothing to do with them. They may be right: the fall took place almost 10 years ago and hopefully my muscles' memory is as short as the one I use when trying to recall what I'm supposed to do either tomorrow or next week. In the process I come across some of my future duties, but I forget the past and the names without which even a personal history makes no sense.

But I don't forget my pain and it doesn't seem to forget me either as if our love was determined to model its intensity on Shakespeare's heroes and heroines who are more renowned for their deaths than for their lives. I wish my pain could die like Juliet or Romeo to let me live my life which can experience the whole gamut of emotions, from happiness to sorrow, without the aid of death scenes. When I was in Moscow, I phoned a friend to say my suffering prevented me from sleeping as much as I needed and he thought at first I had fallen in love. I told him that unrequited love would not cause me suffering.

We die and are risen from the dead and this happens almost daily in spite of our conviction that everything goes smoothly and that death is neither on the horizon nor even beyond it. Our body or rather its parts are removed and extended. They crumble and God (or nature) restores them to their former condition, sometimes replacing them with other parts: nature has a lot of spare parts in its possession. (The same goes for God, needless to say.) We mumble, crumble, fall and scramble into our clothes as our wife or husband races to fetch a doctor. 'We'll soon have you back on your feet again,' says a nurse and she is right; yet we are used to mistrusting the sincerity of nurses and doctors.

As everyone knows, in our cradle we are already old enough for our own funeral and poets often confuse cradles with graves, and they don't always do this on purpose. If questioned on the subject, they say that a coffin looks exactly like a cradle, even if we can't rock it. 'Why should you rock it?' they ask, raising their eyebrows. 'You're already asleep, aren't you?' Yes, we know that death is another variety of deep sleep; at least we believe in this definition and this belief of ours traditionally goes hand in hand with our belief in God. 'Our experience qualified us perfectly for the job,' say our poets, nodding or shaking their heads. What experience? What job? Our birth is the experience they hint at; and the job was defined by Gibbon in his masterpiece entitled *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*. From this point of view, any civilisation and any man or woman have a lot in common: they are born and live for some time only to find that death is even more ineluctable than life.

I don't like the word 'monastery': in Russian it is spoiled by the letter 'i' which makes one draw the air from the very bottom of one's lungs, and I, for one, am deeply suspicious of whatever can be found at the bottom of human lungs. I like the women whose voices remind one of their bodies, especially of their chests, but the sound related to the letter 'i' has nothing in common with those contraltos one hears in prestigious concert halls – even if it is a Russian singer who performs a few old Russian songs. This letter reminds me of a man who is as stubborn as a mule. I wonder why we never say about a mule, 'He's as stubborn as a man'? Because we don't really care about mules? Or do we care about them only insofar as they can help us accuse a man or a woman of stubbornness?

Be that as it may, there are no language barriers between Russian monasteries and my desire to spend the rest of my life in one of them. The word 'freedom' is spoiled neither by the letter 'i' nor by any other letter or sound; and yet I'm deeply suspicious of this notion which is used with great gusto throughout the globe and even beyond it: our extraterrestrial counterparts must already have been contaminated through our slogans and phoney convictions. I think I am free because I've never worked for anybody, and it would gall me to take orders either from my colleagues or from government officials. I don't have a mobile phone and when I come back after spending two months abroad, I find only three messages on my answerphone: the world seems to have forgotten me. But they haven't buried me yet and I suppose I should be grateful to them for this gesture of goodwill.

My freedom reached its peak when I suddenly felt I needed less freedom in my everyday life within whose bounds I can do whatever I wish without exposing myself to poverty, starvation and other varieties of 'slow death'. I can stay at home for a month and no one will miss my presence; my feelings for what is philosophically and pompously defined as 'the other' are reciprocated, judging from my phone's behaviour. Actually, I don't think there are any bounds in my life with the exception of 'natural' bounds, so to speak: death, disease, natural catastrophes. I'm not in the habit of altering my way of life, but I might do so if I feel like it in the near or distant future. In other words, there are no *exterior* rules within my life: no one says to me what I should do and how I'm supposed to deal with the problems I may encounter in my existence. A month ago, I felt I needed a set of rules imposed on me from the outside – from the world I see and get in touch with whenever I leave my house. (I seldom, if ever, look out of my windows.) Immediately I thought about monasteries and the way of life they can offer to those who wish to lose a certain amount of their freedom and withdraw from the world and its temptations to which you invariably yield, if you belong to Oscar Wilde's fan club. I suppose I'm one of this club's members, although Oscar Wilde isn't my favourite author.

Hegel's treatment of the subject under discussion doesn't suit me any longer because his master and his slave are situated beyond the state of affairs where I found myself at the moment when I felt I needed less freedom in my life – or no freedom at all. Hegel's slave is believed to have the upper hand in his struggle with the master for whom he works. Why? Because the world about him is the world he has created and he can't help seeing himself reflected in the work of his hands. This reflection is bigger than his master and whatever he stands for because the world can't be compared to an individual who is just a part of it. I've spent my life creating worlds where I am reflected now, but I no longer need these worlds and my reflections. What I do need is the daily round of monastic life and the chores imposed by my superiors to whose wisdom and experience I'll pay tribute through my work and prayers.

Ever since I began to write novels and poems, I've struggled for recognition and this struggle is over now, even if this means I no longer feel like struggling for life. I think one may live without being pushed around by

the insatiable desire defined by the word ‘recognition’ that I’ll strive to exclude from my vocabulary and also from my body. Why should I bother about others, about my potential slaves? ‘I’ve obtained recognition,’ says the master to the slave. ‘Yes, but not from *another* self,’ says the slave. ‘You’ve obtained it from another *slave*. For the time being, I don’t mind being your slave because I need you to create my world. But you’re a slave to your ambitions and you’ll never get rid of them. In other words, you’ll never become your own master. You’ll always remain in the state of dependence. And I’ll educate myself towards independence. In the world that I’ll create sooner or later you’re not likely to have pride of place. You’ll be my slave because of your ambitions, of your inborn slavery.’

I no longer have any ambitions; to some degree, I’ve already wrenched myself free. And I value this kind of freedom above and beyond all else. What does ‘recognition’ mean in today’s world? Only slaves inhabit it – the humans reduced to objects by objects or their own ambitions. So you can’t obtain recognition from another self and that’s what really counts in the domain of recognition. And even if I *could* obtain recognition from another self, I would prefer not to press home my advantage, for my inner peace might suffer from such an intrusion. Every admirer is an intruder, even if he or she doesn’t ask you for an autograph. You hear applause and bow to the audience. Why should I bow?

Nicholas may seem bossy, but it’s Lisa that really wears the trousers in that relationship. One of my friends has been his wife’s slave for many years, whatever one may think when talking to him. He is homosexual and one might suppose such a man unlikely to fawn upon a woman, let alone submit himself to *her* rules. Nicholas has a knack of explaining things in an easy, non-technical way, even when he explores the inner labyrinth of psychological lore. He says that at the outset of his conjugal life, he had an easy authority over his wife who subscribed firmly to his ideas, theories and opinions. In other words, he obtained recognition which was all the more valuable since his wife was another self and not just his slave or Hegel-glorified being. But she ended up creating a household where her husband enjoyed the comfort he had been looking for all his life. When did this turning-point bring about the metamorphosis described by Hegel and his followers? This must have happened 20 years ago when I came back to Russia and visited all my friends without exception.

I left Russia in 1974 and came back in 1990. The metamorphosis I touched upon was nearing completion when I saw the master-slave couple in a concert hall where we were doomed to hear a run-of-the mill piano recital. My friend walked with a slow stiff gait and I realised it was his way of fawning upon Lisa. ‘They must really be in love with each other,’ I thought, ‘otherwise they would have got a divorce in the late Seventies. Nicholas isn’t even bisexual. How does Lisa manage to put up with him?’ ‘Lisa is lesbian,’ said another friend of mine – several days later. He looked at me with surprise and said, ‘Don’t you know the answer?’ Now I know the answer and I’m still none the wiser.

In his youth, my friend was a poet of sorts and his recent book jolted my memory into action: his poems are printed at the end of it. The author explains his method and development, talking chiefly about the conceptualism he espoused in the early Eighties. He speaks rather pompously about this trend and one gets the feeling that nothing else is permitted to survive in the world where art is no longer on the agenda. One of his poems consists of the orders given by a landowner to his servants: whenever he goes abroad, he takes steps to ensure that his estate will not go to rack and ruin in his absence. The poem looks thus:

To Anatoly: You should count my money.

To Boris: You should plough the top field next week.

To Bartholomew: You should nurse the horse.

To Galina: The furniture is covered in dust and cobwebs. You should dust the furniture.

To Olga Zakharovna: You should wait for me every hour. Wait for me, wait for me, wait...

At the outset of his conjugal life, he might have written such poems for his wife's sake: I'm not sure she knew what to do with the furniture she found in his flat. Now it is her turn to do justice to conceptualism about which I know only by hearsay, being allergic to doctrines of all kinds – in the domain of poetry and literature in general. Whatever comes into my head is worthy of notice and I type it out so as not to allow it to slip my mind. A multitude of things have slipped my mind ever since I began to take notice of my self, and I'm aware that this continuous loss undermines my self-confidence. And even in a monastery I'll need my self-confidence and my instinct for self-preservation.

It is a monastery I have in my mind whenever I speak about the set of rules I'm prepared to submit to in order to structure my life: any wife is too narrow-minded in comparison with the cosmos one gets in touch with within the bounds of a monastery ruled by traditions and centuries. Once I've made up my mind to do something, nothing will put me off – not even a poem I composed in the wake of my friend's experiments:

All our household goods are insured against accidental damage.

The insurance doesn't cover you for household items.

I do all my household accounts on the computer.

No household security devices are proof against the determined burglar.

Britain produces 20 million tonnes of household waste each year.

I'm not sure I've already made up my mind as to how and where I wish to spend the rest of my life. The expression 'household waste' is likely to put me off any experience linked to marriage and suchlike, but I often ask myself the following question: 'What do I know about monasteries?' I answer immediately, 'Next to nothing.' And I have no idea how they live and what they think about in Russian monasteries to which I'm resolved to direct my steps if I finally decide to leave Versailles and settle for good in Russia, not too far from Moscow.

I think what appeals to me about monastic life is a sort of immobility that strikes anyone who pays a visit to monks – even if it is just a flying visit. Outside monasteries, people run against each other or against the clock. I disagree with those who affirm that the world goes faster and faster: I'm convinced that the world is rooted to the spot. There's no denying that the inhabitants of our globe run faster and faster, but they run on the spot and this spot appeals neither to my senses nor to my mind. In a monastery you listen to silence, even if the monks you encounter speak to you and to each other. They speak silently, so to speak, and you listen to music as you try to understand what they're determined to convey to you by means of gestures or words. Their words are silent and harmonious because they're motionless, contrary to what one may think when pondering the nature of language. And their gestures are eternal; they seem suspended in mid-air.

I like Byzantium and its art on account of its austerity and immobility that leaves no room for emotions, aspirations and so on and so forth. The saints we contemplate as we get nearer and nearer to the frescoes look

like otherworldly creatures, even if they are still in the land of the living and consequently haven't been promoted to the status associated with saints and those who live in the highest sphere of Paradise. They leave nothing to chance because chance plays no part in their lives which are protected from any interference, however beneficial and welcome. Only angels are allowed to interfere in their daily routine which has nothing in common with our routine, our daily grind: it is a pleasant and uplifting routine. Every day we play games of chance: roulette, Russian roulette, rush hour, traffic, the board of directors. There are only games of chance in our contemporary life. Monks don't play games and they never rely on chance because chance is what it is and you can't trust it, even if you're sure your stratagem will succeed as a result of your skilful manoeuvres. You double-check everything and leave nothing to chance. And what about bolts from the blue? There are no such bolts inside the walls of a monastery where everything sounds like a prayer.

I tried to write a book about Spain: about Burgos, Segovia, Toledo. But no one can write about everything and I realised I would never finish this book, for all my efforts. I began it: no harm in trying. Here's the beginning:

I have no idea when all this began, but I'm pretty sure at the beginning there was a dream; and this dream was Spain. I might have dreamt about this country in my childhood, for some of the songs I heard in my cradle and in the room where I was permitted to build castles belonged to Spanish culture, to the very core of it. They reminded our communists of the civil war in which they had taken part; they were loath to forget both their hardships and the friendships that hadn't failed to counterbalance the horrors abundantly supplied by Franco and his allies. So my parents and I often heard these songs revered by the Soviet radio; and yet my father had never been to Spain.

My acquaintance with Spanish composers is rather limited. To tell the truth, I'm not eager to bridge the gap between this partial ignorance of mine and the love I feel for the cathedral of Burgos or that of Segovia: this love is affected neither by my lack of knowledge nor my sluggishness. For years and years I was dreaming about Spain without taking the trouble to unfold a map and stuff my suitcases with guides and other books one might need when walking around Toledo. In the long run, the absence of Spain filled me with nostalgia; I didn't mind, for I knew that under the circumstances nostalgia might prove to be more powerful than curiosity or thirst for adventure.

One of the songs I heard at home still haunts my memory on account of the words repeated several times: 'Grenada, Grenada, Grenada moia.' At the age of five I knew the word 'moia', but the word 'Grenada' was as impenetrable as the sky at which I looked every day, trying to see whatever lay or stood beyond the stars. I thought there were lots of cities in the sky; their inhabitants seemed to spend their time playing hide-and-seek so that I couldn't see them. Behind every star there stood a man or a woman for whom a number of people were looking in every corner of the sky. Other players thought they were hidden behind some clouds; they never went as far as the stars. Weary of standing and waiting, the victors ended up putting a multitude of beds beyond the stars, which enabled them to feel more comfortable during the games. They lay in their beds and gazed at other stars hidden beyond the ones we enjoy every night, provided we take the trouble to look up and forget our daytime worries.

'Moia' means 'mine' in Russian and we usually apply this word to women, for instance: 'Moia Tatiana.' Moia, moy, moio. The use of these words depends on the object to which they refer. Gender, of course, isn't an issue in the English language; in Russia, women, men and some children don't live in the same grammatical boat. 'Ditia' means 'baby' and when you speak about your baby to those who admire him or her, you say 'moio ditia' and not 'moia ditia' or 'moy ditia'. For a while I thought Grenada was a woman about whom a man sang proudly, being convinced that she belonged only to him. My Grenada. I had a lot of toys, but I preferred the objects I couldn't have in my room or even in the garden where I played almost every day. Every night I would choose a star and play with it as long as I could stay awake, holding back my dreams and nightmares. I might have replaced the stars by Grenada, had I been acquainted with the beauty of this city. I didn't even know it was a city and not a woman, not a fruit.

At that point I felt I had got sidetracked several times, which usually doesn't bother me: I like digressions and many-layered narratives – provided they don't hamper the rescue efforts of progression, as Laurence Sterne might have put it. But it was hard writing about Spain, especially since in my childhood I'd heard only one Spanish song where the word 'Grenada' resounded with dignity and mystery. Our radio stations seemed to have forgotten the Civil War – at least in the domain of music. From time to time, Franco was stigmatised on the basis of his bad behaviour and anti-communist stance, but otherwise Spain was almost entirely absent from our radio and even television programmes. Perhaps I just don't remember the words uttered in relation to this country I love so much. I don't seem to remember a lot so I ought to have embarked upon my memoirs a long time ago.

Of course I said to myself: 'Be persistent – don't give up.' So I went on for a while:

One of Beckett's heroes says he has always compared himself to Christ. I've never yielded to this temptation because I'm determined to live my own life without relying on models and eternal patterns; and yet I'm tempted to draw a parallel between my life and that of Don Quixote. I don't remember when I read the novel for the first time. Actually I'm under the impression I read it neither in my adolescence nor at the age of 31 when I bought the book in English translation. Of course I leafed through it several times, reading a few lines in English, in Russian and in French. Whatever I do with the versions of the novel I've got in my library, I don't read it: somehow I know it by heart in all the languages I speak. My life is punctuated by windmills at which I tilt whenever fighting the establishment, fakes and phoneyes. Every time the result of the struggle seems to be a foregone conclusion, but I remain undaunted in spite of my defeats.

For almost half an hour I was looking for Putnam's translation of the novel, which I'm not supposed to need, given that I know it by heart. Poetic license often pushes my brain beyond all reasonable doubts, for living in a make-believe world is pleasant to some extent. I don't know Don Quixote by heart; to be honest, I recall only a few episodes from it. I recall a rescue operation that, in accordance with his ritual, Don Quixote carried out single-handedly. As a result, he was stoned by those he had rescued, if I remember rightly. I know he read a lot of books which, in the long run, drove him mad because only a madman does his utmost to go beyond the age within whose bounds his mother gave him birth. Borges says one cannot leave one's day and age behind, whatever one does when writing a poem, a story or an

essay. Don Quixote didn't manage to achieve his objectives because time held him within its prison and even during his escapades he couldn't get beyond its walls, galloping on his horse around the courtyard.

I still recall my last journey to Spain and I may write about it without lying and pathos. And of course I may also write about *Don Quixote*: the book is on one of my shelves and I don't have to cross the Place de la Concorde in order to pick it up. What could I say about the cathedral of Burgos? If I'm not mistaken, this is the biggest cathedral in the world. There are many big cathedrals around us and that of Burgos is of their number. Perhaps it is smaller than one of the cathedrals lost in the middle of England: I don't know much about cathedrals and architecture in general. There's no denying it is a huge cathedral; and yet I was under the impression I could take it in my hands and hold it for a while, perhaps forever. In one of his poems, Rilke says something to the effect that we are falling; not only Rilke feels that, I suppose. But Rilke feels that someone – God, no doubt – prevents us from falling by holding us in His hands. Well, I am not God, far from it. Yet I wish I could hold the cathedral of Burgos which doesn't need my help and hands. I don't care; I just feel like it. I have no wish to hold the Earth, needless to say. And even I had the lever about which Archimedes speaks so paradoxically, I wouldn't lift it.

Recently I went to Berlin where there are no cathedral of this size and harmony. This city is not harmonious at all; it might have been harmonious, beautiful and luminous at the beginning of the 20th century, but now it is just a collection of buildings. Some modern or contemporary buildings are impressive and even beautiful, one might say. The point is I don't care about isolated beauty, as far as cities go. If a beautiful man or woman stands in the middle of a square, I admire and respect such beauty; I even worship it to some extent. But a city should be harmonious, otherwise it is not a city, being just a collection of heterogeneous objects. One day they were thrown into some area any old how and now they remain in this area because a peace treaty protects them. People also protect them unless these people live in Russia – in Moscow, for instance. They protect Berlin because they live there, thinking that nowhere else will they have so many theatres. Berlin excites some people on account of its relative youth, given that it was almost completely destroyed at the end of the Second World War. So a famous conductor lives there because he thinks Berlin is unfinished: it continues to grow, whereas New York, Paris and Rome do not, even if one chances upon cranes and scaffolding in their suburbs. Berlin is both young and pretty old. In this respect, I have more affinities with Berlin than with Versailles where I live. I am young at heart and even wild at heart. My brain isn't old either, with the exception of my memory that often lets me down. But my body isn't confined to my heart and my thoughts. Incidentally, I wonder if my thoughts are still young.

December 22, 2012. Yesterday we didn't live through the end of the world and I wonder if one could really *live* through the end which is supposed to put an end to all movement. So you can't live *through* the end of the world or even through that of your own life unless you believe that every human being goes straight to Hell or to Paradise, without spending some time in *their* waiting rooms. They must judge the quality of your life and weigh your soul, heart and whatnot so as to know exactly what to do with you. Then you cross the waiting room and end up in another land, another life, the afterlife. Be that as it may, the end of the world didn't take place, contrary to many predictions and many tons of sugar some people had bought, hoping to survive for a while – until another beginning of the world. Another abortive attempt; another disappointment. The world isn't

ashamed of itself and no calendar will ever persuade it to die with dignity instead of squelching through the mud of its own degeneration.

I'm watching a huge documentary on architecture, on how people live in enormous buildings created by Charles Fourier's admirers. They live in close proximity to each other, walking through the same corridors, eating in the same hall where no dainty dishes are served – at least no sturgeons adorn the tables at which all those people sit for the sake of eating and talking. They eat and talk, but they end up installing a lot of barriers between their respective flats: they need privacy. They say to their distant relatives: 'I hate sharing a bedroom – I never get any privacy. I hate sharing a corridor – I never get any privacy. I hate sharing a dinner table – I never get any privacy.' I get a lot of privacy and I'm not sure I like it as much as I wish to like it. But what can I do under the circumstances? Nothing at all. I can put an additional barrier in my flat to separate myself from myself. I'm already separated from myself: my decay puts a lot of barriers between myself and my former self. Shyness is one of the biggest barriers to making friends, as they say. Well, I'm not as shy as all that, but barriers loom ahead of me and I can't see whatever happens beyond them. Perhaps nothing really happens: no ends, no beginnings, no middle ways, no ways, no paths, no pilgrims. The world is still around me and it came into existence a long time ago. There will be no end to the violence until the end comes at last.

I found a newspaper on my dinner table where it had spent over a month, waiting for my attention and showing its patience. Inanimate objects *are* patient and we'd better learn this patience from them, from their long experience. They lie under our feet, on our tables and chests of drawers, and do not seem to mind our indifference, our negligence. We walk over them or trample them to death, hoping they're as immortal as Pushkin's verses or Shakespeare's plays. The newspaper I found may be immortal unless I throw it away without taking the trouble to read it. Well, I won't offend it by neglecting its contents and moods which somehow depend on our moods, on our acts. I think about violence and the end which will never come because life constantly renews its membership of our human club. I lighted upon a bit of violence in the newspaper lying under my feet: this afternoon I had transferred it from the dinner table to the room where I'm typing out my thoughts, moods and also my decay that I can't forget. Why can't I? Because it doesn't forget me – an obvious answer. I'll stick to this answer for a while, until next week perhaps.

Taking tea as bombs fall. A captivating, promising title. Should I say from which newspaper it comes? It could come from any newspaper – to some extent they all look alike. Words, words, words. Papers, papers, papers. Well, this time it was born in *The Sunday Times* and it will probably die there unless it has already been stored in a number of computers. A general is sitting in a homely room; his friend listens to him and talks in his turn. They talk about the Syrian army's campaign to crush rebel forces in Aleppo. I know Aleppo only through *Othello* where this city comes to the fore at the very end, on the verge of the hero's untimely death.

*And say besides, that in Aleppo once,
Where a malignant and a turban'd Turk
Beat a Venetian, and traduc'd the state,*

*I took by the throat the circumcised dog,
And smote him thus.*

Everyone knows this monologue by heart, as Orson Welles says about another monologue in a film devoted to his staging of *Julius Caesar*. I quoted it to bridge the gap between all those who do know the monologue by heart and my failing memory which, however, can rely on the books stored in my library. How to bridge the gap between my present age and my youth when I was in my prime, as they say? They also say: 'Middle age can be the prime of life if you have the right attitude.' What kind of attitude do they have in mind, I wonder? For them there's such a thing as the *right* attitude, judging by this sentence and by their attitude towards life. I don't believe in it because I know that no attitude can give me back what I experienced in my prime, in Moscow and even in France where I've been living for more than 30 years. Besides, they speak about middle age and my age is hardly in the middle of my way and I'm no longer in the forest where Dante stood at the beginning of his *Comedy*.

A general sips from a glass of tea and ponders a disturbing piece of intelligence brought in by a defector from the rebel side. As usual there's a car packed with explosives for a suicide attack by Jabat al-Nusra, an Islamist group. The car is about to explode, but nobody cares about the car because it is neither a Bentley nor a Ferrari. What counts, however, is the number of victims the general and his staff will have to count in the aftermath of the explosion. The general continues to enjoy the tea and a few bombs fall in the distance, not far from Aleppo where Othello killed the Turk. Othello's feat pales into insignificance beside the event about which I'm reading in the newspaper, but I wonder if Othello drank a cup of tea after his exploit. A cup of tea is said to do you good, whatever the situation you happen to be involved in. I wish I could keep enjoying my favourite tea *outside* the world where many bombs fall and destroy whatever happens to be at the end of their trajectory. And even if I find myself *inside* the world surrounded by cars and explosives, I might continue to sip my tea because there's nothing else to do in this world of horror. Of course you can pick up a bottle of wine to cope with explosives and rebels who will never stop their attacks and are unlikely to leave their bombs in peace. What counts is your attitude towards the world. The middle way is all right as long as you can have a drink while watching Othello's suicide and two planes screeching through the sky. A few loud bangs shouldn't disturb you. Othello is more important, isn't he? So is Shakespeare.

On the front page, there's a beautiful actress whose destiny doesn't interest me in the least, although I wouldn't mind meeting her somewhere – in Moscow, for instance. Recently I spent five hours in a famous Moscow restaurant and it goes without saying I wasn't alone. Why should I spend five hours in a restaurant if I can't talk to anyone? And I'm not in the habit of talking to waiters, in spite of the attachment I feel for some sommeliers who occasionally offer me champagne and even a glass of Latour. So I wasn't alone, for all my aversion to the world and its representatives. I exclude from the previous sentence a lot of animals and even plants: I love them, I love them, I love them.

I was in the company of a young lady who was almost 40 years my junior, if I remember rightly. I wasn't in love with her so I don't remember the details of our lunch, with the exception of the food. I do remember, however, that I wasn't bored, contrary to what I usually experience in the company of young ladies: I'm interested in their legs and not in their wits. For some reason, she wasn't bored either and our talk didn't slacken its pace as we chinked our glasses together – a Russian custom of no importance. I don't remember where it

happened – in which restaurant I touched her hand and she responded without blushing, without pushing my hand away. Perhaps she liked my skin or my way of stroking her fingers. Frankly, I don't remember her fingers – or her hand, for that matter. I do remember her face or rather her make-up. You don't remember the make-up of a woman who steers clear of lipstick and powder puffs. It doesn't mean you remember the face of this woman, her features, her nose. Sometimes it is better to remember the make-up than to create another lapse of memory: there are enough of them in everyone's life and they make you sick as they remind you of death, of oblivion, of a tomb on which there are no flowers.

I was determined to talk about something else: I should vary the topics I deal with, otherwise I might get bored with this book and relinquish the idea of going on with it. I must have changed my mind, carried away by my memory's capacity to remember this lunch and even the caresses I lavished on the young lady's hand. Whenever I remember something, I hasten to record it in some way or other: I'm sure that any memory is apt to restore the whole of my life because cells multiply continually and one cell can give birth to a plant or even to a human being. This lunch is a cell from which my whole life may spring, provided I pay enough attention to it and treat it at length and with deference. I'm aware of the fact that I use too many formal words and expressions, but I'm an old hat and I'm not ashamed of it. The further I go in the direction of my youth and my ancestors, the better.

I was leaving Moscow after our last dinner during which I touched her hand many times and even tried to stroke it as if to show how much I loved her. She gave me a lift and soon I saw my hotel and even the night porter who opened my door; she was sitting on the other side. So many things happen on the other side – not necessarily on the dark side of the moon or on the other side of the coin. This time, we were sitting in a car and my door flew open before I could say good-bye to her. Nevertheless I kissed her good-bye and got out of the car without further ado. Suddenly she opened *her* door and pressed her face against mine in an unexpected show of solidarity. Was her gesture an expression of love? I don't think so. 'Solidarity', therefore, is the right word. There are many wrong words in this world of ours, but now and then we stumble upon the right one and our life grows as radiant as the moon on a cloudless night. I'm aware that 'solidarity' is not as radiant as 'love' which may be likened to the sun, to its life-giving power, but the moon is all right with me and I will not remove it from the previous sentence.

Apparently the world began at the moment when a cell appeared somewhere: in the sea, in the snow, in one of the hills I saw many years ago in Siberia. Modern cosmology believes the universe to have come into existence about 15 billion years ago. How did it happen? *Why* did it happen? A cell, a prison cell, a cell in a monastery where one can spend a part of one's life. Cooped up in a small dark cell. Bound and gagged and left in a cell for 65 years. Immured in a dark airless cell. Nietzsche was locked in a padded cell and forced to wear a straitjacket.

But biologists and other scientists speak about the *original* cell from which our world continues to grow as if it couldn't stop once and for all. Again I hear the words that pertain to this universal issue: 'My problems stem from that cell and not from my difficult childhood because my childhood wasn't really difficult. And my disagreement with the world stems from that tiny little cell. And I don't really wonder what you are. I'm not a scientist after all, and the origin of the world doesn't arouse my curiosity. Nor do I care about my own origin because my present state doesn't depend on it. I carry a multitude of genes within my body, my mind and my soul, but I don't want to dissect them for fear of dying on the spot.'

One cell, one nightmare, one birth, one death. This death cell has nothing to do with life unless you decide that life and death are synonymous. And scientists speak about the harmony they offer to the world in a fit of generosity. Yes, death is harmonious because we constantly come across the same cells – wherever we go, whatever we touch. We touch an animal and recognise our own genes, our DNA, our moods, our thoughts. The same goes for our relationship with trees and bushes. We talk to a bush and it understands us perfectly – better than humans. We touch a woman and recognise neither our thoughts nor our feelings. What *do* we recognise? A hand, somebody's hand. For some obscure reason, we stroke this hand and nothing happens except a misunderstanding, a disappointment, a delusion, a disillusion. We don't live in the same prison cell: there are enough prisons in our world to accommodate everybody.

I seem to have forgotten about the monastery where I was planning to spend the rest of my life and even my eternity a foretaste of which one is more likely to experience in a monastery than in New York or any other capital. No, I'm not likely to forget it: I bought a few books on Russian monasteries during my sojourn in Petersburg. I also bought a few books on Russian saints; and yet I'll never become one, even if I spend my eternity – or any other eternity – in a monastery or in Paradise.

In one of these books I found a story about a man who thought the world had inherited original sin to the extent of being able to get rid of it only by means of death. And this end doesn't always justify the means unless you're a Christian martyr or a sectarian who thinks about life in terms of ultimate deliverance. This man – a peasant lost in the middle of Russia – thought that his son could be led astray after his death, after his own death. (You can't be led astray in the Hereafter where you're taken care of either by angels or devils.) So he resolved to kill his son on his own initiative – without consulting God or his own brand of god. On second thoughts, however, he decided to consult one of these gods or angels who might have given him a piece of advice, had he behaved in the right way. His conduct was far from perfect because he thought that an angel would whisper the right answer to his question in his *right* ear, whereas a demon was likely to use his *left* ear for the same purpose. Of course the demon couldn't convey to him the *right* solution to his problem, but at that point he was mostly concerned with his ears, not with a question-and-answer session.

So he knelt down and listened to the wind where both angels and demons travel when about to answer tough questions. The wind whispered something in his right ear and he mistook the wind for an angel. It is easy to mistake anything for an angel, provided you're in a suitable mood for it. I mean, at times you feel like making mistakes and no amount of common sense can make you leave the state of mind where your mistakes are embedded. He kept listening to the wind and the wind continued to tell him its own story that had nothing to do either with his son or God. But he heard another story and decided to kill his son so as to save him from damnation and eternal suffering. It is better to suffer for a few seconds than to spend your whole afterlife in Hell where everyone will pour scorn on your thoughts, ideas and sentiments.

He says to his son, 'Put on your white shirt.'

'And what about my trousers, Father?'

'Put on a new pair of white trousers.'

'The trousers I have are old.'

'I wish to kill you.'

‘What for?’

‘I want you to go to Paradise.’

‘I’ll go to Paradise anyway.’

‘I’m not sure you will.’

‘Of course I will, if you buy me a white suit.’

‘It’s too late for that.’

‘Is it? It’s never too late to buy a new suit or at least a new pair of trousers.’

‘You can’t teach an old dog new tricks.’

‘You’re not old, Father. And you’re not a dog.’

‘I am God.’

‘Are you?’

‘I am. At least I’ll kill you in the name of God.’

‘Before buying me a new pair of trousers? I’m not ready for death, Father. First buy me a new pair of trousers, a new computer and a new car.’

‘You’ll have all this in Paradise. Their computers are better than ours.’

The son puts on his red shirt and the father kills him with an axe; and yet he hadn’t read *Crime and Punishment*. Those who use axes as a vehicle for salvation don’t have to read Dostoevsky unless they’re fond of literature and Russian nature.

As the son expires in the throes of agony, the father sees the light coming from the sun or God. He thinks the light comes from God and he is probably right because any light comes from God – even the light radiated by our computers or television screens. He sees the light and realises he has done the right thing because his son is already in Paradise despite his red shirt. He says to himself that not everyone wears white clothes in Paradise and in the Russian language the word ‘red’ is associated with beauty. ‘Red Square’ actually means ‘beautiful square’: his son was beautiful on the verge of death, on the edge of this world. And he’ll be even more beautiful in the Hereafter where diseases are meant only for those who suffer in Hell and are unlikely to see the light of day.

He sees the light coming from heaven and he cries because he knows that God approves of his murder which is a ritual murder designed to improve public morals. Actually he doesn’t care about humankind whose morals interest him only insofar as they concern his family. And he was audacious enough to provide a safe haven for his son. Thus reason some Russians. They think it is better to burn oneself on Earth than to burn in Hell where fire is even more ferocious than Dante’s description of it. Anyway you have to burn somewhere: you can’t always bathe in the Mediterranean, after spending a few hours on the beach. Of course you burn on the beach too – if you forget to put cream on your skin to avoid getting sunburnt. You forget the cream and burn, but there’s no comparison between this fire and that fire – at least that’s what the Russians think. Some of them lie in the sun only with a view to getting used to fire, to their future self-immolation. They prepare themselves for the Hereafter or rather for Paradise where they are likely to go on condition that they die before committing adultery or murder or just a sin. It is better not to ‘get bogged down in details’, as they say, meaning that time supplies human beings with many situations laden with sin, with these awful *details* of life. It is better to see or rather *hear* life as one harmony, one cell, one space inhabited by God.

Instead of killing your son, you may say to him: ‘You should narrow the focus of your curiosity and concentrate on one harmony.’

‘What are you talking about, Father?’

‘You look around too much. You’re too curious. You’re getting bogged down in details.’

‘What details?’

‘Legs, dresses, breasts. You look at women instead of looking at God.’

‘But God is in heaven, Father. Should I look up all the time? I may trip and fall over, grazing my knee.’

‘And I’ll smash your face in, if you don’t look at God. He’s everywhere, on every corner.’

‘Is he also in the women I look at?’

‘No. Women have no souls because they’re devils in disguise.’

The son continues to look at women and his father enjoins him to put on his white trousers. ‘Are you going to kill me, Father?’ asks the son.

‘Yes, for your own good.’

‘I promise to look at God. I’ll even speak to Him, if you wish.’

‘Speak to him now. Have you read *Othello*?’

‘Yes.’

‘Do you remember what Othello says to Desdemona before the ritual?’

‘What ritual?’

‘He strangled her, didn’t he?’

So the son prays and his father murders him because murders are part of our never-ending ritual. Perhaps there’s only one ritual in the history of the world, and this ritual is murder, no doubt. One may say there must be an alternative to people murdering each other on the streets, in the woods and elsewhere. What kind of alternative could one suggest? You stroke someone’s hand and this person murders you. Is that an alternative?

I seldom speak about my childhood because I lost it when I left the Soviet Union forever: whenever you say ‘forever’, you lose something and it isn’t just the thread of what you’re saying or writing. If you talk to other people, they may help you find the thread and you pick it up, smiling at those who assist you in your efforts to get through a number of words. Can their chaos be compared to a thread? You thread your way through the crowded market place and you lose the thread of your walk when someone insults you. Yesterday I went to the Versailles market. ‘An illegally parked car,’ said a middle-aged man as he stopped in front of me, after looking at my car and at the place where I had parked it.

‘Does it bother you? Very few people walk here.’

‘This is a pedestrian crossing.’

‘I can’t see anyone except you.’

‘Your car prevents me from crossing this street.’

‘Are you a cop?’

‘Go to Hell,’ he said. And he added, ‘You’re not even French.’

He wouldn’t have said that to a mixed-raced man, let alone to a native of black Africa. Is he an inverted snob? I lost the thread of my walk and I haven’t recovered it yet.

I must speak about my childhood, otherwise I’ll lose not only a part of my life but also what I’m living through now: if my present isn’t suffused with my childhood and the rest of my life, it does not exist. ‘Only the past can

be relied upon and the present just acts like a springboard for the past, for *Paradise Lost*,' says an old man. As to my own experience, the present is still alive and kicking; I don't renounce my claim to it, for all my infirmities. Even my future lies around me as I look at the light of day or at the dark of night where my thoughts thread their way through some curious shapes created either by my imagination or by the Devil. Sometimes I feel the presence of the Devil far more than that of God: my failures are more numerous than my achievements and I can't put the blame for my failures on God.

I'm often asked whether I was a boisterous child whose habits included breaking toys, insulting relatives, walking on tables, breaking china, breaking promises. I say I was an ordinary child and I am an ordinary man – in other people's minds that are unable to see the intricacies and luminosity of my brain. I can't see my brain either, but at least I'm capable of deciphering its pattern on the screen where this text makes its appearance, as if emerging from chaos. Usually they speak about the void when describing any creative process to which the instruments we use submit without a murmur. They have no alternative but to record our nonsense or lack of harmony which is a mortal sin, in my opinion. Nonsense can be forgiven because the world is nonsensical and we can't help reflecting it from time to time – not always against our will. But overall harmony shouldn't be tampered with because it is a gift we receive daily from nature, from heaven, from the Earth and even from our ancestors' tombs. Perhaps it is the only gift we can boast about when speaking about Creation or even humanity which doesn't deserve much applause, given its history and contemporary trends.

In my childhood, I heard about a novel entitled *The Underground Children*. I've never read the book and I don't have any intention of trying to lay my hands on it to find out what 'underground' means in this context. But ever since I heard about it I've thought I was born under the earth, deprived of light and any contact with those who enjoy fame and prosperity. I'm often reminded of Schubert who, on the verge of death, said to one of his relatives: 'Why am I lying underground? Haven't I deserved a place on the surface of the Earth?' And his relative answered, 'You're in your room, Franz.' 'I'm not,' said Schubert, 'because Beethoven isn't here.'

Some time ago, I spoke about my visit to Berlin which was partly connected with The Jewish Museum I had been longing to see for several years. At the hotel, I asked for directions to the museum and the concierge drew a line on the city map to show me how to get there. I followed the itinerary drawn on the map and eventually reached a building which looked bizarre if not downright weird on account of the scars on its walls. I was under the impression I saw a face – a sort of Scarface – exhibited in the street to pique the curiosity of any pedestrians who were not wrapped up in their daily rounds and bank accounts. I couldn't tear myself away from those walls as if I had in any way been related to them, as if they had been my next of kin, my companions in misfortune. An ordinary wall hardly suits me because it doesn't seem to come from beneath the earth where it might have been exposed to all sorts of dangers, including eternal fire, sulphur and undercurrents that in the long run destroy everything.

I tried to find an entrance to the building designated by the walls but was unable to do so for the simple reason that there was no entrance to the museum from *that* side of the street. Actually I wondered if there was any street to speak of: I saw only the walls which seemed to encompass the whole world, leaving nothing outside. There was no entrance through which I could penetrate *inside* the walls that seemed to hold me in their embrace, in their stone-cold wounded arms. I went to the next building and asked how I could enter the Jewish Museum. I got a ticket and saw a staircase leading to the basement – not to Paradise where a visitor finds a lot of

masterpieces and prestigious signatures. I was going back to my childhood, to the underground where I had been born more than 60 years ago. Is that what I should speak about when trying to enlarge upon my childhood?

I saw several corridors and I knew that they had to lead somewhere because all corridors lead somewhere unless they are dead ends; and there are few dead ends in a museum. At that point, however, I realised I wasn't walking through a museum. Why should I turn my childhood and youth into a collection of objects? I was walking through my life – even through my present to some extent. Those underground passages were empty and they looked as if life had withdrawn from them. They might have been inhabited in days of yore, but now there's nothing but a void where you can find only your life on condition that you were born underground.

There were slits in the walls through which a tiny quantity of light filtered into the space where I had found myself while exploring my memories, my unconscious, my innermost being. They reminded me of the scars or slashes I had seen on the walls when standing in front of the museum. 'Even light comes to me through my wounds,' I said to myself: now and then I indulge in what is called self-pity. I was born underground and the only way to reach the light is to suffer – another expression of self-pity of which I availed myself when walking down the stairs. The walls I saw were empty and we're not used to seeing empty walls during our visits to museums where so many pictures and sculptures await us to show how wonderful the history of humanity has been for so many centuries.

And then I saw another staircase leading upwards. I had no alternative but to follow the lead and reach the end of my journey or one of its ends, one of its beginnings. There were three straight lines overhead and they also led somewhere; at least they showed a few directions, looking like the hints scattered over Paul Klee's works where there are many arrows and many movements. In the documentary I've been watching for some time, the architect of the Jewish Museum, Daniel Libeskind, says he was inspired by Walter Benjamin's *One-Way Street* and Schoenberg's *Moses and Aaron*. There are no other streets in my life or perhaps there's only one street that leads upwards or downwards: it is not up to me to decide where it leads and what the end of my journey looks like.

I read Benjamin's book many years ago and I found it on a shelf situated near the computer on which I'm working or killing time. I also found a few notes in the margins, which remind me of what I singled out for future use and pleasures. They also throw light on the distance between my present state of mind and my former thoughts, which helps me realise how far I've got from myself in the course of these years. I continue to walk away from myself – along the same one-way street. Anyway I can't retrace my steps, even if my memory is sometimes prepared to assist me in this adventure, in the ritual habitually called 'homecoming'. I'll never come home either because I have none or because no one can achieve such an objective.

'The more antagonistic a person is towards the traditional order, the more inexorably he will subject his private life to the norms that he wishes to elevate as legislators of a future society. It is as if these laws, nowhere yet realised, placed him under obligation to enact them in advance, at least in the confines of his own existence.' Even in those years I already subjected my life to the norms I regard as the only way to prove to myself and others that dignity has not disappeared from the face of the Earth. Just another one-way street. In this respect I haven't budged from where I stood 10 or 15 years ago as if, instead of stopping time, I had resolved at some point to adhere to my principles and keep my mind in its virgin state, defying the expression 'to change one's mind'. Of course I'm aware that people who never change their minds are obstinate and not very intelligent – at

least that's what *I* think about such people. But there are principles that shouldn't be trifled with because they play a vital role in the survival of the human race.

I am in the Jewish Museum which I mentally empty of the exhibits to remain alone with its bare walls and bare truth, with the gas chamber it reminds me of. It is *my* truth because I was born here, in the basement of this museum; and yet it had not been on the surface of the Earth at the moment of my birth. I feel like spending the rest of my life underground and some day we'll emerge from the gloom of our corridors to see what the world is like and how one can live in it.

II

I have no idea whether I'm still under the surface of the Earth or in heaven whose surface often looks like that of the Earth on account of the stars we contemplate whenever we feel like it. There are many pebbles on the surface of the Earth and they crunch under my feet as I walk along the road that leads nowhere unless something or someone is waiting for me at the end of this road. Sometimes I get the feeling I walk along the sky and the stars I contemplate from my armchair are rolling under my feet as if determined to play soccer on a cosmic scale. If I'm asked, 'Did you play soccer at school?' I know what to answer because I was a good goalkeeper and often played for our team that needed a skilful defender for its goal; and no one wished to remain motionless most of the time. Even at that time I was fond of immobility and a few occasional jumps would only emphasise how important it was to keep away from life, watching it from afar. Even now I spend hours and hours without budging from where I am and my propensity for keeping my privacy intact becomes clear whenever I jump and repulse an allied onslaught. A few people lumber in and I do all I can to get rid of them in the twinkling of an eye and I mostly succeed, although now and then I suffer a humiliating defeat.

Claude Lévi-Strauss says he doesn't care about our civilisation, otherwise he would have become a politician or a journalist whose camera and cassette recorder are always switched on, even in a desert or on the top of a mountain. In a book on him, there's a myth which reminds me of my childhood, of my youth and also of the present where my life continues to flow as if nothing could wear it out or dry it up. It is a Bororo myth situated far from our civilisation and also from the people that are unable to leave me in peace in spite of my skilful defence and quick reaction: after all, I used to be a goalkeeper. I had a mother, a father, an aunt, an uncle and a few cousins whose presence enlivened my childhood and even a part of my youth except the moments when I wished to remain on my own, eschewing any outside interference, any violence. I was in love with my mother because her beauty was beyond suspicion and I was keen on whatever was beyond – beyond a mirror, beyond the sky, beyond a word, beyond a smile. In my mind I would commit incest with my mother almost every night; and even in the daytime I wasn't immune to her figure that I had an opportunity to enjoy whenever she wasn't away, taking part in a film or touring the USSR with a theatre company.

I also loved my father, but not to the extent of longing to commit incest with him; and yet he was a handsome middle-aged man whose features one could often see on a television screen. (In those days there were no computers.) My father treated me with the contempt I didn't deserve: he had no inkling of what was going on in my mind, let alone in my body. In other words, he couldn't know I was in love with my mother – for the simple reason that he had not read Freud, and Sophocles never so much as touches upon the Oedipus Complex. Be that as it may, he made me confront the souls of the dead, always speaking to me about the past which, in his opinion, was far superior to the present. 'The present can't hold a candle to the past' was one of his favourite phrases; and yet he went on living in the present and not in some tomb or other where he might have conversed with Dante, Sophocles and Pushkin.

Somehow I escaped from the clutches of the past, but my father was still eager to avenge himself; at least he swore he would avenge the dead I had insulted by renouncing them for the sake of the quick. Once he invited me on a bird-nesting trip. He talked me into climbing a steep cliff and for a while I walked along a narrow mountain ridge because I thought I was on the top of Mt. Everest. This myth is never-ending so I can see my father who abandons me for dead on the top of that mountain or cliff where I'm supposed to survive with the assistance of vultures. At first they don't recognise my features; and yet I've done my best to become a bird in the course of this trip: a bird can fly away from cliffs and mountains, from our civilisation and its

representatives. Well, I'm not a perfect bird; I'm only a half-bird that yearns to forget humans and their tricks, their down-to-earth moods and acts. The vultures end up helping me to the ground where I set off on my desert crossing: one must cross many deserts before coming back to one's native land and city.

Eventually I come to Moscow where I'm first recognised by my grandmother who died 43 years ago. She has always been my protector: on her deathbed she swore to protect me from outsiders, from the mores and culture of today's world. She would accompany me to nursery school and later to school and I heard her voice whenever I looked around, trying to come to terms with Moscow and its inhabitants: 'Don't look around. Look inside.' That's how I began to search for myself and my search was on a par with the bird-nesting trip I couldn't forget: my main aim in life was to become a bird and fly away as far as the Pole Star. At the time I thought one didn't need a spaceship to reach the stars where our birds keep on building their nests out of grass. I'm not sure I still aspire to become a bird: I know for sure that no one and nothing can fly away from the Earth, from our moods and tricks.

On the night of my homecoming, there's a great storm and I can see the lights going off everywhere: in the streets, in every window, on bonfire nights. Only in my grandmother's house the lights are glowing with excitement as if to challenge the new world order and the 21st century, its mercenary schemes. The following morning, all the inhabitants of Moscow pay a visit to my grandmother to ask her for light or for hot embers, which amounts to the same thing. Only our bonfire night remains on the surface of the Earth and in heaven where one can pick up hot embers, alias stars, provided one is permitted to do so by angels and archangels. My grandmother often speaks of angels and archangels and I still put to her the question: 'What's the difference between them?' In my childhood I thought an archangel was a big angel. Now I know the answer and yet I go on asking this question as if it was the only way of getting back to my childhood, to the source of my life, to the cave where I was born. A narrow trail of blood leads directly into this cave.

I give a few hot embers to those who come to my house or rather to that of my grandmother, but they burn their fingers and fling the embers down on my writing desk where they remain for a while, glowing in the dark. 'That's how I became a writer,' I say to myself as if I could remember anything: the embers, the writing desk I had in Moscow, my friends and their parents, our nights. At some point, I decided to leave my native city, declaring I would no longer live with my people who had treated me badly. I moved to another city where I was also treated badly because I was still inside the Bororo myth and my dead father continued to pursue his prey. The whole world is my father to some extent and my mother is nowhere: she seems to have forsaken me along with my grandmother. If one person forsakes you, the whole world does the same with the exception of your angry father who is bent on destroying you forever.

Yet the members of those 'primitive' tribes do not beat their children who are often carried by their fathers. They seldom learn how to walk along the roads leading nowhere – not to our civilisation anyway. A child rides on his father's back until his father dies and goes to another world where he'll continue to carry his son, provided the latter doesn't get into the habit of using his feet instead of his father's back. Another child – a pretty girl whose hair falls in curls over her shoulders – rides on her father's neck, and she uses her legs only when she feels like stroking her father's hairy chest. She strokes it and her father smiles because he knows that even in the Hereafter his daughter will stroke his chest and also his belly: she's growing so quickly.

A man makes a few arrows in his spare time; and he has nothing else at home because only arrows and the spare time he uses to his heart's content fill his life to the brim. He sees a jug in front of him and he knows

that life looks like this jug which he can fill to the brim either with beans or with coffee. He drinks the coffee and feels his life inside him; he doesn't have to look inside in order to find his life which would be scattered to the four winds, if he looked around him. He drinks his jug of coffee and becomes what he is: a cup of coffee, a jug of coffee, a world of coffee, the world, the universe, the Andromeda Galaxy. He picks up his son and carries him around the table on which the jug stands like the Statue of Liberty or rather the Statue of Life. The man doesn't care about the Tree of Life: every tree he comes across during his wanderings is a tree of life. The Jug of Life is different because it stands on his table, which enables him to drink the contents of the jug – the black coffee he is so fond of. He has never drunk a cup of cappuccino. He doesn't know that even cappuccino represents his life on the map of the universe and also in the Hereafter.

He thinks that his daughter is the universe he's looking for; and yet he has never looked for the universe lying in front of him. Why look for something that is right under your nose all the time? His daughter plays with his son and he wonders if their relationship doesn't exceed the recommended dose. Then he wonders what the recommended dose means, but since he doesn't know anything about it, he gives up his quest and concentrates on his daughter instead. Nor does he know anything about incest, for he hasn't read Claude Lévi-Strauss and has no intention of reading him in the near future; but he wonders what he can do for his daughter, her future and her life in the Hereafter. He is just content to see his daughter in such a stable relationship – but a grandchild, that really is the icing on the cake. That's right – his daughter is pregnant and his son or rather his son's relationship with his daughter lies at the root of the problem they're facing in 2013.

His relationship, their relationship. Sir Radcliffe-Brown calls them an 'elementary unit'. All this is elementary, as every Watson knows so well. An elementary family consisting of a man and his wife and their child or children. Well and good. So there are two children and two parents who don't necessarily sleep with their children, for Lévi-Strauss speaks about the incest taboo. The Watsons don't read Lévi-Strauss, but they're aware of the fact that incest is frowned upon in some of the tribes they hunt with in the valleys that everyone can see from their windows or holes. They know nothing about the risk of degeneracy and an instinctive horror about which so many scientists speak to guard themselves against their Oedipus Complex. So the father puts his daughter on his bed, after carrying her on his neck through two or three villages where the incest taboo is de rigueur. 'All right,' he says to himself. 'We're at home now.' He is right: they're at home and his bed seems made for gorgeous lovemaking that has nothing to do with the incest taboo: the participants in the experiment don't read Lévi-Strauss. And other tribes are far away from the table on which there stands the Jug of Life.

The man makes love to his daughter and some ethnologist writes in his notebook: 'That night they made love for the first time.' He is wrong of course: he doesn't take into consideration the epic about which so many adults dream continuously, provided they're good readers and take an avid interest in Scheherazade's tales. But the son, who also belongs to the elementary unit, comes to his father's room and kills his father. Freud says that at the dawn of human culture, rebellious sons killed and ate their fathers. The son has no intention of eating his father: he likes foie gras and human flesh doesn't appeal to him unless he can mutilate it before killing its owner. Instead, he makes love to his sister in his father's bed. His own bed is too far and he cannot wait for ages: he has been in love with his sister for many ages and the thought of waiting for another couple of ages makes him shudder. And his sister shudders at the thought of kissing him because she read a book on Lévi-Strauss in which she lighted upon the following argument: 'I relate the incest taboo to religious prohibitions concerning menstrual blood, themselves symbolically linked to the blood of the clan and hence the totem.' She knows everything about

the totem and the blood of the clan, but menstrual blood is beyond her ken: she can't help asking herself what that means. Well, she has no alternative but to make love to her brother because Durkheim and Freud are beyond her reach; and her father is dead. Besides, she knows that in Ancient Egypt – at least in some of its parts – the incest taboo was unknown.

In so-called primitive societies – they were far less primitive than our civilisation – men and women were used to making love almost everywhere and at any time, in any weather: even rain and snow didn't prevent them from exploring their bodies through the agency of their partners. They didn't have to sit in the back row of the cinema to avail themselves of the erotic ritual, otherwise known as 'canoodling'. They carried out their successful attacks in the open air where both birds and humans could get an eyeful of their virtuosity partly inspired by the Kama Sutra. And yet they had neither the time nor the desire to read it because whatever they needed to satisfy their instincts was in the air that was saturated with sex and its derivatives.

Lévi-Strauss relates the incest taboo to rules of exogamy that require marriage outside of a particular group or category of individuals. But brothers and sisters couldn't care less about other tribes, about the rule which was supposed to force them to marry out – outside their houses, their tribe, their sun and moon. Before making love, they often talked to each other thus: 'Do you see the sun?'

'Of course I do.'

'Do you think it's our sun?'

'Yes. But it also belongs to other tribes.'

'So if we make love under this sun, we'll marry out. Don't you think so?'

'I do. We have our sun, they have their sun. At the same time, we have the same sun.'

'So we're both in and out, aren't we?'

'We are.'

'Let's make love, then.'

'Yes, let's.'

'And what about gifts?'

'What gifts?'

'You're a gift, my sister. You'll be offered to the chief of the R tribe.'

'Really?'

'Yes. Humanity has to follow the path that leads from a state of nature to a state of culture.'

'I care neither about nature nor about culture.'

'Do you care about me?'

'Yes, I do.'

'Let's make love, then.'

'Yes, let's.'

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with Mother, and the Word was Mother. In other words, the Word was a matriarchal society where women reigned over men, children, villages, trees, lakes and oceans. And love reigned supreme in their hearts, otherwise there would have been no life on Earth. Only love is able to mix the liquids born inside our bodies and it is said that these liquids are secreted by glands in or near our genitals. These liquids do their best to escape from their respective prisons and multiply those humans who are

worthy of being multiplied. But only love is capable of pushing them out, of making them labour for the sake of the future which wholly depends on our children, on their propensity to create other children and other mothers.

Every member of a primitive society was an artist in his own right. (Women didn't care about the arts because they had other things to do. In a way, their children were wonderful works of art – far superior to artefacts created by men.) An artist thinks that he should do something for the primitive society and there are no taxes in the society to which he belongs. So, instead of paying taxes, he makes a statuette called 'Mother' or 'Earth' or 'Fertility' or 'Goddess'. This goddess must have horrible fat thighs, otherwise she won't be able to give birth to mankind – or to the universe, come to think of it. You can't say, 'Goddesses come in all shapes and sizes – fat and thin, short and tall.' They *may* look short because sculptors are often short of time and of the materials they need to create goddesses in their workshops; but goddesses are never thin. Every self-respecting sculptor thinks in terms of fat thighs that he creates before tackling the problem of head and waist. Even breasts are less important than thighs on which the belly of a goddess stretches out restfully: the whole world can trust such a pair of thighs. You put the Earth on them and, contrary to your fears, they do not give way and continue to defy both the Earth and the laws of gravity that are merciless in *our* society.

Moses and Aaron. Schoenberg leaves the opera unfinished in spite of the years he spends on the surface of the Earth, which gives him an opportunity to finish this opera and compose oratorios, quartets and piano pieces. Life is brimful of operas, but some of them are left unfinished because we don't always feel like finishing our works and deeds; and even some of the sentences we utter can't make their way to the end of thoughts and moods. 'I fear only one thing: I shall then have forgotten everything that I have written, for even now I hardly recognise what I composed of it last year.' I still recognise what I wrote a month ago when I resolved to write another book inspired by what I had left unfinished in the course of my previous life, of the years I had lived before my last birthday or deathday: there are only deathdays in front of me, all around my body, inside it.

Follow-my-leader. Many children repeat this ritual without knowing it, unconsciously. We all carry out this ritual because we have to go somewhere, not necessarily to the Promised Land; we can't do otherwise. No one wants to promise us the Earth and if we ask why no promises resound in our ears, we hear the following words: 'You already have the Earth. You can walk on it and plough its surface. These fields have been under the plough for centuries and even now you enjoy the generosity of this morsel of the Earth. What else do you need?'

'Why don't you promise us the moon?'

'Because you can look at it. What else do you need?'

'We'd like to walk on it and plough its surface. Why don't you promise us the world?'

'You've got the wasteland which enables you to purify your thoughts and feelings. What else do you need?'

A small horde. One powerful patriarch and his females. A lot of younger males. There's fierce rivalry for the females. This rivalry pushes the younger males to kill and eat the old father. 'Guilt following this original Oedipal crime led to the tribal totemic laws against murder and incest.' I smile as I read this poetic nonsense, but my father thinks otherwise: for him it is an assertion that explains everything down to the unconscious. 'Do you really think I killed you, Father?'

'Yes. And you've never stopped murdering me or rather my ghost.'

‘Why should I murder you?’

‘I own the females you sleep with. They’re mine and you think they belong to you and your body. Anyway you did murder me in days of yore.’

‘I didn’t. You’ve never owned the females you’re boasting about, otherwise our species would have died out.’

‘I wasn’t impotent, was I?’

‘There was no Viagra in those days.’

‘I didn’t need it.’

‘You’ve always been old, Father. And now you’re ghost of your former self.’

There are so many deaths and every death is just around the corner. How many times have my parents killed me in the course of my life or death? I recall their knives and their hands raised above my head, my heart, my genitals, my eyes. ‘And if thy right eye offend thee, pluck it out, and cast it from thee: for it is profitable for thee that one of thy members should perish, and not that thy whole body should be cast into hell.’ My father thought my right eye was about to offend me and he plucked it out. ‘And if thy right hand offend thee, cut it off, and cast it from thee.’ My mother thought my right hand was about to offend me; she went to the kitchen and picked up the longest knife. My mother also owns a ghost who is always at her beck and call. Yesterday, I spoke to her ghost once again. ‘Why are you haunting me, Mother? Do you own me still? I’m not your ghost, am I?’

‘You’re my son so I own you. Every mother owns her son. And I’m your mother, am I not? You have to love me more than your girls, your whores.’

‘Of course I love you, Mother. I love you more than my girls, my whores, my nymphs, my Venuses.’

‘I am your Venus, your Aphrodite, your goddess, your Mother Earth. Why do you write about other women? Why do you make love in our bed? All your beds are mine. Don’t you know that?’

‘I do. But I don’t suffer from necrophilia.’

‘You could have sex with my ghost. Don’t you like her? Doesn’t she look like your mother?’

‘She does, but I’m not physically attracted to ghosts.’

‘I’ll seduce you in the long run. Don’t you feel I’m alive? I’m just away. I’m making a two-week tour of Australia.’

I’ve always been fluid – as fluid as the water on which I’m floating now as I recall my childhood, youth and my parents who used to push me around. We often went to what is called Pure Ponds and I thought, ‘I’m also a boat’ as I looked at the children who enjoyed floating their boats. I was manipulated by my parents, not by other children whose participation in the game was active and therefore limited. I felt passive and unlimited as I floated around, obeying not my instincts and their errors – or their Eros – but my parents’ commands. They were holding me in their hands. In those days I didn’t need God whose participation in my life was filtering through my parents’ minds and ideas, principles and rules. To some extent, God’s light was dimmed by my parents’ bodies whose interference in my life conveniently fitted the image conveyed by the books I was reading: a happy family, an obedient child.

I come back to the image I don’t really like on account of its humdrum nature: the River of Life. Well, I still stand on the riverbank, watching the boats float past, and all these boats are my days and years, my defeats and triumphs. At some point I stopped rowing and let the boats float with the stream I might call the Stream of Life if I felt like it. I don’t feel like it because, this morning, I don’t feel anything at all except the water on the

surface of which I'm floating. I don't get the feeling it is the surface of the Earth that my back explores as it follows the itinerary dictated by time or something else, somebody else: a comet or Jupiter. My parents also take part in the game, for there are only games in our lives; and yet I don't like the word 'game' which seems to suggest that life is not a serious undertaking fraught with problems and risks. Of course we do risk our lives when playing a dangerous game, but life is beyond any game, in my opinion, if only in the light of what has been said and written about the Hereafter. Let us suppose that life is a game and wherever we go or stand we participate in this game beyond which there's nothing with the exception of a few rewards. Do they constitute the Hereafter we should take into consideration whenever living through another episode in our life? The Hereafter is *not* a collection of rewards and punishments. It is another life or the same life – the one we are accustomed to on the surface of the Earth, on rivers, on ponds, on Pure Ponds.

'Paint is paint, surface is surface. That's all they should be,' says a critic in the film on Pollock I've been watching since yesterday as if I had nothing else to do. Perhaps it is the only thing I *can* do at the moment because this film and my curiosity mean gliding over the surface of life and not dipping my toe into a pool to see how cold it is: I don't need to do anything of the kind. Life is cold but I don't have to swim in it, let alone plunge headlong over some cliff or other. I should glide gracefully over the water I see all around me because today life is water, as Thales put it many centuries ago. Many years ago, I tried to swim with my head underwater and I might have seen some exotic fish, had I stayed underwater for an hour or two. I was wearing a mask which was so tight it left imprints on my face and I've never repeated this experience so as not to suffer permanent disfigurement. I should stay above the sea, above life, which might enable me to contemplate it from afar, from a cloud or a comet. For the moment, I'm content to skim across the top of the waves and glide effortlessly through life with no real worries. Why should I worry about the alcoholism from which Jackson Pollock suffered throughout his life? They used to say, 'He's been in remission for the past six months,' but then he would turn up with a bottle of beer or whisky, upsetting the apple cart.

When you drink, you see both the surface and the bottom of the world that lies in front of you as if in expectation of your hands, your touch, your caress. You caress the world, which you never do in another mood or state of mind because one should be either drunk or mad to feel like caressing the world where one lives long enough to understand the ins and outs of the Earth, the air, the stars, the Hereafter. One doesn't know *everything*, but one knows a lot about death, about how one may disappear from forests and lakes, from clouds and twigs. You drink a bottle and one disappears along with others and the twigs you touched an hour ago disappear from your memory, from the surface over which you skim, glide and slide. When I was little I used to like sliding on the polished floor in my socks; now I slide on Pollock's paintings.

The critic I quoted above continued his monologue and said something along these lines: 'The surrealists confuse literature with painting.' So do I. I mean I often confuse life with literature and one should banish literature from one's life to avoid disasters – the pain of unrequited love, among other things. One can write about surfaces, but *going* through the corridor of life is another kettle of fish because one may find oneself underground or in a tunnel at the end of which there's no proverbial light. So I'm writing about surfaces and the tops of the waves and the waves I'm writing about do not crash against the shore. Nor do they sweep away my sandcastles, my castles in the air where I live from time to time amidst my birds and treetops.

The savages I saw in another film make arrows and musical instruments which may be used for creating the harmony one needs to live one's life with dignity and serenity. I need neither Beethoven nor pianos: they shouldn't upset my mind and heart with any more nonsense about ghosts, feelings, empathy, phoney triumphs. 'I'm not the phoney. You're the phoney,' says Pollock in the film I've just stopped watching: you can't see anything beyond the end of a film. There are a few names that glide across the screen, but I'm loath to join them: I no longer need any names. Even my name no longer speaks to me as if I was on my way to God's abode from which both names and images were banished a long time ago – at the dawn of monotheism. I switch off both the names and music: I don't like the film's soundtrack. Nor do I like the music stored on my shelves and in my memory. I'm sure I'll forget it in the long run, along with my loves, tragedies, comedies, operettas.

If I make a pipe, I'll become a faun or Nijinsky. I don't need Debussy's music which should be replaced by silence, by the void one can see, provided one looks at the sky for years on end, for centuries. Dancing, rolling on *my* stage. I am not the phoney.

'How do you know when you're finished with a painting?'

'How do you know when you're finished making love?'

What am *I* supposed to say? 'How do you know when you're finished with a novel?' 'How do you know when you're finished with life?' At least that's what I should say about *this* novel of mine.

What is there after the end of a film? There's its beginning and you can also find yourself in the middle of nowhere: I don't remember what preceded the sequence I'm watching in order to quote a few pertinent or impertinent words uttered by Pollock, his critics and journalists. I must search for another sequence where Pollock speaks about art and how he walks within its walls. Actually I'm not sure I should speak about walls in connection with the breakthrough that occurred in 1947, as far as Pollock is concerned: I don't think I'm permitted to speak about *my* breakthrough, *my* art, *my* maturity. His wife said to him at some point: 'You've done it, Pollock. You've cracked it wide open.' No one has ever said anything like that in *my* presence: neither my mother nor my numerous friends appreciate what I do in the domain of poetry, in the corridors of prose.

You crack it wide open and see other skies, and the feathers you put on your head take off and fly towards other worlds in the midst of which you'll live from now on, weary as you are of your own self. You get rid of yourself and join your own feathers and fathers, your aspirations, your dreams and hopes that no longer hang on treetops, on Christmas trees. I hate this sequence: Pollock's family, his mother and brother. I'll fast-forward to the next one, to the words I'm looking for. Sometimes it's better to hear words than music and flowers are far better than humans – at least Pollock speaks about *them* and *not* about his brothers and sisters.

'Today, painters do not have to go to a subject matter outside of themselves.' I no longer go outside of myself either, for there's nothing outside, it seems to me – not even birds, let alone humans who have withdrawn from my field of vision. Some time ago, I put up a fence to stop people walking across my field of vision and they obey my command, complying with my dearest wish. Now and then, however, I let them in and they wreak havoc in my garden, uprooting trees and blowing the fence down. They're evil spirits I ought to have killed by using the arrows I spoke about in the previous chapter, on another page and probably in another life. In *this* life of mine I have no arrows and I'm not likely to have some in a minute or two, no matter how brilliantly I depict

them in my book. So I'd better not waste my time on them; I shouldn't forget that time is running out. Oddly enough, I often forget it, and I don't blame this lapse of memory on my memory.

Like many of Dante's followers, all my life I've been walking towards an ever-receding Paradise, but the bliss you can experience at the end of the road doesn't depend on your zeal and determination. For instance, I went to my favourite bookshop in the hope of finding the book I had been yearning for after finishing my commentary on the *Commedia*. Unable to part with it, I feel like writing a postscript where I intend to describe my present state of mind and the thoughts inspired by the comments I chanced upon in the same library two or three years ago. I realise I'm taking a rather devious route to explain what I'm planning to do and pinpoint the source of my inspiration – the aim I pursued when making for the bookshop where I hoped to find another book on Dante. But the route leading to Paradise is always devious and it is not enough to state the limits of your freedom: you have to *show* them. That's what I'm doing right now and therefore my demonstration looks and sounds like an abstruse philosophical essay.

Actually the situation I'm trying to describe is crystal clear and doesn't need any additional explanation: it is enough to stick to the facts. Three years ago, I went to a bookshop situated in the centre of Paris and while browsing through the books standing in front of me I noticed a huge volume devoted to the *Commedia* I cannot part with, for all my efforts. *Lectura Dantis, Inferno, A Canto-by-Canto Commentary*. This commentary was edited by Allen Mandelbaum, Anthony Oldcorn and Charles Ross. Upon seeing this book I realised I would never tear myself away from the *Commedia*, from my eternal reflection on Hell, Purgatory and Paradise where I might encounter some of my nymphs and goddesses. Ever since I have been itching to write a commentary on this commentary, adopting the procedure to which many Talmudists do justice as they scrutinise every letter they come across.

Pursuing my goal, I went to the bookshop once again and found *Purgatorio* which I needed for my journey to the end of the road, of the world, of time and its implements. Another year elapsed and I said to myself I couldn't set about writing my comments on the commentary in question without being able to consult the last volume of the trilogy. I went to the bookshop once again, but this time I found nothing on the shelf where other books on the *Commedia* stood in expectation of the uncommon reader. I asked a shop assistant if I could order the book and she sat down at the computer which had already found a lot of books for my library and leisure. Many times she pushed the same button but, as everybody knows, you can't expect to get everything you need at the push of a button – not even a book, let alone a villa on the Riviera.

So she failed to lay her hands on the book I was looking for and I thought I should come to the shop with another book in this series to make things easier for the shop assistants whose benevolence was above suspicion. A week later I paid another visit to the shop where I met a woman I had pestered with my demands for many years; she sat down at the same table, in front of the same computer and I began to wait for a miracle or rather for Paradise. Actually you're not supposed to *wait* for Paradise, twiddling your thumbs and looking at seventh heaven: you should toil up hills and mountains in the midst of which you are bound to stumble upon the Mount of Purgatory or Jacob's ladder. I was merely looking at the shop assistant; she continued to play with the computer which was in no mood for revealing the secret of the book's whereabouts. 'It's not available,' she said at last.

‘Why?’ I knew my question was irrelevant, but I was unable to damp down my emotion: I realised I was facing my own destiny, my future and the Hereafter.

‘I don’t know,’ she said. ‘Mandelbaum died two years ago. Perhaps they’re trying to come to terms with his heritage.’

And what about *him*? Did he land up in Purgatory? The absence of *Paradiso* seems to suggest that its gates remained close at the approach of the scholar who had done so much for Dante’s successors – for his fan club, so to speak. Be that as it may, one has to go *down* instead of toiling up hills, mountains and Jacob’s ladder, and Beethoven knew it better than anybody else, with the exception of Dante: let us recall his *Fifth* and *Ninth* symphonies. I’ve spoken about this way, path and road many times, but actions speak louder than words. I’m about to ‘bury myself’ – the ritual that was fruitfully worked out by the members of a Russian religious sect. They literally buried themselves to escape from the sins and temptations strewn around the world in the bosom of which they had to walk, eat and sleep either alone or with their companions in misfortune. They decided to live under the surface of the Earth – for two or three hours. One can’t live without air forever or even for a week unless one drives a hole in one’s tomb and starts breathing properly.

I’m living under the surface of the earth, but that doesn’t mean I intend to *bury* myself and die in the name of Christ: any other sacrifice makes no sense and is frowned upon by angels and the Blessed Virgin. The Russian fanatics thought that whatever was done in the name of Christ was blessed by both the Virgin Mary and her Son; they began digging holes in the garden where they used to pray and cry. The ground was frozen hard and was impossible to dig, but the Russians can be very obstinate at times and this time they *were* obstinate, otherwise they wouldn’t have died in those holes or tombs. They must have prayed a lot in spite of the fact that many people are unable to do two things at the same time. When questioned about this incapacity of theirs, they answer in unison, ‘People like Julius Caesar aren’t born every day.’ The same goes for the members of the sect I’m writing about: such fanatics aren’t born every day, judging by the numbers of self-burials recorded by chroniclers and statisticians. In 2012 they unearthed only two burials of this kind, which means that the trend towards underground ownership has gone into reverse.

A man hears a voice and the voice utters the following words, ‘To a monastery.’ ‘I’m at your command!’ says the man and sets off up the road on his old bike. Upon his arrival he meets a monk who tells him there are services every morning and in the afternoon one is supposed to attend what is called ‘obedience’. ‘What do you do in the evening?’ asks the man.

‘There are services every evening,’ says the monk.

‘What kind of service are you talking about?’

‘If you don’t know what the word means, look it up in a dictionary,’ says the monk. ‘Do you have a dictionary?’

‘I do,’ says the man.

‘I hope you’ll be able to put your dictionary to good use,’ says the monk.

The man opens his dictionary and finds the following definition of the word: ‘A place at the side of a large road at which fuel, food, drink and other things that people want on their journey are sold.’ Services, services. What do they have to do with religion? If you don’t have to stop for fuel on the way to the airport, your mind is at rest because you are unlikely to be late for your flight: aeroplanes don’t wait for unpunctual people. But you needn’t go to a monastery to experience this feeling and the man is already within the walls that

surround him as if to insinuate that in his youth he committed a crime for which he must be punished, otherwise his conscience will never be at rest. The walls seem to say to him, 'Your mind may be at rest, but what about your conscience? Don't you wish to put it at rest before taking care of your body?'

And what about 'obedience'? The man talks to another monk and finds out that he should chop wood in the yard and sweep the leaves from the driveway. 'There are no cars in this monastery,' says the man.

'For some reason, we don't use the word "path", saying instead "driveway". This tradition dates back to medieval times.'

'But there were no cars in those days.'

'There were horses,' says the monk.

'Do I really have to chop wood in the yard? Could I peel, core and chop the apples instead?'

'You could not,' says the monk and the man hears something that reminds him of a prayer.

The shadows deepen as the evening draws on and a liturgy invites both the monks and their guests to the church where Russian voices resound so affirmatively one believes they resound around the world. This is the main aspect of the Orthodox faith: you should believe that your voice resounds around the world and even in the Hereafter and its suburbs. The Orthodox liturgy – a four-hour marathon – lasts until ten o'clock in the evening and the man begins to curse whatever he sees and hears around him – with the exception of God Whom he neither sees nor hears nor feels in his heart. 'If you'd got on with your work instead of wasting time in the church, you'd be finished by now,' he says to himself and he repeats this sentence many times, unaware of the fact that his negligence and intolerance are tantamount to a death sentence.

After the liturgy, a monk he hasn't seen before invites him to dinner and the man is surprised to see a few dishes on the dinner table: he has always thought that monks eat only grass and berries. Of course there are no sturgeons on the table at which he is sitting and waiting, but there are other products associated with rivers and lakes. He realises he is unlikely to starve to death in the course of his stay in the monastery. He eats and thinks his walk around the monastery has given him an appetite. His train of thought doesn't prevent him from noticing that all the monks without exception have a healthy appetite; and yet they're not in the habit of mooning around their cells and the yard where some of them traditionally chop wood and cook meals, whenever their superiors are in the mood for a dish like shish kebab.

'Don't forget to wake up at 5.30 a.m.' says a monk.

'Why so early?'

'You should chop wood, onions and carrots. You can chop them roughly.'

'Are you talking about wood or carrots?'

'I always talk about everything, about the universe and the Hereafter.'

'Don't forget parsley,' says another monk.

'How do you mean?'

'Add some fresh parsley, finely chopped.'

'What are you talking about?'

'Just put it on an enormous plate,' says the second monk. 'Otherwise we'll have no room for cucumbers.'

The man wakes up at 5.30 a.m. and thinks about his teeth which should be brushed in accordance with his private ritual performed on a regular basis in his bathroom and other bathrooms he happens to visit during his travels. But the water he feels in his mouth is so icy he interrupts his ritual and looks at the water while talking to

himself along these lines: ‘Yesterday the temperature was below freezing for most of the day. I’ll freeze to death while brushing my teeth. But if I don’t brush my teeth, I’ll lose them one by one. I’ve already got one wobbly tooth.’

The man leaves his makeshift bathroom and goes out to see what’s going on in the yard where no one chops wood as if the monks had gone to France for their summer holiday. Some tourists are walking around the yard and the man realises they’re pilgrims who have come to the monastery in the hope of meeting the Almighty or at least one of His emissaries. Their self-imposed exile must lead them to another life where the trials and tribulations of marriage do not annihilate human minds and souls. They flee from their wives because God is more important than female beauty, bodies and the sex appeal to which they have paid homage for many years, losing the most precious thing one is likely to find in the Gospel According to St John – personal salvation.

The man talks to one of these pilgrims, for he is curious to know what has happened to him during his journey to the end of our humdrum existence and the pilgrim says to him in a whisper: ‘I’ve had minor breakthroughs but real success eludes me and my colleagues.’

‘So you haven’t met God, have you?’

‘No, I haven’t.’

‘And what about angels?’

‘They don’t seem to respect our group.’

‘Can you see the other world?’ asks the man.

‘I can.’

‘What does it look like?’

‘Are you a pilgrim yourself?’ asks the pilgrim.

‘I’m not.’

‘You should become one, otherwise you won’t understand my description of the Hereafter.’

‘How to can I become a pilgrim?’

‘Our association works to promote the status of pilgrims as useful members of the community.’

‘Do I deserve this status?’ asks the man.

‘There has been an increase in applications for refugee status,’ says the pilgrim.

‘I don’t need to qualify as a refugee, do I?’

‘This status is the first stage of coming to terms with God. To become a pilgrim, you first have to seek refuge from persecution.’

‘What persecution?’

‘Are you married?’

‘I am not.’

‘Don’t you realise you’ve always been persecuted by our society, by men and women?’

‘I hope you don’t think I’m prying, but I wonder if you suffer from persecution mania,’ says the man.

I don’t feel nostalgic for the place where I grew up because I see it whenever I go to Moscow and spend a few days there without bothering about female beauty that may engulf my heart if I give free rein to my emotions. I keep my emotions – and beautiful human beings – on a tight rein, which enables me to visit

museums and the streets where I played and strolled in my wretched youth submitted to the communist yoke. I don't need to keep my nostalgic feelings at bay: I master them all the more easily since, in my bosom and in the rest of my body, there are no nostalgic feelings to speak of. And if there are some feelings of this kind, they're focused upon my 'first impressions' and 'discoveries' – the events that are unlikely to produce a stinging sensation in my soul: I've lived with them for many years. Of course I may forget them partly or even completely, but as soon as I find myself at the core of a situation I first experienced in my childhood or youth, I follow a Proustian path and recognise every nuance of the past which, through thick and thin, has remained faithful to me and my memory. The process itself and its result which I hastily define as 'recognition' are a great source of nostalgic longings that I intentionally conjure up using books and other objects linked to both my memory and Russia.

This time – the event took place last night – I turned my attention to the earliest Russian epic entitled *The Song of Igor's Campaign*, and I don't even have to track down the source of this minor turning point. All I have to do is cast a quick look at my television set that communicates its ideas to my mind and body. I realise I'm in the habit of putting mind and body side by side. Whenever I speak of my body, my mind is not far away; it can't even wait for another sentence, let alone another paragraph. In one of my books I quote a scientist who said on TV: 'Our mind would be quite stupid, if deprived of our body.' Once again I'm tempted to use this assertion as an alibi.

I chanced upon this epic at the age of 15: one of my teachers gave it to me and for a while I was reluctant to open it, thinking that Russian literature began with Pushkin and was about to end forever. And then I did open the book and was instantly overwhelmed with grief as I read about the eclipse that seemed to cast a shadow over the whole world and also over my room. Usually an eclipse of the sun lasts five minutes, but the blackness depicted in *The Song* was blacker than any night I could see around me and in my soul; even my soul wasn't as black as the colour of the epic I was reading or rather devouring.

In the book I found three translations of the epic written in an archaic language understood only by specialists or the people who live on the Russian steppes and consequently know nothing about cars, aeroplanes and computers. Do you really need a computer in the middle of a steppe where only horizons surround you and talk to you about the universe, where the stars fall on you now and then as if to prove they're not dreams? I ploughed through the original text, catching only half of its meaning; but the beauty of the language struck me and for the first time I felt the time of Russia, of the country that I used to associate with space or rather with steppes.

*Then Igor glanced up at the bright sun
and saw that from it with darkness
his warriors were covered.*

My youth continues to trace its figures on the carpet of my life, but Freud is far from these figures and even from the carpet on which I lie as I count the stars and read Russian and Scandinavian epics. My parents and their frolics never aroused my curiosity and only the books I read in my prime continue to influence my life, making me forget my whereabouts and today's catastrophes. Humanity is not the bright sun at which I might cast a glance to find out about what's going on outside and anyway I wouldn't see much, given the colour I touched

upon earlier. Blackness, darkness. There are many warriors in the world about which I'm speaking now but I can't see them on account of the eclipse of the sun I read about in my youth – and also because I'm still in the Jewish Museum where light only emphasises the reign of darkness as it filters through some slots, chinks, crevasses, wounds. 'The soul's dark cottage, battered and decayed, / Lets in new light through chinks that time has made –'. This museum *is* my soul and hope: there's a path leading from the basement to the top of the world, to the stars that never fall or twinkle.

There are many warriors – I typed out 'worriers' – who fight for life, money, prosperity, luxury and status symbols; they glance up at the bright sun and see only its brightness, not the pitch blackness I came across in *The Song of Igor's Campaign*. Even those who read either Nabokov's translation of the epic or the original text do not fear the eclipse – the phenomena associated with tragedies, bad omens and life-sized images of death. Nor does Igor fear the bad omen he faces at the very outset of his campaign and he goes so far as to say in one of the chronicles: 'None knows the secrets of God,' which allows him to judge the situation from *his* point of view.

You commit a crime and put up a fight when the police resolve to arrest you and convey you to the nearest prison: you think that the policemen who maltreat your body are neither God nor intellectuals. Only poets, philosophers and mathematicians are able to decipher God's intentions and ways, whereas an ordinary policeman looks at the world from Plato's cave or cavern, seeing only a dozen shadows on the walls and the ceiling.

'None knows the secrets of God,' you say to the police officers.

'Did you murder that woman?'

'I did.'

'Is it a secret?'

'Yes, but I've just let you in on this secret.'

'So we know your secret, don't we?'

'You do, but you don't know the secrets of God.'

'Do we need to know them under the circumstances?'

'We always need to know them. What if God sanctions the murder I committed? Would you dare arrest the man who acts in accordance with God's secret wish?'

*A longing consumed the prince's mind,
and the omen was screened from him
by the urge to taste
of the Great Don*

One wonders why Igor was ready to sacrifice his and his warriors' lives for the sake of the water which couldn't be different from what he was accustomed to at home: no oil spills were likely to cause damage to his estate's ecology. So I'm driven to treat this desire as a symbolic hint whose meaning I'm unable to decipher, for all my knowledge of human weaknesses which ravage our lives and divert our thoughts from God and salvation. I use the word 'salvation' in the broadest sense, allowing the whole of humanity to take advantage of the generosity one can find within this word and its extendable limits. I can't say I really care about 'universal salvation', being too preoccupied with my personal problems and the repercussions they might have for my

solitary journey to Paradise or Purgatory: I happen to suffer from the sin that thwarted Dante's plans, forbidding him to settle near Beatrice's celestial abode. I too suffer from pride and John Donne might have harangued me thus: 'Valery be not proud, though some have called thee genius, for thou art not so. Valery thou shalt die.'

Why does the water of the Great Don appeal so irresistibly to Igor and probably to some of his companions in misfortune? Is it associated in their minds with glory, riches, immortality, salvation, Paradise, Helen of Troy? At some point, the author of *The Song* touches upon the war described by Homer and brought to light by Schliemann without whom we would relegate *The Iliad* to the domain of dreams where a nightmare may peacefully cohabit with a figment of someone's imagination.

In Borodin's opera that gleefully draws on *The Song of Igor's Campaign* the hero's son falls in love with the daughter of his father's chief enemy, but in the epic this episode is conspicuous by its absence. I shouldn't drag female beauty into my analysis. I think that glory was the chief motive behind the campaign and the water coveted by Igor whose thirst, if any, might have been quenched at home where a river and many brooks were prepared to serve the prince. He didn't shout: 'Glory be to God!' Nor did he dedicate his campaign to the glory of God and His celestial army. He merely knew that to win this battle would bring him true glory and he yearned for this glory, for the moment in the course of which he could bask in it.

Water is the spring and channel of all life, so that sap is water and, in some Tantric allegories, water stands for the breath of life, prāṇa. On the physical plane, and because it is also the gift of Heaven, water is the universal symbol of fertility and fecundity. In southern Vietnam the Montagnards say that water from heaven makes the rice; and they are, in addition, well aware of the regenerative role of water, which they regard as a medicine and beverage of immortality.

Jean Chevalier & Alain Gheerbrant, *Dictionary of Symbols*

The Russians often speak about the difference between a war whose aim is to liberate a territory and the one destined to conquer cities, oil, gold and aluminium. Apparently Igor didn't even think in terms of fertility and immortality when talking about the Great Don and its water: he just wished to conquer another country for the sake of glory. A commentator draws a parallel between *The Song* and The Afflictions of Jeremiah in which the sun neglects its duty and yields the sky to the occupying forces – to blackness, in other words. The army of blackness invades the world and the prophet laments the decline in moral standards on account of which his nation is doomed to live through many a scene of desolation, through virtual death deprived of resurrection and hope. His people have forgotten their God Who forgives neither memory lapses nor withdrawals from His influence that ordinary men and women pay attention to only when a miracle takes place in a desert or on a riverbank.

I'm also used to drawing parallels and seeing myself not only in mirrors, but also in the cities I've never been to, for no one can visit the whole world: it is not a small world.' It is true that I don't compare myself to Christ, but I may and probably must identify with Igor and Jeremiah: this book can be interpreted as a lament for lost youth, lost humanity, lost ages to which one traditionally adds the adjective 'golden'. Our age doesn't even deserve the adjective 'iron' or 'plastic', although I might compare it to the plastic bags into which I stuff a lot of rubbish so that often the rubbish falls out and I have no alternative but to pick it up. I pick it up, look at the bag in which it belongs, put it back and do my best to tie up the top of the bag in order to prevent the rubbish from

falling out. The same goes for the world I clean whenever given this opportunity; in a way every lament of mine is apt to cleanse the world of its sins. But the world's sins and rubbish fall out, scattering over roadsides, and I realise that no bag, no bog will ever hold it, whatever the size of the container I resort to in the course of my lamentations, dirges and funeral marches.

'Speak, thus saith the Lord, Even the carcasses of men shall fall as dung upon the open field, and as the handful after the harvestman, and none shall gather them.' I do gather them and put their carcasses back into my bag that I'll carry to the nearest rubbish dump, and one wonders why I pick up these carcasses instead of leaving them where they are – in the open fields, in the streets. 'Why look for *another* rubbish dump?' say my opponents.

'It's a shame that such a beautiful area has been defiled by a rubbish dump,' I say to them by way of an answer.

'Do you mean to say the whole world is just a rubbish dump?'

'That's right.'

'What about *your* rubbish dump? Is it located *outside* the world?'

'I carry the carcasses of men to the Hereafter.'

'Why do you defile the Hereafter? You'll go to Hell for this.'

'For death is come up into our windows, and is entered into our palaces, to cut off the children from without, and the young men from the streets.' I'm often asked why I have no children and this question doesn't remain on its own – away from other questions and interrogations, from what may be defined as an 'inquisition'. 'Don't you like children? Aren't they the flowers of our world? Do you prefer *real* flowers? How can you prefer plants to human beings? Look at the children and their games. Aren't they cute? Aren't you tempted to have a child of your own?'

'I've got some funny ideas about how to bring up children,' I say to them.

'Could you describe your funny ideas?' says a fun-loving girl.

'I wouldn't let them leave my palace.'

'No walks in the woods and valleys? No beaches?'

'The sun also shines in my park.'

'It's so cruel to keep your children chained up like that all the time. Do you want to shield them from death?'

'From the scenes of desolation.'

'You always sound angry. Are you one of the angry men? Have you seen the movie?'

'Anger can function as a shield against even more painful emotions of loss and hurt.'

'Why do you quote Jeremiah?'

'It's cruel to beget children in this day and age. "Rahel weeping for her children refused to be comforted for her children, because they were not."'

'Don't marry a woman whose name is Rahel.'

"With thee also will I break in pieces man and woman; and with thee will I break in pieces old and young; and with thee will I break in pieces the young man and the maid."

I was in two minds whether or not to take a walk in the snow-covered woods ‘where I might slip and break my hip’, as I told myself. Of course I could have broken many other members of my body – *any* of them, to be exact; but, for some obscure reason, I thought about my hip which is not the most precious part of my body. Well, I did slip this morning, though neither in the woods nor on the ice; I slipped on the marble that gives a warm or rather cold welcome to whoever gets close enough to the front door of my house. This time, the marble greeted me with open arms – to the extent of permitting me to touch it with all the members of my body. We didn’t make love, but I spent enough time on its surface to enable it to appreciate my curves and the quality of my clothes – my cashmere coat, among other things.

I am a thinking reed, to borrow Pascal’s definition, or one of the tubes one can admire in Sendai – during a visit to the multimedia library. An unpleasant memory can shake and in this case – a Hobson’s choice case again – I become a bottle that my torturer turns upside down and shakes as if dealing with orange juice. Even the dead can do that – my mother, among other people who are allowed to turn me upside down or just push me to accept their terms. Of course they are *not* allowed to do that, but I have no say in the matter and I bow to the inevitable, turning into a reed which forgets what to think and how to act in order to remain a *thinking* reed endowed with both brains and willpower.

The architect, Tokyo Ito, says he wished to create ‘a fluid space’ – hence the image of the seaweed shown in the documentary I bought last year. Like a river, the space chosen for the library was to ‘flow with air and light’, according to the architect and to the tourists who flock into the building in search of air, light and Japanese lore.

There are thirteen vertical tubes that hold up the building and ensure the safety of the visitors who continue to flock into it, heedless of earthquakes and suchlike. They know that, despite their fragile appearance, the tubes are designed to stand up to any natural catastrophe, however destructive and unpredictable. They seem to have been twisted and therefore may have a few affinities with my nerves, their contours and sensitivity. But for all their apparent fragility, my nerves are able to stand up to any catastrophe: physical, psychological, natural or unnatural. Even femmes fatales do not manage to break them into pieces.

I absorb psychological shocks, even though they often bend my inner structure, trying to reduce me to a quivering wreck – a state I’m reluctant to adopt in spite of its Beckettian quality. Actually you don’t have to identify with your favourite writer’s characters: you can admire them from a distance, from your armchair or hammock. But occasionally I might identify with the sentences I chance upon in the books stored on the numerous shelves I’ve bought over the last 33 years. ‘The mind of the sage penetrates to the utmost the perfect union of yin and yang and understands most clearly the wonderful principles of the myriad things. Therefore he can identify himself with changes and harmonise with transformations, and finds everything all right wherever he may go. He embraces all things and thus nothing is not in its natural state. The world asks him to rule because of disorder. He has no deliberate mind of his own. Since he has no deliberate mind of his own, why should he not respond to the world?’

I can’t identify with the whole of this quote because I’m not mature enough for such a metamorphosis; I must proceed from here – from my present state of mind – in stages. A friend of mine told me last night: ‘We’re decorating the house in stages so it won’t be ready for another couple of months.’ Suppose I have to decorate my inner house to which I referred earlier as a ‘structure’ and I can’t do this at once, given my immaturity and

childishness – at least in this domain I am like a child who doesn't know much and therefore relies on his parents or a guru.

This morning I triumphed over my pain and went as far as the living room to fetch a book on Chinese philosophy in which I actually found the passage I quoted above to provide useful information about purity, void, adaptability, flexibility and other components of what may be termed 'enlightenment'. I realise that this term is hardly adequate for my needs, but I'm not as subservient to words as I used to be only three years ago. And I'm getting further and further from those structuralists whose trust in language is as absolute as that of Duncan who was assassinated in *Macbeth*.

My pain is back and my dictionary informs me that I 'strained a muscle in my back playing squash'. But I don't play squash and the pain I feel is not located in my back, although at times it spreads all over my body – when I have a coughing fit, for instance. These coughing fits may be likened to the earthquakes to which my inner structure is supposed to stand up in the light of what I said about the multimedia library I came across when watching one of the documentaries on architecture. I resist the pain and even stroke my cat to answer his calls: he mews pitifully outside the door of my room and obediently I go and stroke him as long as my pain permits my love to express itself.

Can I identify with changes and harmonise with transformations? Of course not and even the notion of democracy jars on my nerves because it is misunderstood all over the world – especially in so-called 'free countries'. I'm supposed to accept the results of a democratic election, but stupidity and ideologies are omnipresent and no one can get rid of them by means of universal suffrage. Many people are leaving France because they don't accept the results of our last democratic election and sooner or later I'll follow in their footsteps because I'm not mature enough to accept its results and the ruin of all my hopes. What did I hope for? I need peace and quiet to write my books and the government has promised that they'll increase taxes. Kuo Hsiang's – the Taoist I quoted above – knew nothing about our government and the taxes we have to pay; he spoke quietly about transformations, harmonies and unions. Nor was he aware of the trade unions and the rallies they organise in order to reach a state of disorder which is a sine qua non of their prosperity – at least that's what they think and no one is capable of making them change their narrow minds. The government is totally disorganised: nobody knows what they are supposed to be doing. The same goes for the media. *Le Figaro* is a newspaper with a large right-wing readership, but the members of its staff do not know how to influence public opinion and what to write about the problems we are facing everywhere – even in our nightmares. The same goes for left-wing newspapers: they have no idea what to do and how to do it. And I'm all at sea with the new regulations that seem to banish me from the country I used to worship to the extent of forgetting Russia, Moscow and St Petersburg.

It is true that my inner house and library are ready for both action and non-action, but I really don't know what to do: for once, there's a wide range of choices open to me and I am too embarrassed to admit it is a case of Hobson's choice. As usual determinism rules the waves and I would gladly accept its verdict, if I knew what kind of situation I am to face in the future and where I'll settle as a result of this verdict: in Belgium, in Switzerland, in England, near Vilnius – or in the suburbs of Moscow. This project may be difficult, but I still think it is doable.

I'm supposed to find everything all right wherever I may go and I will not ignore this Taoist verdict that seems to put me on the right track for which I've been looking all my life. I keep repeating: 'Everything is all

right, everything is all right. Their declared aim is to tax the rich. I'm not very rich, but the money I've got is likely to land up in their bags and banks. If this happens, I won't have any money in the near future and I'm afraid it is a case of Hobson's choice – another triumph of determinism. Hobson's choice is all right. Poverty is all right. The void is all right. Death is all right. The Hereafter is all right. I go to the Hereafter and find everything all right – Hell, Purgatory, Paradise. I have no deliberate mind of my own and blissfully I respond to the world – to Hell in particular. I embrace all things and beings – devils, angels, Satan Himself. Am I allowed to embrace the Almighty and the Virgin Mary?'

I haven't drunk anything today except two cups of tea which, for some reason, reminded me of my psychological pains instead of making them disappear in one of my memory lapses – or memory holes, as the French put it. Perhaps it is easier to forget something in French: we are used to dropping things into holes and suchlike. Yes, I am a reed once again and the weather forecast warned of winds of up to 60 miles an hour today. People may think you're a genius; they even go so far as to speak of your uniqueness in a public place, in the middle of the crowd. But if you happen to find yourself in the company of a famous artist whom your friends and colleagues treat with scorn, they'll fawn upon him only because he is famous; and they'll neglect you and your genius because your name is almost unknown in Britain.

I wish the roof of my temple could be held up by a row of thick stone columns and not by a number of tubes leaning to the right, to the left. I wish I could turn into Nelson's Column in Trafalgar Square, which might enable me to emerge victorious after a 65-year life on Earth. (I didn't say on the *surface* of the Earth, did I?)

I think I must be going senile, but I'm not senile to the point of believing I can vanquish death and the diseases one has to cope with before his advent. Of course many people die in their sleep because death decides to murder them on the spur of the moment, without making them suffer and curse their parents who gave them birth and thus exposed them to the dangers linked with life. Well, I don't think I can lord it over destiny and God Who does nothing to alleviate our pains and obliterate death not only in our poetry, but also in our existence which is perhaps more important than poetry, given the number of potential poems it nurses in its bosom. I believe in God and I'm no longer forced to practise my faith in secret, as I did in the Soviet Union where even my mother's mortal remains were not permitted to spend their last hours in church – I mean, the last hours they spent on the surface of the Earth. Such restrictions infringe upon basic human rights and I infringed them in my turn: it was my turn to flout Soviet traditions. My mother's mortal remains did spend one hour in the church before finding their eternal peace at the cemetery where my father had been buried four years before. Soviet officials used to ignore our needs and moods; for once, I was given an opportunity to pay them back in kind.

Two hours ago, I saw a programme devoted to a spiritual healer whose name is widely known in both the West and the East and therefore I don't have to divulge it. She is not in a class of her own: there's a power to which we have to pay homage whenever we can do it with dignity and solemnity. This woman – is she a spiritual healer or a faith healer? – seems to have resurrected many people who spent a part of their lives on the brink of death. She used her hands from which a multitude of heat rays radiated with a view to defeating cancers and other fatal diseases that sap all our energy and confidence, nibbling holes in our lives. The host usually invites the people who roughly belong to two categories: believers and unbelievers. Some of the unbelievers don't even believe in God, if I'm not mistaken. At least they don't believe in mysticism, in faith healers and in the hands from which a multitude of rays continuously rush towards bugs, microbes and rotten genes – towards death hanging over our bodies. It's not enough to say to death: 'Be not proud and go to Hell.' Habitually death does

not go to Hell unless you keep him company. Going to Hell arm in arm, like old friends. You *are* old friends, as a matter of fact, and there's no point in denying the fact.

In the audience there were more believers than unbelievers: people still believe in miracles, even if they're inclined to be lazy and forget about God Who can raise us from the dead in the twinkling of an eye. 'They found a malignant tumour in my breast,' said one of the guests. 'She put her fiery hands on it and the tumour set off on a round-the-world cruise. Actually it set off straight away on a journey to the station.'

'On a round-the-world cruise?' said another guest.

'Many people suffer from the same tumour,' said the first guest.

'Have you contaminated all these people?'

'No, of course not.'

'Why don't you arrest this woman?'

'Which woman? The healer or the patient?' said the third guest.

'Both,' said the second guest.

The host said: 'Look at the screen' and we saw a pair of hands and many wires, electrodes and whatnot. "Her power has been proven scientifically," said the fourth guest.

'Could I see the results of the test?' asked a scientist.

'The first diagram is a view of the power from the room, and the second shows it in section,' said the fourth guest. At first we saw nothing except the screen and the same pair of hands. 'Did she put the battery on charge overnight?' asked someone. At that point, a red globe floated before our eyes. 'This power emits a characteristic red glow,' said the fourth guest.

I wish I could go and see this healer: the pain I feel seems to grow as I go through days and nights, hoping to get rid of it with the aid of time that heals everything except death and birth. I don't really *go* through, contrary to what I might say when talking about my capacities and incapacities. The only spot where I feel at home – assuming that home is the only source of wellbeing – is my bed where I forget about my pain. Should I say *my* pain or is it better not to appropriate it for fear of becoming too familiar with its repercussions and sadistic disposition? We are not on intimate terms, are we? We are certainly not on an equal footing; yet pain and man ought to be able to compete for supremacy on an equal footing, notwithstanding the eternal presence of death. Easier said than done: pain always wins, even when it subsides. All we can do is lay down our weapons and surrender. What weapons have we got, I wonder? The spiritual healer's hands, their rays and human warmth? Incidentally, I wonder if the woman I'm talking about belongs to the category of *spiritual* healers: she doesn't speak of God or the Buddha, does she?

I can't even sit down without looking for a support which may enable me to choose an appropriate trajectory for my body or rather for my pain: it dislikes straight lines and seems to accept some curves. I do my best to discover these curves and make good use of them. Whenever I start talking, I feel the same pain, which seems to suggest I'd better shut up and communicate with others through sign language. But many signs elude my body on account of the pain which puts a veto on them and on my desire to reach out to the men and women I meet in the streets and on the threshold of my house. Should I watch a few Antonioni films to find out more about communication and the signs one may use during an important talk? Antonioni's heroes do not fall all the time and consequently their bodies are flexible enough to convey any thought or sentiment, however intricate and abstruse.

I can't raise my left hand to fetch a bottle of wine, but fortunately I don't need it because I'm not left-handed and therefore can use my *right* hand for this and other purposes.

Pain or no pain, I go and stroke my cat whenever he calls to me from the entrance hall; otherwise he is likely to forget this ritual and his father whose presence shouldn't be limited to feeding time only. To all outward appearances, he still recalls my hands and lips, my tenderness.

My writing desk still groans under the weight of *The Song* and Jeremiah who speaks about death as often as the author of *The Song*. 'But I was like a lamb or an ox that is brought to the slaughter; and I knew not that they had devised devices against me, saying, Let us destroy the tree with the fruit thereof, and let us cut him off from the land of the living, that his name may be no more remembered.' I would also have written this lamentation, had I lived in days gone by. Well, I've typed it out, but there's none so deaf as those who will not hear. 'But, O Lord of hosts, that judgest righteously, that triest the reins and the heart, let me see thy vengeance on them: for unto thee have I revealed my cause.' The more I quote Jeremiah, the more I think about death: my death, their deaths. I don't need much prompting to give myself over to morbid reflections.

We know what happens before death and the journey to the Hereafter, which starts at the moment of conception, as everybody knows. But I'm speaking about a stretch of land lying between death and what may be termed 'life after death'. I think I'd better call it a 'stretch of wasteland', but terms and words are of no importance in this paragraph related to the departure of the soul saying 'farewell' to the deathbed and the relatives of the deceased. How does the soul embark upon its journey to the Hereafter or the void where it should spend some time, eternity or just a few seconds? Jeremiah doesn't say a word about this rite of passage to which I turn my attention to find out what *really* takes place in the corridor leading from death to another life or to the same death – in case there's no hereafter to speak of. The author of *The Song*, on the other hand, supplies a description of how the soul leaves the body on its way to whatever may lie in wait for it at the end of the road.

All alone

*you let your pearly soul drop
out of your brave body
through your golden gorget.*

Here is Nabokov's commentary on this obscure passage of rite:

According to Russian traditional belief, the seat and point of exit of the soul is the hollow of the throat above the chest bone, the triangular dimple called dushka. The dress a prince wore under his mantlet was fastened on the chest by a system of loops and had, higher up, a round or square gap at the front of the collar. This opening (which the soul might conveniently use for its exit from the throat) was adorned with gold braid and precious stones forming a broad band called the oplechie or, as in our text, ozherelie –which I have rendered as gorget). The image of the soul dropping out like a pearl occurs in religious works as late as the 17th century.

The image also occurs in this book of mine, but I've only skimmed the surface of the problem instead of getting to the bottom of it, to the underground.

I love *The Song*, *Anna Karenina*, Tolstoy, Pushkin, but I'm not sure I love Russia, for the men and women of genius live their own lives which are *partly* interwoven with the gardens where they spent their hours and years, looking into the future, going backwards towards the past, towards the time unfolding before their births. I don't think I'm duty bound to love the country where I was born and spent more than 26 years – against my will, I must admit. With the best will in the world, however, I couldn't leave my native land for the simple reason that no one was permitted to do so without special permission – an invitation to uprooting, so to speak. Today, few people recall the predicament out of which only the all-powerful Communist Party might have helped us, but I'm in no mood to dwell on this aspect of my past because I have no time for *their* rules, moods and worlds.

Actually I don't know if one is capable of recalling that part of Russian history without getting bogged down in the details such as the sheer impossibility of using an ordinary Soviet passport *elsewhere*. (Once again I use the word associated in my mind with Coriolanus and his assertion: 'There's a world elsewhere.') For most of us, there was no world elsewhere and we didn't really need another passport; besides, no one was willing to provide it with a stern look or a benevolent smile. Is there a world elsewhere, I wonder? I have a passport thanks to which I can travel to the Moon and even to Venus, let alone to New Zealand and Australia, but even on Venus I'm likely to find computers and their games, stupidity and the lack of human dignity. Of course the inhabitants of Venus aren't supposed to display the variety of *human* dignity that our ancestors were accustomed to before the Second World War. The point is they lack dignity *altogether*, poisoned as they are by *our* way of thinking and dealing with life and its intricacies: moral and spiritual bugs require no spaceships to travel from one star to another, spreading rumours and destroying cultures.

In the Soviet Union, we had to cope with *another* variety of desert, but there were a few camels in our desert and they walked around proudly and independently, showering us with their gifts. Needless to say, our regime was unable to supply them with 'water of life' – *eau de vie* – but they had enough life in them not to yield to communist pressure and the directives issued by the Politburo and other right-minded organisations. (Left-minded organisations.) Communist ideas no longer hold sway over cities and villages, but the camels seem to have vanished into thin air as if to demonstrate that they're used to deserts, not to computers, mobile phones and suchlike. They're faithful to coarse sand, fine sand, the lack of water, the absence of Coke, the absence of humans who constantly make fools of themselves and of others – of animals, for instance.

I don't know if I should call our legendary bard, Vladimir Vysotsky, a camel: I've never liked him, his songs and his fans whose number outstrip astronomical qualifications and even encroach upon the rights of individuals. I, for one, have always thought that every individual is entitled to individual thoughts, ideas and feelings, otherwise the word 'individual' makes no sense; but even now, more than 30 years after Vysotsky's death, many Russian citizens have only *his* thoughts, songs and words in their heads, their hearts and their souls that must have left their bodies on the day of their idol's death. Instead of looking for their future abodes – animals, demons, insects – they settled forever in Vysotsky's corpse, adding a finishing touch to Pythagoras' charitable doctrine. According to Ovid, Pythagoras used to address his disciples as follows: 'Souls never die, but always on quitting one abode pass to another. I myself can remember that in the time of the Trojan War I was

Euphorbus, the son of Panthus, and fell by the spear of Menelaus. Lately being in the temple of Juno, at Argos, I recognised my shield hung up there among the trophies. All things change, nothing perishes.’

In my opinion, Vysotsky’s fans can easily remember their former lives because they have *always* been Vysotsky – even before the bard’s birth in the Soviet Union. They recognise Vysotsky – and themselves – in Ancient Greece, in Egypt, amidst the members of primitive tribes which, contrary to what Claude Lévi-Strauss thought throughout his life, may prove to be primitive and savage. They often mistake Homer for Vysotsky in spite of the resistance offered by the radical wing of the club whose representatives declare that the ancient bard can’t hold a candle to his Soviet counterpart. ‘If I didn’t know Vysotsky, I would recognise myself in Homer’s verses. I’d even agree to lend him my soul and a few years of its life. But my soul, my whole being belongs to Vysotsky. I’ve always lived in his immortal, eternal body because people like that are never born. Or rather they’re born on the day of the Creation.’

‘And what about the years that elapsed before the Big Bang?’ said another member of the club.

‘There was no time without Vysotsky. His birth is the Big Bang.’

‘Let’s rename the Big Bang,’ said someone else.

‘What name could we give to it?’ (The identity of the speaker doesn’t matter.)

‘The Big Song.’

‘Which one? All his songs are big.’

‘One with a bang.’

‘There are bangs in all his songs. Actually all his songs are bangs.’

‘He seems to bang his fist on the table.’

‘On our skulls.’

‘He’s like the police banging on the door. “Open up – it’s the voice of your conscience!” he shouts.’

‘It’s Vysotsky, life, passion, love, death, horses.’

‘He’s everywhere. When he sings about the war, we think he was a soldier. He knows everybody and everything. He knows me better than my mother.’

‘And we know him better than his mother – our souls have been living inside him since the Creation.’

What’s the secret of these affinities, of the wavelengths that coincide and walk along the road together – even if their paths diverge and do their best to separate them? They say to each other: ‘There are no paths to speak of – there’s only one road and we’ll follow this road, come hell or high water! This road is “Vysotsky”. This road is “Truth”. This road is “Us”.’

Whenever walking along a row of open windows, I invariably heard Vysotsky’s voice and I’m sure this phenomenon wasn’t typical of Moscow and Leningrad only: in every village resounded the voice of death and life, of vodka and caviar. The government officials didn’t bother to announce his funeral in newspapers, on the radio and television. Besides, the Olympic Games were in full swing – the action takes place in 1980 – and, according to the Politburo’s calculations, only Vysotsky’s close friends and relatives were likely to accompany his corpse to the threshold of the Hereafter. Contrary to their great expectations, the entire population of Moscow turned up in the area adjacent to the Taganka Theatre where Vysotsky used to play Hamlet in whose most famous monologue he found his own life and aspirations. ‘To be’ meant his union with the members of the fun club created in his honour at the very outset of his career, at the moment when one of his private performances was recorded on a tape that could be multiplied ad infinitum. Sure enough, this tape replenished the Soviet

Union and other tapes followed in the wake of the first historic recording I had no opportunity to hear in those days, in the late Sixties – I wasn't interested in the creative output of so-called bards.

'Not to be' meant the government's rejection of Vysotsky's poems, songs and numerous talents. Judging from his chronic despondency, he was neither an official poet, nor an official actor. He was just a nobody, but nobodies prospered in the Soviet Union because they made up the only opposition to the regime we hated heartily, saying that every member of the Politburo was a dimwit saved from nonentity by his blatant adherence to Brezhnev's policies and Lenin's inheritance. I was neither nobody nor anybody and my path seldom if ever crossed the road along which my fellow-citizens marched round the clock, walking together in spite of their individual characteristics. In my opinion, they all followed the same road; and yet in their midst one could encounter a dissident and an informer, a classical pianist and a member of the Vysotsky club. Somehow they would join hands and start walking down the road traced and built by our rulers who, in a way, were on Vysotsky's side: they were fond of the crowds heading for the horizon and using the same road to achieve their objectives.

Day and night I watched those people whose objectives might differ radically, making them quarrel and bang their fists on their opponents' skulls. (They didn't *always* vent their wrath on tables and doors.) But Vysotsky reconciled them and our dissidents ended up enjoying official Lenin-inspired songs because to them they sounded like Vysotsky's works, like the result of *his* inspiration and genius. It was much easier to attribute to Vysotsky The Song of Songs because every song of his was the song of songs – of all the songs composed and performed in the course of human history. 'Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth: for thy love is better than wine.'

Whenever I listen to his songs and their words – these are not songs without words – I find them coarse and rather vulgar. My skull suffers a lot during the legendary concerts shown on TV with a view to paying tribute to the man who was born 75 years ago. I'm in no mood to translate these songs into English and I don't think this mood of mine will ever be replaced by another mood, although I change my mind and moods rather often: even if I think I'm in the right, I don't become stubborn for fear of turning into a stone and thereby proving Freud's pet theory called the 'death instinct'.

As I already pointed out, in the course of my Soviet life I was unquestionably West-oriented and *The Song* I resort to whenever in need of sledgehammer arguments seems to foretell my tale of woe, my defeat in the countries situated outside the Soviet Union and its borders inside which I loved and was loved in return and where I wrote the poems admired by my friends. Now I also write poems in Russian and I don't fail to distribute them among my friends and also among the people I hardly know, but neither these people nor my friends read the fruit of my inspiration and toil; and even if they do manage to finish one poem, they say nothing about its style and my inspiration. I recited one of my recent works in the presence of an old friend who said I should publish my youthful haikus – the poems he knows by heart. No one is likely to try and memorise what I'm writing now so that I wonder why I spend so many hours in front of my computer instead of watching blockbusters and other trendy products of the Western world about which I dreamt throughout my youth.

*The grass droops with condolences
and the tree with sorrow
bends to the ground.*

*For now, brothers, a cheerless tide has set in;
now the wild has covered the strong.*

Yes, I've lost the battle in the world where only the wild are bound to prevail, which makes me think about one of Churchill's speeches or rather about its end: 'We'll prevail, we'll prevail, we'll prevail.' Who? What? Yes, we defeated the Nazis and some of us thought that the world would be a better place in the 21st century, let alone in the 22nd century. If left alone, the world goes on a spree and nothing can stop it, not even the bloodiest war and a series of tsunamis backed by a worldwide earthquake. 'It's been hard work, but now the business is running smoothly you can sit back and enjoy the fruits of your labours.' What business are they talking about? They all are in business and they do a lot of business with overseas customers – we know the fact and there's no denying they succeed in the property world and even in getting their bills through Congress. We know they enjoy the fruits of their labours and from time to time we're even allowed to see these fruits and the ways they enjoy them – from afar, needless to say. 'Speak for yourself!' says my colleagues. 'We had a wonderful time!' All right, I'll speak for myself. I enjoy the fruits of their labours and their enjoyments while sitting in front of my TV set and not in a hall where bottles and tablecloths rival the balls one can admire in the Russian version of *War and Peace*. But where is old Prince Bolkonsky? Where is his son? Prince Andrey would have admired my poetry.

*This night, from eventide,
they dressed me with a black pall
on a bedstead of yew.
They ladled out for me
blue wine mixed with bane.*

Go West.

III

Whenever I go down and reach my childhood situated at the centre of the Earth, I find Vysotsky or other people who are the by-products of overcrowded housing – at least that’s how I see them within the framework of my life. I was born in a big city and such a city usually has a multitude of houses where men and women eat, sleep and get on their neighbours’ nerves because they can’t do otherwise, being different from their neighbours. Sometimes they go for each other with their fists and have to be pulled apart; sometimes they limit their disagreements to verbal attacks and insults which are not as easily forgiven and forgotten as might be presumed. One might point out that my description of city life reflects communal flats which were rather common in the Soviet Union: I, for one, was born in one of those flats whose tenants would meet in the kitchen and talk for hours on end, leaving their gas cookers alone. I would partly agree with such a comment; and yet I always feel my neighbours – even if I happen to stay in a castle, miles from anywhere. I feel them and, contrary to the Bible’s explicit instruction, I don’t manage to love them: for some reason, there are no beautiful women among my neighbours.

In Moscow, I could see a lot of houses from my window: my family lived on the twelfth floor of a skyscraper built on Stalin’s orders by German prisoners. I looked at those houses and felt their inhabitants, their quarrels, their dinners and bottles of vodka; I heard Soviet songs which were more harmonious than our bards’ contribution to the history of art. And yet I hated Soviet songs along with their performers whose mouths could be seen on television at ‘governmental concerts’, to use the official formula applied only to the social gatherings during which our artists – our national treasures – played Chopin’s polonaises and sang a number of hymns to our Motherland.

In the Soviet Union, I hated everything and almost everybody: even my friends might turn out to be nothing but by-products of overcrowded housing. They build a house and put some people in it and I can’t help meeting these people in the streets because now and then they feel cooped up in their flats and go outdoors to play a game of dominoes in some courtyard or other – the way I used to talk to myself in those bygone days. The more houses you build, the more people I touch either with my shoulders or my hands that are reluctant to touch passers-by, even if a beautiful woman may turn up unexpectedly in a remote corner of Scotland.

I’m not in a hurry; nevertheless I think I should bypass my childhood – the one I lived in Moscow, not far from Red Square – and wend my way through the dark back streets of history to where my former lives continue to indulge in harmless frolics. A month ago I had a go at living in a primitive tribe, but the experience didn’t last and I don’t recall it in spite of my wish to return to the Iron Age, to the Bronze Age – to any age isolated from our civilisation and its gadgets.

When I watch the documentaries I acquired in the hope of lighting upon my former lives and habits, I recognise the ball that is being maltreated by those tribes. We played our games in the centre of Moscow and it is far more delightful to throw or kick many balls in a glade surrounded by trees, animals and birds, and bathed by the sun in shades of pink and gold. What does it matter what game is played under the circumstances, in such surroundings?

Would Pythagoras have recognised himself among the players I’m watching with envy and sorrow? They’re not different from their ancestors as if taking their cue from Keats’ nightingale. Why am I different from them? Am I? Perhaps I am Keats’ nightingale – come to think of it. In ancient days, my voice might have been heard by an emperor and a clown unless I was an emperor or a clown. Did my song find a path through the sad heart of Ruth? Incidentally, my mother’s name was Ruth.

I'm often asked why I yearn to reach my former lives and I answer that the effort I make to remember whatever happened to me in days of yore is fully justified by the important role played in one's life by the primeval scene – one's meeting with God. According to a Russian philosopher – his name is Averin, I think – the theory to which we often refer when speaking of our memory relates not to multiplication tables and suchlike, but to God and his paternal care. What I'm saying now is too abstruse and I'll do my best to make it crystal clear, assuming that a process of recollection can be clear: when trying to remember what happened to you before your conception you're bound to muddy the waters. As everyone knows, Plato thinks that our knowledge was stored in our memory at the moment of our conception or even at the outset of the Creation, symbolised by the Big Bang and the disappearance of the chaos we read about in the Bible. Guided by a guru, an ignoramus recalls differential calculus, but this kind of knowledge can be acquired at school and we don't really need to make a superhuman effort in order to plant this branch of mathematics in the forefront of our brain. Our meeting with God is far more important: the Bible may bring us closer to heavenly regions but it can't convey us to the spot where we first met the Almighty and His army.

Do I reconstruct our meeting when I watch a documentary on primitive tribes, society and people? These people are neither God nor the army of angels at which I hint as I do my best to visualise the City of God defended by His soldiers, generals and machines. I just envy the people I watch from my divan and I play with them to my heart's content: I'm weary of playing chess and cards with myself. On the other hand, I strive to narrow the gap between the present and the past about which Jean-Jacques Rousseau spoke so eloquently, with such nostalgic élan. Yes, I'm longing to escape from this day and age which obscures the main issue – the primeval harmony guaranteed by the presence of God and His advice. Of course I might keep my fellow creatures at bay by other means – by wearing a mask, for instance; by concealing my face and thoughts. Unfortunately I can't fold my hair over my face: I don't have enough hair for such a manoeuvre. No one will ever say about me: 'He brushed his long red hair.' Nor did I lose my hair by the time I was twenty-five; one of my schoolmates did. Be that as it may, I can't fold my hair over my face to interrupt the circuits of normal social communication. Let us not forget that the human face is the seat of communication and if you become an invisible man or woman, you won't be able to communicate with the visible world, whatever you may do to attract attention to your persona. You may talk your head off or play Liszt's sonatas, etudes and tarantellas – nobody will react to these signs of your existence solely concentrated in your face, your eyes and your eyebrows.

According to Lévi-Strauss, your hair or just a sheet of paper you hold in front of your face removes you from society, allowing you to establish contact with other forces, other worlds – those of love and those of death. I don't know if I really need the world of death because I already own it, and when asked, 'Do you have any proof of ownership for death?', I answer 'Yes' and point at my body. But I do need the world of love and only by breaking diplomatic ties with society am I likely to enjoy friendly relations with this world. I can't fold my hair over my face, but nothing and nobody prevent me from wearing a mask. (I *could* fold the rest of my hair over my face, but such a gesture wouldn't serve a useful purpose: my hair will never *conceal* my face.)

As Lévi-Strauss said earlier, masks are the means by which man enters into contact with the world of the supernatural. In other words (or in other worlds), the mask re-routes communication away from its social function towards the sacred, the transcendental – or to the primeval scene in which the Almighty takes part as an actor, as the Author. Anyway I am at a loss to know how to proceed and what I should wear apart from my trousers, jacket or the dressing gown I've been hopelessly addicted to for 20 years at least. Should I wear a

mask? But, as Lévi-Strauss seems to point out, the result I may achieve through this procedure is bound to have the opposite effect, highlighting my identity as a social being. I am an anti-social being par excellence, by nature, by profession and it is too late to mend my ways; besides, I'm not in the habit of going from one extreme to another. The mask is at once human and non-human and hopefully I'll be able to separate these aspects of the mask so as to retain only its non-human quality.

I wonder what I looked like in the course of the primeval scene I superficially analysed at the beginning of this chapter. Did I appear before God in the shape of an amoeba? Was I just an embryo in search of its mother's womb? Was I human or non-human in those days? I'm not sure I was wearing a mask when talking to God Who wouldn't have given a warm welcome to a masked embryo or a masked larva. Anyway it is pointless to wear a mask in the presence of God because our main aim in life is to be on intimate terms with our Father and Saviour from Whom we shouldn't conceal either our eyes or innermost thoughts: He has known them from time immemorial.

I consult my diary and find a few entries which may cast light on my relationship with God. 'He affectionately ruffled my hair with His hand as He passed.' Why did I capitalise 'His' and 'He'? I must have fallen into a trance because no one can remain conscious and alert when God speaks to him. (Even Moses was unable to withstand this pressure.) When a hypnotist puts you in a trance, you no longer have conscious control of yourself. What about God? What about *His* way of putting you in a trance? I don't remember the nuances of the meeting I cherish and dream about, but a few entries in my diary speak volumes and I listen to what they convey to my recovered consciousness.

'He looked up from His book and smiled at me.' This entry corroborates the theory according to which the Almighty wrote the Bible unaided and I'm certain that during my visit he was checking its newest edition for mistakes. 'It's sometimes difficult to find exactly the right word to express what you want to say.' Do my words reveal God's incapacity to master English? Is it not *His* language? I think our languages are part of God's all-embracing idiom – the conclusion I invariably reach upon reading the following words: 'In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.' So I must have deplored my own incapacity to express my feelings and aspirations; and yet I am a poet whose prime objective is to make the information more widely available. What kind of information? Frankly speaking, every poem of mine is nothing but a report: a news report, a weather report, a report on such and such a situation – on falling in love, among other things. But I must admit it *is* difficult sometimes to find exactly the right word; even the wrong words are not always available.

Claude Lévi-Strauss thinks the mask is capable of bringing the gods to Earth and once again I stare at the text in complete perplexity, for it drops no hint about the identity of those gods whose penchant for interstellar travel seems to be established once and for all. Of course Lévi-Strauss speaks of pagan gods who give orders to rain, snow, thunder and many other natural phenomena in the middle of which we walk and spend our holidays, unprotected by our roofs and walls. But what about eschatological issues and metaphysical problems? What about our *salvation* and the meeting upon which I've already touched many times before tackling the problem of personal acquaintance with the Ruler of the Universe Who can even undo the past and cancel the future by means of The Second Flood, of human blood?

I put on a mask and say to God, 'I know You can't hear me because I haven't reached the regions where You talked to me in days of yore and even before them – in the midst of chaos. Well, I trust You hear everything

and my mask is an invitation I wish to send you because I need the harmony stored at the beginning of the universe, in its remotest corner. I might have written this invitation in beautiful italic script, but I'm sure the mask I'm wearing is far more eloquent than any script, any email.'

'I'm happy to accept your invitation,' He says. At least that's what my diary says and I have no reason to doubt the information supplied by my diary: whatever is written in a state of trance is said to impart Absolute Truth, otherwise hypnotism wouldn't have prospered so nonchalantly. Don't mystics stare out of their windows as if in a trance? Sometimes they stare open-eyed at all the food on the table, but everyone knows it's not the food they stare at: the food doesn't deserve their stares unless at mealtimes they constantly apply the doctrine of transubstantiation and never judge the food from a gourmet's point of view.

Sometimes a lot of happiness awaits us in a sauna and not in London where economists and ordinary citizens spend their time wheeling and dealing on the stock exchange. And Russian mystics take refuge in monasteries where they don't feel comfortable at first on account of what is termed 'obedience' which my dictionary translates as follows: 'Clean out the stables', 'You'll have to get down on all fours to clean behind the sewers', 'Sweep the leaves up into a pile'. But all those who go to a monastery as tourists are born mystics and they are perfectly capable of putting up with the problems they encounter during the first stage of their sojourns inside the walls that look like a prison in spite of their peaceful appearance.

In the book I touched upon a month ago, a man goes to a monastery and cleans whatever can be cleaned not only in the monastery, but in the whole world where dumping grounds for toxic waste have proliferated in the last ten years. He cleans the dumping grounds and says to the monk in charge: 'I'm sick and tired of you telling me what to do all the time.' Sure enough, the man is sick and he looks so weary the monk says to him: 'I think you're telling the truth and only the truth should be spoken within these walls. Here, sit down and rest your weary legs.'

'And where am I supposed to rest my weary arms?'

'In the same armchair.'

'It's just a chair, not an armchair.'

'We call it an armchair or a divan or a royal bed – just take your pick.'

'Never mind. Could I watch TV? Is television forbidden in your monastery?'

'Not at all. Television can shout: "Crucify Him, Crucify Him!" But it can also celebrate Mass and sing praises to the Almighty.'

This time the television set installed in the dining room sings praises to the Almighty and the tourist starts singing the same praise, though in a different tonality. But what counts is the praise itself and not the performance it happens to depend upon as it resounds under the vaults of monasteries, churches and temples where God's presence seems to promise the Earth to those who have ears and consequently can hear both the praise and the presence of God. The tourist is imbued with deep, religious feeling, and he seems to understand what his local guru said to him several months before: 'I view my life as a spiritual journey towards a greater understanding of my faith.' 'The same goes for *my* journey to the monastery,' thinks the tourist. 'And within the monastery I continue to walk or drive towards a greater understanding of my faith. Yes, I believe in God, but so

far I haven't been able to understand my faith. I don't claim that I understand it now – at least I don't understand it *completely*. But my understanding of it is certainly greater – thanks to the sewers and dumping grounds.'

Another sewer and the tourist realises he is overwhelmed with grief because he has to leave the monastery before sunset, otherwise he won't be able to find the path leading to the railway station and the train bound for Moscow. Of course the Almighty could send him a few sunbeams from His treasure trove of spiritual and material light, but the tourist knows only too well that his spiritual stock isn't high enough to enable him to find his way in the dark. His 'little father' – the guru he got acquainted with in the monastery – said to him confidentially: 'It's my job to keep a check on stock levels. Believe me, your stock is low so you must leave now. I'm sure you'll come back as soon as you run out of spirituality. I hope that in the near future you'll write in your diary: "A tourist turned monk."'

The tourist heads for the station, reaches the station and immediately the train pulls in: since the recent improvements to the service, the trains are running like clockwork. No wonder that the tourist mistakes a real train for a clockwork one; anyway, everything seems to him undersized in comparison with the revelation bestowed upon him in the monastery where even the sewers have a knack of radiating light and wisdom. The tourist drops his suitcase because he yearns to go back to the monastery, to the walls within which he was happy and dirty, sleepy and enlightened. He might need this suitcase in Moscow, in his flat full of wardrobes where he hangs his jackets, pyjamas and the only dinner jacket he owns and irons in the hope that in the near future he'll be invited to an important banquet or ball. He no longer needs this high-society paraphernalia and that's why he drops his suitcase which is a miniature model of the world where he lived, loved and nourished racial hatred. All this is a thing of the past and his sentiment is enhanced by the sight of a teenager who confidently munches on a sandwich as he walks down a street in the suburbs of Moscow. The tourist is so used to the monastery's ritual that he begins to hate the teenager who doesn't always say grace before eating sandwiches and other snack foods such as hamburgers, crisps and sausages. 'They're high in salt, sugar and fat,' thinks the tourist and the prospect of devouring this kind of food fills him with horror; what's more, the sandwich and the teenager diverted his attention away from God and spiritual matters.

All of a sudden, he hears a voice and the voice speaks to him thus: 'Didn't I promise you the Earth?'

'You did.'

'Isn't this sandwich part of the Earth?'

'It is.'

'So you have to love it as well as other items of snack food.'

'But these items are not organic, are they?'

'Whatever happens in the universe is organic because its birth was organic. Do you think its mother isn't organic?'

'Why are speaking about the *Mother* of the universe? Do you know this story? Stalin and Gorky – '

'Of course I do. Stalin says to Gorky: "I admire a lot your novel *Mother* and I want you to write a novel entitled *Father*.'"

Tomorrow I'm flying to Petersburg as if resolved to disregard the pain I feel and also whatever I've learnt about diseases and their tenacity: they never leave you alone if you don't respect them. A week ago, I broke four

ribs and I didn't have the slightest inkling of what was happening because I thought I had strained a few muscles that could be neglected and nearly obliterated on the grounds of their utter insignificance. But my pain was quite significant, not to say atrocious, and I went to the nearest hospital and had an X-ray to see if any of my ribs were broken. Four of my ribs *were* broken and the doctor told me I should rest for a few days, forgetting about my business trip to Petersburg in order to concentrate on the shattered bones and on the massive psychological injuries that any pain is bound to inflict, even if one does one's best not to notice it.

'Your ribs need a positive fluid,' he added.

'A spiritual fluid?' I asked.

'There's some kind of thick fluid oozing from the trunk of that tree,' the doctor said, pointing to a tree that stood in the middle of his garden.

'Do you think I should try and imitate this tree?' I asked.

'There are many bodily fluids,' said the doctor, 'and your ribs may be healed through their exchange. But if you don't assist the fluids on their journey to the ribs, you'll always feel a dull ache in your lower back. And you'll keep asking your neighbours: "Have you heard today's weather forecast? What's the weather forecast for next week?"' Our old wounds are sensitive to rain clouds and dark clouds in general.'

I've spent the last week at home, watching TV and the films I treasure to the point of dusting the shelves on which they repose in expectation of my visit to their worlds. Sometimes I scour my shelves for hours in search of a film I chose as a new (or old) entertainment and I find some other films that appeal neither to my senses nor my memory. Stories about pirates often include a search for buried treasure and I picture myself walking around hills and jungles, dressed as a pirate or an ordinary man who can't find a film he is bent on watching this afternoon.

Well, in every film I watch there's a woman who runs towards a man and says to him, her eyes glistening with tears: 'I really missed you when you went away.' Is that what my business trip boils down to? I won't hear this sentence and I'll break the rest of my body when walking around Petersburg on blankets of snow, on icy patches perfidiously hidden by blankets, sheets and whatnot. Anything can hide a patch of ice and you find it only when you scream upon hearing your ribs and bones break inside your body and even outside it.

'I'm going to be on the move all next week, but I'll call you when I get back to Versailles,' I said to my former mistress.

'What about your ribs? Will they be on the move too?'

'They will, unless I cancel the trip and stay at home, watching the films that make me cry.'

'Cancel the trip.'

'I'm eager to watch life from the inside.'

'And what about *your* insides?' she asked. Incidentally, she has got a nice husky voice – very sexy, according to all my friends.

'I'm always looking for adventures.'

'Are you Don Quixote?' she asked in the same voice.

I have no horse and my fall will not be as spectacular as that of Don Quixote who mistook a drove of sheep for an army of giants because in those days humans could be seen in the shape of giants, if only by a madman. Nowadays, whenever I look out of my window and see a lot of people in the streets, I say to myself that this crowd is just a drove of sheep or any other drove one can think about on the spur of the moment. Even if

I hear the neighing of the horses, the sound of trumpets, the roll of drums and the drone of engines, I say to my friends or a journalist whose eagerness to question my brain seems more than suspicious: ‘A drove of sheep, nothing more.’

‘How can you say that?’ says the journalist. ‘There are many artists of genius on your screen, in our country. Can’t you appreciate our writers of genius, composers of genius? Can’t you hear their symphonies and operas?’

‘I hear nothing except the bleating of sheep.’

‘How so? The whole world admires these artists and scientists. You’re so afraid of the world that you cannot see or hear properly, for one of the effects of disgust and indignation is to disturb the senses and cause things to appear other than what they are. If you’re so angry and disappointed, leave the world and settle on a desert island.’

‘What about a monastery?’ I ask.

‘What about angels?’ asks the journalist. ‘Wouldn’t you take *them* for a drove of sheep?’

In our world I’m duty bound to play two roles: that of Don Quixote and that of Sancho Panza. I have no alternative but to revert to one of my favourite themes – that of the doppelgänger. Thus, within the framework of one episode, I often play both roles because my adventurous spirit pushes me into defying the stupidity of this day and age, and this spirit of mine takes no notice of my admonitions – of Sancho Panza’s admonitions, to be exact. ‘Come back, your Grace, Señor Don Quixote; I vow to God those are sheep that you are charging. Come back! O wretched father that bore me! What madness is this?’

It is difficult to disentangle one role from the other since I both recite Sancho’s monologue and charge the phoney geniuses whose jubilees they show and comment upon almost every day. I say to myself they’re sheep and it’s useless to confront them either in the open field or during a TV show. But the issue has been much discussed in the media and now the crowd recites Don Quixote’s monologue, turning a deaf ear to Sancho’s supplications. ‘That knight in the gilded armour that you see there, bearing upon his shield a crowned lion crouched at the feet of a damsel, is the valiant Laurcalco, lord of the Silver Bridge.’

‘May I go to the devil,’ says Sancho, ‘if I see a single man, giant or knight of all those that you’re talking about.’

‘You’re an angry and envious man. You envy the enormous wealth that these giants have amassed. You hate and envy their luxurious lifestyles and personal ostentation.’

‘Why should I envy a flock of sheep?’

‘You automatically turn our heroes into sheep because you don’t want to admit to yourself that you’re a born loser. And you lose your battles against men and women, not against sheep.’

‘How do you know they’re not sheep?’

‘Sheep don’t wear gilded armour and they have no shields. And they’re seldom shown on TV. The media doesn’t care about their birthdays and jubilees.’

‘Your heroes’ gilded armour and jubilees mean nothing. They’re nonentities – or sheep, to use Sancho’s terminology. This is the work of the devilish media and sponsors. They make the con artists assume any appearance they choose.’

‘Who are you talking about?’

‘Sometimes it’s sponsors who decide what their favourite artists should represent. But occasionally a con artist has a dream and says to his sponsor: “I want them to think I’m a genius. I want them to think I’m a benefactor of humanity. I want them to think I’m a pillar of the community. I want them to think I’m a master builder.”’

‘They *are* geniuses and benefactors of humanity. They derive great satisfaction from helping other people, especially children and widows. They give money to schools, colleges and universities. Thanks to their financial and moral help, all our colleges have counsellors to help students with both personal and work problems. But above all, they’re great artists.’

‘Open your eyes, prick up your ears and you’ll see them become what they are: sheep, sheep, sheep. They aren’t even black sheep – just white sheep, nothing else. Don’t be like sheep, my dear journalists, readers and concertgoers. Pick up the shield described in *Don Quixote*: a crowned lion crouched at the feet of a damsel. For goodness’ sake don’t crown sheep!’

Many years ago, I saw a film in which Chaliapin played the role of Don Quixote, making me cry now and then in spite of the laughter one always hears when Don Quixote is shown either on screen or in the theatre. Not only bystanders mock him viciously, but even the actors go all-out to defeat the knight and mock him verbally and physically by jabbing needles into his legs or jabbing him in the eyes with their umbrellas. ‘Do you really think you’re a knight errant?’ they ask, pinching his thighs and shoulder blades. ‘You’re a decrepit old man. You should sit on a park bench instead of wielding lances and brandishing your fists. Of course you have no fists to speak of, but you brandish *something* and that’s ridiculous and pitiful. Anyway this is not very dignified behaviour for an 80-year-old man. How old *are* you, by the way? You look very old – very old indeed. Of course life expectancy in Europe has increased greatly in the 20th century. According to *our* standards, you might be pretty young on condition that you’re not over 60. Anyway this is not very dignified behaviour for a young man. We’re ashamed of you. You’re big enough to know better. You’re much taller than Sancho Panza.’

Chaliapin was put in a cage and he sang a mournful song while listening to the harangue and doing his best not to feel the pricks and kicks – more pricks than kicks – that his body couldn’t help registering. And Don Quixote’s body subjected his owner to a monologue on its suffering and the wounds inflicted on it by dukes and their wives, by knights and their knives. With these knives they tickled Don Quixote’s feet and his body said to him: ‘There’s a cut on the sole of your foot. There are two cuts on the sole of your foot. There are 50 cuts on the soles of your feet. There are 40 cuts on your stomach. You have a nasty cut above the eye. You’ll come home with a black eye. Your face is severely lacerated. You’re in constant pain.’

‘This balm should help to ease the pain,’ said Don Quixote, taking the balm out of his pocket.

‘Don’t you feel a sharp pain in your leg?’

‘I do.’

‘In these cases there’s no choice but to amputate,’ said the body.

Even my memory doesn’t forget everything and one thing it can’t forget has only visual reality for my mind and body because neither of them has ever experienced anything like that in everyday life. Such things don’t happen every day, but they did happen and you may see them and other things on condition that you switch your TV set on and sit down in front of it, not too far from the screen. Cruelty, mockery, one elaborate hoax,

another elaborate hoax, a shot, a false promise, an oven. They ran short of gas and so they threw a multitude of children into a gigantic oven and other prisoners heard cries of a kind they had never heard before. Whenever I watch another film on concentration camps, I learn something new, I hear new cries and they don't sound like the old ones. Such pain is always in a class of its own.

A doctor plays with a child. He throws the child up after twisting her arms and legs. He used supernatural powers to twist them and the child understands the intensity of this power. The child is in the air and a moment later she finds herself in the doctor's arms. How delightful it is to lie in someone's arms. The person holds you and you can rely on them and on the arms holding you tenderly. That's right – your mother cradled you tenderly in her arms and you would go to sleep whenever she did it. And she did it whenever she thought you should sleep for a while.

The doctor holds the child in his arms. He doesn't think the child should sleep for several hours: in his opinion, the child has slept enough since her arrival in the clinic. 'You haven't done a lot of exercise all week,' says the doctor, 'so I think you should go for jog this morning.' And he throws the child up. 'Do you know what this kind of jogging is called? "Ariel." And this exercise is designed to develop the shoulder and back muscles.' The doctor pinches the child's shoulders and back muscles; he punches them and the child opens her mouth. I can't hear the child: the documentary belongs to the category of silent films. I *can* hear her. A new cry, an old cry, an everlasting cry.

A famous Nazi doctor said: 'What a marvel! It's the first time I see a stomach function. A live performance. I don't appreciate dead stomachs – they smell mouldy or rotten.' He took the stomach and began playing with it. Why not toss it up into the air? That's easier said than done. First you have to remove the stomach from the body because you have no intention of tossing the body up into the air: it is too heavy. Besides, the patient might think he is fêted by doctors and other member of the staff. That's how humanity usually treats its heroes.

The doctor pauses for a moment and reflects on the work in front of him. In front of him he sees a body from which he must remove the stomach, otherwise he would have to cancel the game he feels like playing this afternoon. So he picks up a knife and cuts whatever holds the stomach tight within the body. He cuts a lot of tissues, nerves, tendons and underdeveloped muscles. Everything is ready for the game, but the doctor changes his mind. Instead of tossing the stomach up into the air, he kicks it as hard as he can. 'It's just a ball,' he says to himself. 'Let's go to the garden, my dear stomach,' he says to the ball. 'Recently we felled a great number of trees to provide space for our games.' He heads for the garden, stops in the middle of it and kicks the ball so powerfully it flies over the hedge. 'Doesn't matter,' the doctor mutters to himself. 'I'll play with the liver.'

For the first time I see the whereabouts of the camps and their number: there's a map on the screen and it is covered with dots. And inside every dot there are thousands of children and stomachs. 'No,' says a voice-over. 'There are not as many children as you think.'

'Where?' I ask.

'In our camps. Some of them were shot dead on the way to our gas chambers. You have to have such a lot of patience when you're dealing with kids. In the end you lose your patience and shout at them. But their mothers shout at you. You draw a gun and hold it to a mother's throat. Then you go to another mother and hold your gun to *her* throat. Then you kill some mother or other. You also kill one child, two children, three children. What does all that add up to? I'm afraid my mental arithmetic isn't very good.'

The Nazis watch the documentary shown in Nuremberg and realise they can't watch it because they've never seen those camps and their victims from the *outside*. They were *inside* their offices and whatever happened outside boiled down to a few sheets of paper on which their signatures told their tales. 'We are soldiers,' said the signatures, 'and soldiers must obey orders. Our commander gives the order and we fire. We see a few men and women in front of us and we raise our guns. Our guns take aim and fire. We aren't guilty because it is our guns that take aim and fire. All right, all right. We take aim, but we don't fire because there are no bullets inside our bodies. There's no fire either. There's a lot of water in our bodies so we thought we were holding water pistols. Where does fire come from? From heaven, from the sun? From an oven? But ovens were far away and the people were near. So was the commander. He shouted, 'Fire!' and our pistols heard him. And they obeyed him because they always obey the voices they hear. And they hear many voices, many commanders, many generals, many Hitlers. Our guns and machineguns keep their ears to the ground.'

They didn't *always* stay in their offices, bent over the sheets of paper on which their signatures were talking to history. They went outdoors and saw corpses, bulldozers. What is a bulldozer? A heavy vehicle with a large blade in front, used for pushing corpses and for making areas of ground flat at the same time. Bulldozers build flats for corpses. Nice, isn't it? How generous of them. Bulldozers are kind and generous, aren't they? Oddly enough, corpses don't fall in love with bulldozers and the Nazis decide to exterminate them once again. They exterminate corpses and their bulldozers carry on the good work. 'You just have to carry on as if nothing's happened,' says a commander in chief and his bulldozers obey his order.

'I knew that there were some Jews in concentration camps, but I thought they worked in those camps and also outside them – all over Germany. One day I received a letter from a Jewish woman.'

'Could you reveal the contents of the letter to us?' says the host of a well-known talk show.

"'They pay me next to nothing but I really enjoy the work.'"

A lot of citizens talk to each other. 'We need a mayor who is tough enough to clean up this city,' say the citizens and other citizens applaud, whistle and brandish their fists. Everybody sees a former Nazi officer, but nobody cares about the past and the future looms large at the conference, at the union of local trade unions and other unions. The man whose past remains obscure – in the shadow of the future – says he'll cleanse the city of drug dealers and he invites the citizens to dinner. They're flattered to be invited to dinner by the mayor and flattery hovers in the air along with happiness and good-humoured remarks. The citizens and their guests are good-humoured despite the bad weather and the recession about which they do not talk when they're happy and when a dinner table is within their reach.

A BBC journalist arrives in the city and says to the city council: 'Do you know that your mayor is a former Nazi officer?'

'No,' say the members of the city council.

'What do you think about this fact?'

'We don't think about it. The future is lying ahead of us and we don't see any Nazi party in whatever lies ahead of us, including the future.'

'All right. The Nazis are a thing of the past, but this thing is still alive and I think we'd better get rid of it,' says the Englishman.

'What for? Let the thing stay with us. Do you think the thing would take up too much room in our city? We could deport thousands of illegal immigrants to make room for the thing.'

‘The thing is a former Nazi officer,’ says the Englishman. ‘And the English don’t like Nazis, you know.’

‘We’re aware of the fact,’ says the citizens. ‘But there aren’t many Englishmen in our community.’

‘What about Englishwomen?’ asks the journalist who is eager to demonstrate he has got no affinities with misogynists.

‘There are no Englishwomen within a hundred-mile radius of our community.’

‘What about your conscience?’ asks the journalist.

‘What about it?’ asks the citizens.

The journalist goes to the mayor, saying to himself, ‘Three years ago, I quickly mastered the art of interviewing people. So I’ll have no problems with the mayor.’ And he says to the mayor, ‘You were sending 80-year-old people to concentration camps. Why? Did you think they would work in the camps?’

‘I did,’ says the mayor. ‘I think that retiring early is a stupid thing to do, don’t you? We’re not in France, are we?’

‘Do you know what happened to them?’

‘I was ordered to send them to the camps. Other officers were in charge of those people’s future, well-being and financial affairs.’

‘Here are the documents I’d like you to read.’

‘Papers don’t prove anything except that there are still a lot of trees in our woods. By the way, my son hopes to study ecology at college.’

The mayor and the city council are anxious to avoid getting entangled in the controversy and they manage to keep away from both the controversy and the journalist who packs up his things and goes home. But he leaves the thing in the city where both the thing and the mayor prosper, incurring the wrath of journalists and those who think the evil should be eradicated, however old and venerable it may appear. But the mayor says, ‘Our country’s future prosperity depends, to an extent, upon the quality of education of our people,’ and the people are educated at schools from which the Holocaust has been removed. First they put the Holocaust in a corner where they can cover it with a woollen blanket or a travelling rug. They say to the Holocaust: ‘You can sleep as long as you like. Sweet dreams, our dear Holocaust. Try not to snore because sometimes you snore so loudly it keeps English journalists and other sleuth awake at night. Nobody should hear you. Do you understand what we are saying? We can also say it in Yiddish.’

At this point my thoughts branch out – as some roads do at the bottom of a hill, at the bottom of the world or elsewhere, for your thoughts as well as the rest of your substance can branch out whenever they feel like it, leaving you high and dry. You no longer know where you are: at the end of the war characterised and marked by trials and Nuremberg or in Cervantes’ novel which, according to some scholars, encompasses the world and its history. Can we compare the duke and duchess, their wives and cruelty to what the Nazis did in concentration camps and on battlefields? Does cruelty have nuances, categories, branches? Or does it see the light of day in one piece?

I think that the monsters who play dirty tricks on Don Quixote and Sancho would have endorsed the Nazis’ views, had they lived and enjoyed themselves in the middle of the 20th century. They might have become doctors and soldiers, commanders in chief and prison wardens on whose indefatigable loyalty Hitler relied as he shouted his orders and signed the sheets of paper lying on his writing desk.

Cocteau says that from a house on fire he would take and save the fire itself, but I need neither the house nor the fire bent on destroying it: I always carry it – I mean, the fire – in both my memory and poetical élan. But sometimes I do reach what Don Quixote calls the ‘region of fire’ where my inspiration knows no bounds and lets itself go without asking for my consent and the moral support of my muse. Fire is regarded as the key factor that determines the outcome of every literary enterprise, be it confined to a short poem or widened into a family saga. So I get overexcited when I feel the poetic fire all around me – not only within my heart or mind or whatever may be defined as the seat of inspiration. Yet I know it would be foolhardy to try and predict the outcome of my tenacity and perseverance: no matter how often you dream of creating a masterpiece, you’re not likely to succeed unless your muse and the Almighty vouchsafe to make a major contribution to your large and complex undertaking.

In Stalingrad there remained a few walls behind which sharpshooters hid as they aimed their rifles at the Germans or rather their shadows moving on the blankets of snow, on the bodies of the dead. At that point there were only blankets and corpses; one had to walk carefully in order not to wake the dead, for a famous song warns us against waking soldiers: ‘Don’t wake soldiers. Let them sleep peacefully.’ Contrary to the popular opinion, soldiers don’t fade away: they die and lie under our feet that trample all over soldiers, over their bodies, killing them once again. We can’t help killing our fellow creatures; besides, I *am* in love with these soldiers. Is that the path leading to my native land, to my past, to the stories related to the Second World War? I heard a lot of them in my childhood, in my youth, because a Western journalist said about the Soviet Union: ‘The war was yesterday.’ He wrote his book in the early Seventies of the last century and I agreed with this statement upon reading his book. Yes, the war was yesterday and the Jewish Museum at the bottom of which I’m living now testifies to this statement and many other statements, to the images one sees on TV screens whenever they show a film on the Holocaust. One can’t write poems after the Holocaust. One can’t write prose after the Holocaust. One can’t write music after the Holocaust. One can’t live after the Holocaust. But one *can* live after the battle of Stalingrad, if only with a view to paying homage to the soldiers who took part in this battle.

There were no more walls to speak of, so they hid behind boulders. The ground was frozen hard and was impossible to dig. They dug a shallow pit and threw their bodies into it. Their bodies were still alive and they were civilians, not soldiers, not sharpshooters. They couldn’t kill the enemies so they hid their bodies wherever nature and Mother Earth allowed them to do so with impunity. But death comes anyway: so many civilians died in Stalingrad and a multitude of bombs continued to kill them, unable to distinguish between civilians and soldiers. Actually those bombs made no distinction between the sexes and other nuances: they killed everybody. Everybody was lying under the snow, on the snow, on the blankets and under them.

What would I have felt in the midst of those bombs, bullets and grenades? ‘Grenada, Grenada, Grenada moia.’ My Grenada, my grenade. I still recall the song I touched upon at the beginning of my book and I can see the grenades they throw and perish from in the film shown on TV: *Stalingrad, 70 years*. All this happened 70 years ago and they still remember everything. They even remember what no one talked about 70 years ago, 60 years ago: the archives are bulging with material. And today this material can be shown on TV and one can consult it in public libraries and in the museums where death continues to walk unimpeded as if there was no life on Earth. Is there life on Earth? We know that there’s no life on Mars, but what about the Earth?

Protopop Avaakum – is that how his name is spelt? – says in his book that if one sees a pig being killed in a courtyard, one feels one’s own death acutely, immediately. Avaakum, Avakum, Vacuum. He must have written

about death three centuries ago, but death hasn't become a vacuum – far from it. No human lives and works in a vacuum – we are all of us influenced by others; the same goes for animals. I'm influenced by Avaakum and Vacuum, by pigs and other animals that die in courtyards, in rivers where kittens drown daily, for they cannot swim. And humans continue to fling them into rivers, getting rid of them and guarding against overpopulation. Yes, that's how they deal with the problems of overpopulation. While flinging kittens into rivers, lakes and swimming pools, they say to each other: 'Overpopulation is one of the country's most pressing social problems.' After throwing all their kittens into water, they deduct one problem from the social problems they have to confront every day, if not every night and every dawn. Some to misery are born.

I see the soldiers who defend Stalingrad and die there as if the whole Earth was a cemetery or an atom bomb, a grenade; and this grenade is always mine, whatever happens. I feel death all the time – even when only joy is shown on TV and only Russian oligarchs disport themselves in their castles, villas and swimming pools where no kittens can be found. I am behind a boulder; I am surrounded by enemies and these enemies stand by other boulders, rifles at the ready. Their bombs are ready too. Their bombs say or rather shout: 'We are always ready.' That's how our Pioneers used to shout when asked: 'Are you ready?' No one knows what I'm writing about, for Pioneers and their proverbial ties disappeared more than 20 years ago: even Russian citizens must have forgotten those ties and their owners. I do remember them – another direct link between my childhood and my present state of mind, of body. Always ready, always ready. For what? For the last and decisive battle against capitalism?

On one of my shelves, I found Geoffrey Hosking's book entitled *A History of the Soviet Union*. I wonder who may be tempted to read this book nowadays when capitalism holds sway over the universe. Hosking speaks of the *Komsomol* which he defines as the party's youth organisation. The party he mentions on page 142 has nothing to do with American Democrats or Republicans: we come face-to-face with the Communist Party and its members who took care of teenagers and also of children. The latter were supposed to join the Pioneers I talked about in the previous paragraph. And our Pioneers shouldn't be confused with the ones admired by Walt Whitman. 'Pioneers, oh Pioneers,' if I remember rightly. I wouldn't say that about *our* Pioneers. Sleep well, sleep sound – sweet dreams, Pioneers.

At the age of 10, I swore an oath of allegiance to the Pioneer Party and I still remember the text of this oath: 'I am a young Pioneer of the Soviet Union. In front of my comrades, I solemnly promise to be faithful to Lenin's legacy, to stand up for our Communist cause, for the victory of Communism. I promise to live and learn in such a way as to become a worthy citizen of our Soviet *patria*.' The Italian word '*patria*' is the best equivalent of the Russian word '*rodina*' – on account of the operas where this word is abundantly used and overused. In a way, our Soviet life was an opera performed at the Bolshoi, of all places.

In the West, demonstrators march past waving placards that say and shout, 'Send food, not missiles'; in Moscow we saw only capital letters and the word 'capitalism' that we used to cross and tear to pieces. And if we could neither cross nor tear it up, we had to paint a skull or a skeleton below it.

I recall 'proletarian hegemony' and the trail of devastation it left behind. If this kind of hegemony is allowed to spread, it is bound to cause widespread devastation – many people are aware of that. But I live in France where the left-wing politicians and sympathisers affirm that proletarians are always right and poor; and the petit bourgeoisie is always wrong. Roland Barthes could seldom resist an opportunity to cock a snook at traditional French life swarming with petit bourgeois prejudices. And what about the proletarians? Don't they

have the same habits and traditions? Of course they do, but they don't have money and money makes the world go round. The proletarian world does *not* go round and Roland Barthes plays with it to his heart's content and in the end he succeeds in setting the ball (or the world) rolling. 'A little sympathy makes a world of difference to someone who's been badly treated,' he writes over and over again. And again I hear the capital letters I'll never forget: 'THE RICH MUST PAY'. French proletarians are fond of these letters; and French (or English) aristocrats are fond of horses. Each to their own.

Almost 40 years ago, for the first time I went to the Château de Versailles where I was given yet another opportunity of walking through the void: the furniture had been sold by the revolutionists, according to the guide. The revolutionists were trying to promote commerce between France and England, between France and Germany; so did our communists, selling off icons and precious manuscripts at half price – to England, France, the United States and Germany.

Whenever I reach my youth, I remember death and realise I don't always think about destruction, annihilation and bones; sometimes death sinks into oblivion and I begin to enjoy life to the utmost as if life and whatever happens in it were all roses, nothing but roses and rosebushes. And then I watch a documentary on the battle of Stalingrad and learn that Stalin refused to comply with his marshals' wishes, saying: 'The evacuation of civilians is out of the question while the fighting continues within our sacred borders.' With the exception of a few party officials, no one left the city before the battle; and it was too late to leave it after the battle.

Again I find myself in the basement of the Jewish Museum, which requires neither total concentration nor any other effort on my part: I've never yearned to *leave* my underground abode where I continue to search for my childhood, for my first impressions and words. In other words, I continue my descent to the centre of the Earth and while doing so, I'm reminded of Don Quixote and *his* underground adventure, otherwise known as the 'Cave of Montesinos'. One isn't always satisfied with what one finds on the surface of the Earth, which explains the profusion of alpinists and pilots, of parachutists and jumpers who constantly long for the air and its treasures hanging over them as they walk down the streets and curse whatever they see around them. What *do* they find in the air? The air, nothing else; but they breathe the air and they think that the air they breathe while hanging or flying between the sky and the Earth is purer than the air rejected by ecologists who drive away from big cities, from the capitals of the world.

There are people who, while caring about ecology and whatever is connected with it, ask themselves some metaphysical questions and look upward as if the solutions to these questions were to be found in the midst of the stars or even on the nearest cloud. Don Quixote too was in the habit of looking up and the windmills or giants he encountered at the beginning of the novel helped him leave the Earth for a while, allowing him to breathe another air and answer a few metaphysical questions. Actually he thought the giants were reluctant to budge from where they stood and, as everyone knows, it is easier to defeat a motionless giant than the one who mounts his horse and gallops through the woods, resolved to fling a series of lances in your direction. Had Don Quixote realised he had positioned himself in front of a series of windmills, he would have said to himself: 'When the large cog wheel engages with the smaller one, the mill stone will start to go round. And I don't wish to go round. I just wish to vanquish this giant and disenchant a series of maidens among whom I'm sure to find Dulcinea del Toboso.'

But he didn't say anything along these lines – either to himself or to his squire who thought his master shouldn't confront the windmills on the battlefield because they're bigger than his master and his master's horse put together. Sancho actually put them together and realised his master hadn't got a ghost of a chance of winning the battle, assuming that one can call this adventure a battle – the word reserved for Stalingrad and other cities attacked by the Nazis. Anyway the knight battles with 35 gesticulating giants whom the magician Freston transforms into windmills to thwart the valiant warrior's strategy and intentions. While in midair, the same warrior breathes profusely, but his lungs do not really *taste* the air they get as a sort of birthday present: such an adventure comes one's way only once in a while – once in a blue moon. And he has no time to answer the metaphysical questions that continue to haunt him, so the reader says: 'Fighting with the windmills was an experience that would haunt him for the rest of his life.'

Disappointed with the air and its supplements, Don Quixote directs his gaze and emotions at the Earth or rather at the centre of the Earth to which the cave in question is believed to guide intrepid travellers and knights in black armour. I don't remember whether Don Quixote's armour was black or white, but that doesn't really matter, given that inside the cave any armour is bound to look as black as night. As soon as our knight sees the cave in question, he decides to explore or investigate it, paying no heed to Nabokov's remark: 'This is an old mine shaft if we wish to be realistic.' But Don Quixote doesn't wish to be realistic or surrealistic; he is just determined to investigate the vertical cave he comes across on his way to Dulcinea and her heart which may be hidden at the bottom of the cave, for all I know – for all *he* knows. There are lots of ropes and coils; Don Quixote lets himself down. Assisted by a young scholar – a rope specialist – Sancho pay out the rope. (Is the scholar a *cave* specialist, a speleologist?)

Many Soviet citizens used to sit in their kitchens where there was enough room for a dozen bottles of vodka that had to be emptied in the course of one dinner or one night, depending on the revellers and their livers. Drinking vodka is a test of human endurance and some revellers showed remarkable endurance throughout the test which usually ran its course from dawn to dusk, seven days a week. 'This event tests both physical and mental endurance,' they used to say as they clinked their glasses together and drank to a happy new year, a happy new month, a happy new week, a happy new minute. The minute would come and go and the glasses went up and down as if to measure the distance between the Earth and the sky – between Heaven and Hell, as Blake might have put it.

'Why are you destroying yourself?'

'I have every right to do so. Clause 1001 of the constitution is thought to be the most important section.'

'What does it say?'

'It says that one can drink vodka while listening to Scheherazade's tales. That's how I spend my nights, my former and future lives.'

Usually children learn about death when their brothers and sisters die in their presence or on the eve of their departure for a fabulous city or scenery: for the Black Sea, for instance. They know they're going on holiday; the sun must be prepared to welcome them on beaches and even in the woods where many trees and

their branches let the sun through because everyone and everything know that sunbeams are good for one's health. And suddenly some relatives begin to whisper and say there's a corpse nearby – in the adjacent room, in the house opposite and children recall their brothers and sisters with whom they're used to playing almost every day, weather permitting. Only last night they dreamt about playing with them on the beaches and in the black water for which the Black Sea is justly renowned all over the world. But the whisper they hear is ominous and bodes no good. They realise their holiday and the Black Sea are receding into the distance instead of getting closer and closer to their bodies and hopes.

They go to the house opposite – or to the adjacent room – and find either their brother or sister in a bed where there are sheets and pillows as if death didn't pay much attention to objects that traditionally are permitted to survive their owners and even their creators. 'Hey lazybones, get up from the bed!' cry children as they look at both the bed and its owner or rather occupant who doesn't seem to react to what resounds in the room, namely to the words uttered by his or her next of kin. The children can't say to themselves, 'We've searched for our brothers and sisters, but there's no sign of them anywhere', for they see a sign lying on the bed they know almost by heart. They know the length of the bed and they can draw the bedposts on any sheet of paper, provided a sheet of paper is put within their reach: they always have pencils in their pockets. Nor can they say: 'There's no sign of life in the building', for there are many signs of life around them, given that their relatives continue to whisper, sigh and cry. Their tears are rolling down their cheeks and both the tears and cheeks are signs of life despite their mournful messages.

So a boy says to his father: 'What's going on?'

'Nothing,' says the father.

'Why?'

'Because your sister can't move.'

'Is she paralysed?'

'She isn't.'

'In that case, she must get up and put her clothes on. The car and the driver are waiting downstairs.'

'They're not,' says the father.

'What's going on?' asks the son. 'Is the car broken?'

'It isn't,' says the father.

'What's broken then?'

'Your mother's heart.'

'Why?'

'Because your sister is dead.'

'You mean she's asleep? Last night she fell into a lovely deep sleep. Her sleep is so deep she can't get out of it on her own. We should help her, shouldn't we? I think we should bring her to the surface of the Earth.'

'No. We'd better put her in a hollow.'

'Why?'

'First we should put her body in a coffin.'

'Why not in our car?'

'Then we should lower the coffin into the grave.'

In the space of an hour, the boy learns a lot of words and he is at a loss how to use them, for he doesn't really know what they mean and why his father needs them. There are many words in the boy's vocabulary and this vocabulary seems to encompass everything from music, theatre and ballet to literature, cinema and the visual arts. Oddly enough, death remains *beyond* this vocabulary; and yet the domains included in it continually receive some moral support from death without which they would be colourless, boring and redundant. 'What is death?' asks the boy and his question is heard by his relatives who continue to bend over his sister's corpse that they don't leave in peace despite the obvious presence of death associated with immobility and calm. 'It irritates me the way they're fussing with her hair!' says the boy, but this time no one hears him because he is in the habit of talking to himself, especially when his next of kin and other people irritate him no end – in his room, on beaches, in courtyards.

'Should I put all these words in my pocket?' asks the boy as he goes on with his interior monologue which doesn't feel like jumping over the borders of the boy's brain and mind. Shortly afterwards, the boy is shown the coffin destined for his sister's corpse and he realises that he won't be able to put it in his pocket unless his mother takes the trouble to widen his pocket and also the jacket he is wearing on the day of his sister's funeral. 'Where's the hollow my father spoke of?' asks the boy. He looks down and spots no holes; at least none of the holes he finds within his field of vision seem to welcome his sister's body: the latter is too big in spite of the deceased's age and weak constitution.

'Where's the hollow you spoke of?' The boy turns his head and his father doesn't miss the opportunity to stroke his son's forehead and cheeks.

'At the cemetery,' he says.

'Could I put the cemetery in my pocket?'

'No,' says the father.

It is easier to study the world if you're allowed to put its ingredients in your pockets. You come home and empty your pockets, relying on the generosity and prudence of the carpet over which you strew the world's ingredients and sorrows. You study them and after a while you say to yourself that you understand Creation. Your parents are unquestionably in the wrong: they insist on your going to school every day. Well and good. But what to do with death? Your sister lies in her bed, in her coffin, in her early grave and you can't strew her death's ingredients over the carpet designed for the world's mysteries and their solutions. You know where your sister's body is hidden, even if you're in no mood for playing hide and seek, either with your sister or anybody else. You also know where her death can be found and, frankly speaking, you're tempted to play hide and seek with her death because you're sure to win: her death makes no secret of its whereabouts. But what about the variety of death related to other people, to the whole world? Your sister is not in a class of her own, according to your father, mother and uncle to whose remarks you listen carefully in the hope of learning something useful. 'Anyone with any common sense would have known what to do,' says your uncle and you're yearning to master this proverbial sense eulogized by your uncle on a regular basis. And common sense tells you that death is everywhere, which makes things easier for those who, being engaged in a game of hide and seek, are resolved to lay their hands on death and win the game once and for all. But how to *hide* from death? That is the question and this question can't be answered at once, on the spur of the moment, unless the moment in question lasts eternally, jumping over time and its borders with elegance and defiance.

The boy crawls to safety and eventually takes refuge from death's persecution under his bed to which he always refers as his 'refuge' – even when he lies under a blanket and on a pillow, exposed to all sorts of danger. This time, however, he is *under the bed* and for a while he thinks the bed will protect him from death and the absence of what he has grown accustomed to in the course of his short and fruitful life. He is aware of the fact that death means 'absence' and 'void' and consequently no beds or blankets are likely to keep him company in the land situated beyond death, graves and tombstones. Well, he is under the bed and death finds him in the twinkling of an eye; and yet neither death nor mortal injuries need to seek him, being omnipresent and omniscient. Be that as it may, the boy removes his body from the refuge of sorts and dashes to the front door, determined to escape from the house where annihilation always throws its arms round him and gives him a hug.

The boy makes his way to the garden and is about to crouch down behind a bush as if death couldn't see him from where it usually stands on its pedestal. Of course our death is intimately acquainted with bushmen and bushwomen so that its victims say to each other, 'We know who's pulling the strings around here.' Why is our boy still in the dark about how our death mishandles human bodies, turning them into skeletons or mummies which are incidentally believed to bestow immortality and eternity on corpses? The boy is not a mummy; he doesn't yet belong to the eternity club that no one is allowed to join in one's lifetime unless one is resolved to take one's own life. The boy isn't mature enough for such rituals; all he dreams about concerns the game he plays with death and agonies associated with it.

'Death is everywhere,' he says to himself at last and death grins from ear to ear because it longs for recognition and does all it can to obtain this result. Should I say 'because *he* longs for recognition'? Is death a father figure, a sort of guru on whom any child may rely for good advice and guidance? I don't think so and consequently I'll always say 'it' when describing death and its acts on which not only our life but also our status in the Hereafter entirely depends. Indeed our last words are so important that whatever we say beyond our deathbed may be erased from our record in the light of what we utter at the end of our agony, on the threshold or rather on the border of the great Beyond. Beyond our deathbed, beyond our world: there are many beyonds in our life and we are supposed to cope with them to the best of our abilities.

Recently I saw a film in which a man or a dancer was selling last words to whoever wished to buy them out of curiosity. 'Do you want to buy them?'

'Yes.'

'But I can't sell them to you.'

'Why not?'

'I can sell you houses and gardens, but your last words shouldn't be handled like a piece of real estate.'

'Why not?'

'Because they're your death's property and your life has nothing to do with them.'

Rilke spent a lot of time on death – not only because he was dying and therefore couldn't dissociate his personal time from a process taking part in his body and the rest of his poetic substance. Peaches, plums, dates, avocados and olives all contain stones; Rilke thought that in the same way human beings were carrying at the core of their beings a number of stones which, however, didn't look like the stones we find in fruit, for our stones are tangible symbols of death, whereas theirs remind us of life, of the source of fruit's vitality. The stones carried by adults are bigger than those any surgeon can stumble upon in children's bodies – in their chests, for instance. While eating a plum, you often feel a stone between your teeth and you can spit this stone out so as not

to burden your intestines with a foreign body about which they don't know much. You can't spit death out of your body, even if you manage to isolate it, transferring it into your mouth where you've got a tongue and a number of teeth used to grinding whatever they find within striking distance. Try as they may, they won't be able to triumph over death because death is far more powerful than teeth and tongues that are eager to proclaim its death – as John Donne does in one of his poems. 'Death, you're dead. What's more, you've never been alive – at least not after Christ's Resurrection.' And death says to the tongues: 'I could sit here and argue with you till the cows come home, but it wouldn't solve anything.' And a wise old man writes in his notebook: 'I'd better not argue with death.'

Donne says that death should not be proud, but Rilke insists on the importance of having death within one's reach, for death is *our* pride – an inexhaustible source of our self-confidence. Death has a rather elevated idea of its own importance and we follow death's example, which is all the more realistic since death turns out to be part of our body, let alone of our life. So, after many centuries of the struggle for life, we begin to have a rather elevated idea of our own importance. Don't we appreciate the elevated language of the Psalms? What do *they* talk about? Death, death, death. They also talk of God because we need Him to vanquish the evil continuously symbolised by death and its couriers; otherwise we might have forgotten Him a long time ago.

Rilke points out that death is not a burden despite its weight: contrary to what might be presumed in the light of the parallel drawn a bit earlier, death is much heavier than the stones we usually find in olives and avocados. It is extremely heavy, in point of fact, and that accounts for our fear and reluctance to carry it along the streets and motorways which seem to frighten us whenever a car or a lorry cuts in on us. But we should get used to death – to the point of enjoying its company and weight, even if this weight or the body of death happens to be stuffed with suffering and unbearable pains. We should accept the boundless energy for which death is renowned and respected, otherwise we are likely to be shocked upon making death's acquaintance in our deathbed, deatharmchair and deathpark.

The point is, death *is not* beyond our endurance and the forces we store up in expectation of some forthcoming exploit should be channelled towards our friendship with the Hereafter; and we can come to terms with it only through the agency of death which is kind enough to put in a good word for us with angels and even with the Almighty. Sure enough, even God listens to death, although talking to a representative of destruction is in a way beneath His dignity or rather our idea of it based on paintings and frescoes where God always has a quiet dignity about Him. It is as if Italian and Flemish painters were longing to impart to us the following truth: 'God is a man of dignity and calm determination. All painters and sculptors have a knack of creating God in our image and we can't help admiring the image we contemplate in our cathedrals and museums on account of the dignity we are writing and thinking about.'

So death says to God: 'Dear Sir, please look at this woman. She is an excellent travelling companion.'

'Really?' asks God.

'That's right. She has been my constant companion these past ten years.'

'And before?' asks God.

'In her youth she thought she should travel with life. And then she changed her mind.'

'What can you say about her? Has she sinned a lot?'

'Not at all. I prevent humans from sinning.'

'How so?'

‘I contaminate them, I poison them. The sick cannot sin. They neither fornicate nor treat Christmas as just another excuse for gluttony.’

‘How *do* they treat Christmas?’

‘With respect and love.’

Let us visualise a basketful of apples that are not really apples and we soon realise our mistake because we don’t usually jump to conclusions. It is true that death can assume many identities and apples are nothing but a multitude of masks beyond which death and its angels often go on a spree. You eat an apple and collapse under the weight of your own body – as if you hadn’t been used to dragging it around the world. ‘The apple was poisonous,’ say your next of kin, and your uncle adds pensively, ‘Death is always poisonous like certain mushrooms.’ Children look at a basketful of apples and rush towards the fruit. ‘Don’t grab at the apples, children – there are plenty for everyone.’ And a sage adds pensively: ‘There’s no shortage of death, alas.’

Rilke’s poetry has diverted our attention away from heaven and its allurements: he speaks too convincingly about the Earth to which we should direct our criticism and hopes. ‘After three crop failures in a row, the people face starvation,’ we say to the Earth.

‘You spend hours gazing out of the window when you should be ploughing fields. You look at heaven instead of sowing fields with barley.’

‘We thought God would help us.’

‘God helps those who help themselves.’

Many people start helping themselves and God helps them in His turn so that everything is full of ‘terrestrial spirit’, according to Rilke’s definition and dreams. He also speaks of our ‘pure terrestrial consciousness’; our vehicles get bogged down in the heavy mud and we squelch through this mud in search of some other help. According to Rilke, we thus make our way to the afterlife where we are permitted to learn our death and its ways that hide beyond bushes as long as we gaze out of the window, trying to guess what the clouds convey to us through their masks, shapes and nuances. And when death leaves its hiding place, it opens up sharp differences between our diseases and the imaginary health that lulls us into a false sense of security. Nevertheless, we have no alternative but to welcome death and accept our destinies and the ballet of bones staged by death’s favourite choreographer. Even the dinosaur skeletons one admires in the Natural History Museum begin to dance as if they were swans’ skeletons or Gisele’s numerous ghosts.

‘It is not easy to reach the domain of death situated on the other side,’ says a sage or a partisan of Rilke’s doctrines. ‘This side doesn’t look at you. It looks sideways, anyway. And it walks with a sideways motion – like crabs.’

‘Is death liver cancer, bowel cancer?’ asks a middle-aged man.

‘Cancer is the fourth sign of the zodiac, relating to the period from 22 June to 22 July and represented by a crab, or a person born during this period. Were you born during this period?’

‘I was not,’ says the middle-aged man.

‘So you’re immortal,’ says the sage.

Human beings are easily diverted and mostly death remains out of their reach, whenever they try and concentrate on it for a while, saying, ‘*Memento mori, memento mori.*’ ‘I find running concentrates the mind,’ they say to themselves and they answer by running along motorways and through the woods where death doesn’t seem to work as hard as anywhere else, due to ecological advantages hidden in trees and their leaves. Plants are

the main source of atmospheric oxygen and every self-respecting leaf knows that the symbol for oxygen, for this life-saving substance is O₂. Death retires as it realises that life is about to play its trump card and we continue to run through the trees and bushes as long as we are yearning to live forever, flouting entropy and decay. Our health is about to strangle death, but death eludes us in spite of our lungs that breathe a lot of fresh air during our wanderings in the woods because our death still has one or two cards up its sleeve and this card is its trump card. Didn't Julius Caesar say, 'I'd rather die suddenly'? Even in the woods you can encounter your death because it can cancel the fresh air you inhale and partly store in your lungs and in the rest of your body: death can cancel everything and you know it only too well. Death cancels *you* and you fall on a bush, on a mossy lawn where a lot of insects will bemoan your lot and sing you the definitive version of your personal lullaby.

Rilke says that one should face the truth – or death, in other words, for there are no other truths in our world peppered with lies and their derivatives. 'She wheeled round to face him and saw him take out a gun,' says one of his poems which starts as follows: 'The window of their hotel room faces the sea / And their houses face each other across the street.' Scholars know that Rilke speaks of death, even when he focuses his attention on the houses that face each other in various regions of France and Germany. Every house gives shelter to death as if the latter needed shelter or any other kind of protection offered by houses, hotels and their rooms, by the bottom of the sea. 'Your hotel room has always faced the sea,' says Rilke. 'Why can't you face death? Are you inferior to your hotel room? And death may be likened to the sea on account of its depth. Any animal is capable of seeing what is open. Why can't *you* do it? Do you think death is closed? Death is not a shop, is it? Nor is it a museum. You should turn on your heel and leave your room, otherwise you'll miss your appointment with death. We are the bees of the Invisible or the pigs of the Invisible. The pigs forage in the woods for acorns. We forage for the Invisible, for death, for the great Beyond. You shouldn't stay where you are and you're always lying in a Louis XVI bed or standing in one of the corners. As usual you are rooted to the spot instead of walking through life that leads you towards death and revelations stored in the bosom of death. *Bleiben ist nirgends*. Yet you stay instead of going and what remains of you has fossilised over the last 20 years. To live means "to leave". You can't save the Visible, can you? So you should create the Invisible by means of language, of an expression you coin, a term. Allen Ginsberg coined the term "flower power". What about you?'

'Tower power,' you say to Rilke.

'What does *that* mean?'

'I think W. B. Yeats speaks of towers,' you say to Rilke.

'Does he?'

'He does.'

'Can't you quote chapter and verse?'

There in the tomb stand the dead upright,

But winds come up from the shore:

They shake when the winds roar,

Old bones upon the mountain shake.

I wonder why the dead stand upright instead of taking advantage of their coffins that never stand upright, judging from what I saw in Russia, Egypt and elsewhere: mummies do *not* stand upright unless museum

attendants decide otherwise, being weary of those lifelike corpses lying in glass cages. At mealtime the attendants have to get down on their knees and feed their wards while running the risk of hurting their own bodies which are prone to rheumatic pains and other aches related to uncomfortable postures. So they prefer not to kneel down in front of their clients; these may look like idols if too many knees touch the floor beside their bodies which are wound with fabrics of all kinds. And idols were banished from Judeo-Christian rituals a long time ago, otherwise Schoenberg wouldn't have composed his unfinished opera *Moses and Aaron*; nor would I have devoted many hours to this opera and the problem of idolatry. Nowadays they idolise nonentities referred to as 'stars' and no one upbraids them for this crime – which is not a misdemeanour, as some might lightheartedly assume – and even Moses might have kept silent under the circumstances.

Well, the dead stand upright and I'm in no mood for correcting Yeats' text; I'd better come to terms with it in order to continue my analysis of death and that of black towers inside which the dead behave like unruly children, especially if the wind takes part in their games. Thanks to Yeats, we know that winds come up from the shore and we don't have to locate this shore, for its whereabouts are not important – at least within the framework of my novel. The tower and the shore might have reminded Yeats of his youth, of his dearest Ireland, but I am not of Ireland, and the Holy Land of Ireland, and therefore I can survive and prosper without Ben Bulbin, the Mareotic Lake and the Witch of Atlas. The winds shake the bones as they roar and gnash their teeth – like the monsters exhibited in fairy tales. They open their jaws and roar like lions whose company one can enjoy in zoos and Africa. And the old bones shake as they listen to the winds and a few women who continue to cry as if those bones had died yesterday or the day before – not at the beginning of the last century.

The Tower of Babel is death; so is Yeats' black tower inside which many bones take plenty of exercise as they shake in response to the winds that refuse to sleep peacefully in their own tombs. What have I to do with these bones and winds? Do I have to count *my* bones and listen to the noise they make as I inhale and exhale the stale air of my room? The morning after the party, my house smelt of stale cigarette smoke; the same goes for tonight because the party took place yesterday and usually I can't get rid of this smell at once. I have to wait a week, a fortnight, and so I wait, running out of patience. I don't run through the woods with a view to catching up with death; I just wait and wait and the smell remains where it is, being rooted to the spot. And the old bones continue to shake as if they had nothing else to do.

*There in the tomb the dark grows blacker,
But wind comes up from the shore:
They shake when the winds roar,
Old bones upon the mountain shake.*

In a Buddhist treatise I found the expression I can't get rid of in spite of the proofs to the contrary I find in everyday life which offers us a lot of adventures; these make us believe that love is not a figment of one's imagination. I come across a beautiful woman who doesn't look skinny and consequently is not supposed to remind one of skeletons or indeed of anything allied to death, however remotely and superficially. It is life that such a body speaks to us about because there's nothing else in it, not even a niche where the second law of

thermodynamics might ‘squat in squalor’, as an English poet put it. And yet a genuine Buddhist would see only bones – not only collarbones which are often visible in spite of dark ladies’ features and their intrinsic beauty.

‘May the Earth open under my feet! May lightning strike my brow!’ Well, the Earth does open under my feet and I fall through the Earth. My fall is not as spectacular as one might presume, for I’m already an underground artist – well in keeping with Soviet traditions and rites. I seem to have forgotten what lightning looks like: there are not many lightning bolts streaking out of the sky above Versailles. Anyway no lightning has ever struck *my* brow, but my ribs are still broken and I can feel the pain that originates in them, in their mortal remains. A lightning strike might have caused them, for all I know; it’s a pity I don’t know much about this natural phenomenon that may destroy not only houses but also human lives.

Suppose I spend my whole life shut up in some monastery or other, but the sorrows of the world also live within the monastery walls. I’m exposed to grief and danger even within this secluded spot where kings, queens and criminals are said to find the peace and harmony one hears in *Die Zauberflöte*. Why should I forego the pleasure of having my main meals in three-star restaurants? I suppose I could drink my bottles in any monastery, provided the authorities I touched upon in the previous paragraph are not opposed to this ritual of mine. But why should I drink them in a monastery instead of staying at home and watching TV whenever I feel like it?

The world is full of sorrows and I often watch these sorrows enjoy a leisurely stroll in the sunshine that can’t bear their presence: even on the sun there’s widespread gloom and doom about the future of the Earth, whenever our sorrows set off on a round-the-world cruise. On the way they find many monasteries where human beings repent and repose on the grass, on stones and marble slabs. They wake the monks up and torment them so efficiently that groans and screams awaken the angels painted on the walls. The guardian angels look at each other and shake their heads as they realise they can’t protect their wards from the sorrows and their pitchforks.

If you feed your dog on cakes and biscuits, it’s not surprising he is so fat. Monks are not dogs, but many of them eat cakes and biscuits and no one says about them: ‘They eat all the time but never get fat.’ There are many Falstaffs among the monks of the monastery I’m speaking about and sorrows get through its walls, determined to torment the monks and put an end to their bliss.

My expectations are fading as I try to focus my thoughts on my future abode, on the future refuge where my body will make preparations for the final journey to the end of fear, night, light and whatever we say in this world, determined to described it with utmost accuracy. Some time ago – where is this time now? – I said I wished to move to another country so as to escape from the clutches into which I had fallen on the day of our election. Tax evasion may be inadmissible, but I’m so used to it I can’t imagine myself sitting in my favourite armchair and giving money to some officials whose credentials are doubtful and do not concern me in the least. Yes, my life is symbolised by my favourite armchairs where I spend hours and hours, getting rid of bad memories and the habits which drive me towards the front door and the pleasures situated beyond it. Instead of these pleasure I’m entitled to count upon, I’m likely to meet those officials who have already sent me a few letters, saying I should pay penalties because ‘this offence carries a fixed penalty,’ as they put it.

‘What offence?’ I ask.

‘Tax evasion,’ they say.

‘I’m campaigning for stiffer penalties for people who drink and drive,’ I say. ‘But I neither drink nor drive.’

‘But you earn money abroad,’ they say.

No wonder I think about monasteries and their walls through which only sorrows can walk in order to torment the monks whose conscience is partly guilty so that their cells are adorned with a multitude of pictures showing flies and ointments. I don't mind taking care of my conscience, provided I no longer hear the words 'tax evasion' uttered by the officials whose superior manners jar on me, making my life unbearable.

I am not in Paradise yet and my earthly existence doesn't fit in with Mozart's music which might give us an idea of what our paradise on Earth must sound like. Of course our travel agents excel at turning any country or resort into paradise, but even they say to us at the end of their discourses: 'For further information, please listen to Mozart's quartets and sonatas.'

Of course one can withdraw from society without following a path at the end of which there's a monastery and a lot of sewers one has to empty in order to gain iconic status. On television an old woman is scrubbing an old saucepan clean; after a while, it looks as good as new. 'That's how I live,' she says to the cameraman who continues to film her daily rounds in order to show television viewers the right way and also a host of angels: these are fond of old women, especially of solitary women. Our woman lives in a village where there are only two people; apart from her, around the empty village wanders a priest whose duty is confined to his relationship with the old woman and to the church situated in the very centre of the village. They both live in the centre, anxious to be as near the church as necessary for the energy required by daily prayers that God must listen to, according to them. 'God is in the centre, so are we,' says the priest to the old woman. 'He can't help hearing us.'

The woman scrubs the floor and two walls, taking no notice of the other walls which seem to protect her from Yeats' winds; her bones do not shake either when she sleeps or during her walks around the house where she lives and prays. Her head does shake, on the other hand, and she seems to say 'no' as she gropes her way to the front door, to the church that she cannot see: she started to go blind in her sixties. She no longer goes blind because she is blind already and, as everybody knows, God set a strict limit on blindness, on darkness. Often she spends a few hours inside a snowdrift; the priest can hear neither her prayers nor her cries for help that may sound thus: 'You're a monster! Where are you? Are you deaf?'

'There's a limit to the number of times I can stop what I'm doing just so I can help her!' says the priest, but God upbraids him and submissively he goes and helps the old woman out of the snowdrift in the centre of which there's a hole made by the old woman. 'You're keen on holes,' says the priest.

'I wish I could plant a tree in this hole,' says the old woman.

'In this snowdrift?'

'I'll wait for it to disappear. The snow usually melts by mid-March.'

'Do you wish to stay in the snowdrift until then?'

'I wish to pray,' says the woman.

'You can pray in the snowdrift,' says the priest.

'I wish to pray in the church. What is it for?'

'Let's go and pray,' says the priest.

The woman says to three journalists that she can forgo the pleasure of eating, if bread and milk interfere with her prayers and the music they compose in the emptiness of the church. 'Cheer up, Father,' she says to the priest whose morale is fairly low: he dreams about Moscow and the churches where he could enjoin his congregation to kneel and bend down. The old woman can't go down on her knees; she either crawls or walks and whenever he says to her: 'Kneel in front of the altar and pray' she falls down and scrambles up. The priest is not a sadist: he no longer speaks to the woman about her knees and the altar she cannot spot in the darkness at the bottom of which she continues to live and pray.

'Do you still want to settle in Moscow?' she asks.

'Yes.'

'Do you think there are no old women in Moscow?'

'I don't think so.'

'Do you think there are no blind women in Moscow?'

'We live in the country of the blind,' says the priest.

Should I go to this village and settle down in the centre of it, near the old woman whose prayers might help me pave the way to Paradise or to a cubbyhole situated on the outskirts of Purgatory? I wouldn't mind helping her in wintertime because I'm used to snowdrifts, being a native of Moscow which is strewn with snowmen. But I'll always draw the line at scrubbing floors, walls and even saucepans. What's the use of scrubbing walls and the marks I leave on them? I scrubbed the mark on the nearest wall for ages, but it wouldn't come off.

I would talk to the priest about philosophy and God with Whom he must be on intimate terms, for no one diverts his attention from heaven and the Garden of Eden where God spoke to Adam about the forbidden fruit. 'What's the forbidden fruit?' asks the old woman.

'I told you about this fruit three years ago,' says the priest.

'I'd like to know what I'm allowed to eat,' says the woman.

'Bread.'

'Man cannot live by bread alone,' says the woman.

'Milk,' says the priest.

'I like fruit,' says the woman. 'I like exotic fruit – mangoes, papayas.'

'Where have you seen them?'

'I haven't seen them. Ten years ago, I heard about them from my grandchild.'

'What did he say?'

'He said, "I like exotic fruit – mangoes, papayas."'

'Did he describe them?'

'No.'

'Why do you like them?'

'Because my grandchild likes them. I trust him – he knows about these things. He lives in Moscow.'

I would recite to her Jeremiah's call to repentance: 'I have forsaken mine house, I have left mine heritage; I have given the dearly beloved of my soul into the hand of her enemies. Mine heritage is unto me as a lion in the forest; it crieth out against me: therefore have I hated it.'

'Where's your house?' asks the woman.

‘I was born in Moscow.’

‘Where’s your soul now?’

‘I don’t know. In Moscow perhaps.’

‘How can you live without your soul?’

‘I can’t.’

‘Your enemies have your soul.’

My soul might have betrayed me a long time ago and my heritage doesn’t leave me in peace because I dream of eternity without which I can’t live on the Earth; even on Mars I would have been unhappy. My soul, my heritage. Aren’t they my *real* enemies? Why can’t I live inside the time conferred on me by God and the forbidden fruit? Why do I yearn to live outside it, in the Garden of Eden where Plato and Dante walk arm in arm?

Suppose I settle in the house opposite and give a helping hand to the woman who sees only God, leaving behind our world where she goes to church every day, resolved to pray to God on His own terms. His terms are symbolised by the church erected in the middle of the village and she goes forward, groping her way towards the spiritual light she is bound to see not far from the altar and the icons radiating this light at the approach of another liturgy. She walks through the snow, leaving behind her sorrow and blindness which pursue her at home where she can’t find anything with the exception of the floor and the instruments she uses when scrubbing it to her heart’s content. Well, I’ll give her a helping hand – to the best of my abilities; and yet I don’t know if I have a gift for scrubbing floors, cleaning walls and dusting photographs: there are lots of photographs on the walls of the Russians, be they old or young. The older they grow, the more photographs they hang on their walls. At some point they realise they can’t clean the walls because of the photographs that cover them completely, leaving no room for a washing-up cloth. They must therefore content themselves with dusting the photographs which depict faces, wrinkles, and even thoughts hidden behind these faces and wrinkles. Every wrinkle hides a thousand thoughts and they often shed a few tears as they look at the photographs and recall the thoughts engraved on them: even time doesn’t succeed in removing the thoughts from their ancestors’ faces.

The old woman can see neither her ancestors’ thoughts nor their wrinkles. She cries very seldom, focusing her sorrows only on her blindness and her state of mind which is not always up to the mark, so to speak. At least *she* thinks her mind isn’t worthy of God and the delights He showers on her life deprived of material light and brimming with the Almighty’s grace and bounty. But I’ll do my best to keep her mind in order by reading some excerpts from the Bible to her and pulling her out of the snowdrifts that await her whenever she ventures outdoors, anxious to attend another liturgy, another portion of light and hope.

‘O the hope of Israel, the saviour thereof in time of trouble, why shouldest thou be as a stranger in the land, and as a wayfaring man that turneth aside to tarry for a night? Why shouldest thou be as a man astonished, as a mighty man that cannot save? yet thou, O Lord, art in the midst of us, and we are called by thy name; leave us not.’

Whenever I read this excerpt, the old woman says, ‘I won’t leave God.’

‘It’s the other way round,’ I say to her.

‘There are no other ways,’ she answers. ‘I’ll go to God today. I’ll go to Him tomorrow. I’ll keep Him company.’

There's no point in speaking to the woman who always speaks about herself as if she was alone in the world, not only in the village that she equates with the world. She must think there are only two houses in the world and she lives in one of them – just opposite the church where God awaits her day and night because He knows she can't live without Him. But for His daily help, she might die in one of the snowdrifts and God relies on the priest or on your humble servant for help, for a pair of hands suited to the job. The priest is snowed under with work, but he is so talkative he can't resist the urge to discuss religious matters in *my* presence: the old woman isn't sufficiently versed in theology and her reactions disappoint and irritate him.

'Thank you for coming to God,' he says as he shoots me a sidelong glance. 'God is a stranger as long as we stay away from Him. Of course you can go to any church, but no church is a valuable asset without old people and the snowdrifts from which you can pull them.'

'It seems to me that a lot of evil deeds are done in the name of religion,' I say to him.

'That's right. But if you scrub an old woman's floor, you're unlikely to fall into this trap. Don't fall into the trap of thinking you can be saved without doing any work. And you should scrub *other* people's floors, not yours – preferably *old* people's floors.'

'This woman thinks the world is confined to this village.'

'So do I,' says the priest. 'And so should you – as long as you stay in this village. You shouldn't spread yourself too thin.'

'But the old woman's grandchildren live in Moscow, don't they?'

'Moscow is another world,' says the priest.

'Is your house also another world?'

'No. This village is a world and whatever can be found in it belongs in this world. If you think about other worlds, you chase God away from *our* world.'

'Aren't you dreaming of Moscow?'

'An idle dream. I sometimes think I'm losing my grasp on reality. I shouldn't. "Why shouldest thou be as a stranger in the land, and as a wayfaring man that turneth aside to tarry for a night?" Jeremiah talks to us too. "We are called by thy name." Aren't we? God is *not* a mighty man. God is the Almighty. And He is in the midst of this village, of this room, in the midst of every snowdrift. This woman's falls are the most tangible proofs of her faith.'

'Why not leave her in the midst of these snowdrifts?'

'I'm always helping people and doing other good deeds. Why not follow my example? Faith is hollow without good deeds.'

The old woman goes to the church and the priest pushes her violently; she falls and makes a hole in a snowdrift. I pull her out of the hole and the priest goes back to the old woman's house. He spills some tincture of iodine all over the floor and I scrub the floor with bleach. Leave us not. Leave us not.

I don't know whether my mood has anything to do with what I feel and experience as I look at the screen which shows me another competition and a group of human beings and bodies; they dance and sing as if they couldn't just walk down the street, indulging themselves. Window-shopping is a more useful and less harmful pastime than whatever they do in their studios where somebody says, 'Yes,' and others applaud all the more

hysterically since the trash they hear doesn't penetrate their minds that go further and further, leaving the field clear for other selves, for puppets and innocent monstrosities. But I'm not eager to condemn the young who spend their nights in Internet cafés, playing games that are even more stupid than the players who do their best to catch up with the games, to become as stupid and meaningless as they are. I think these teenagers don't waste their time as drastically as those who read bad books and think they fill their minds with cultures, with beauty and philosophical dilemmas without which one cannot die with dignity and purpose.

Extroverts devour their fellow creatures; introverts remember that their grandmas always had a few titbits for them – 'if we're visiting at lunchtime', they say out loud, as if their grandmas were still in the land of the living where titbits are destined for grandchildren and dogs. Their grandmas being no longer available, they set about searching for titbits inside themselves and they succeed, for they realise it's better to know the ins and outs of their minds and egos than to starve to death. In this case it's better to drink wine than to read the trash acclaimed by critics and readers alike because this trash is not affiliated with time except that one wastes one's time on it instead of listening to life.

My teacher never said I interacted well with the other children, but once he said as he continued to walk along the corridor with a sideways motion, 'One child in 5,000 is autistic.' And he added enigmatically, 'It's interesting at parties to see how people interact socially, isn't it?'

'I'm studying how these two chemicals interact,' I answered.

'What chemicals are you talking about? And *why* are you talking about chemicals? Aren't human beings more important?'

'Humans are also chemicals,' I said to him.

'They think and feel,' said the teacher.

'Their thoughts are also chemical. Each day, they release millions of tonnes of toxic chemicals into the atmosphere.'

'How?' he asked.

'They think and talk. And they feel.'

'Is love also chemical?' he asked.

'I'm studying how these two chemicals interact,' I answered.

I'm under the impression that I see a number of molecules and not those humans who interact and fall in love with each other as they walk and talk and sit down on benches, under trees, under dark clouds, in the rain. These molecules must live their lives inside their bodies and even their smiles are made up of molecules, of their vortices, swirls and swings. All smiles look alike; and yet I realise the molecules are not identical because they differ in temperament and even their physiques are different from each other as if they were resolved to preserve their respective identities. Apparently they don't live in a communist society where humans are bolts, according to sociologists and right-wing intellectuals. 'Give it another screw to make sure the lid doesn't come off while we're travelling,' as Stalin used to say to his cronies. His cronies were not in the habit of asking superfluous questions: they knew that the journey Stalin kept hinting at was to convey the whole country into communism. And they always tried to convey in their speeches how grateful they all were for Stalin's help, for his guidance and muscular arms that used to push the Soviet citizens into concentration camps and other paradises. 'Yes, I convey the whole country into communism,' he used to say and his cronies knew they should utter the same words to please their leader; otherwise they might find themselves in the camps about which they had heard from

their colleagues. So they said, ‘Communism, the whole country, communism, Stalin.’ They also said, ‘Words alone cannot *convey* the untold misery endured by people in capitalist countries.’

‘What *can* they convey?’

‘Are you speaking about words, Comrade Stalin?’

‘Yes. And also about you. What can *you* convey by means of words?’

‘Our gratitude and the magnitude of our achievements.’

I wrote about the molecules and sent the text to a young man who had said to me somewhere in Germany, ‘I’d like to write your biography,’ and some time later I came up with the idea of dividing humans into molecules. I thought I would have to talk of my native land and I had no idea how to come to terms with it because I was sure the molecules could be instrumental only in dividing it into portions and motions. But I know that the molecules’ edges interlock to form a tight world where there’s no room for the void on which Descartes used to enlarge in his works, saying the world feared it and had no desire to do anything with it. (Was it Descartes?)

In the country of my birth they spoke a lot about proletarians and the way they should live and confront their enemies who always smoked cigars and drank whisky – even if they drove around New York in their Chryslers. On our slogans and in our rooms, the proletarians united and their molecules interlocked as they looked at capitalists and said to themselves: ‘We should kill them, otherwise we’ll starve to death.’ But how to kill multimillionaires? ‘Capitalists are bacteria,’ said the proletarians, ‘and the world is their food because we can feel their teeth and their teeth feel our bodies and minds. Food must be heated to a high temperature to kill harmful bacteria. Let us heat the world and our capitalists will die a natural death.’

Proletarians heat the world by erecting barricades and throwing stones at their capitalists, but these do not die either naturally or unnaturally; and their teeth continue to tear proletarian bodies to shreds. So proletarians say, ‘Let us knock chips out of their front teeth.’ They engage a few heavyweight boxers who knock a few capitalists unconscious. But other capitalists put the boxers in a maximum-security prison; these serve a year in prison and are then let out on probation. No longer do they knock capitalists unconscious and the number of capitalist teeth increases as they search for proletarian bodies that can be recognised and singled out in the midst of other molecules: they’re lean but not fit. They look like skeletons and no one knocks them down because the easiest thing to do would be for us to knock a proletarian body down: there are no heavyweight proletarians in the world. And we need obstacles and arduous tasks to show we are capable of exploits and deserve our status on a planet where status symbols and a very complex social hierarchy count a lot – more than our immortal souls and our faith in the Last Judgement.

My native land is a collection of molecules and some of these molecules interlock with mine. I can say I was born in Moscow and I am still Russian, although there are many bloods in my veins and I’m not always on the same wavelength as the inhabitants of Russia, Moscow, St. Petersburg and Kazan. There are the soldiers who fought in Stalingrad; I can’t discard them because I cry whenever I watch a film about this battle, about those people and the snow where so many bodies were lying in spite of my vision of the world, of the molecules I see and count: they were *human* bodies.

‘If I can think of some excuse to wangle my way out of going this afternoon I will do so!’ I say to myself: I’m supposed to meet a friend of mine who said we had to watch *The Master* and Tarantino’s latest film. I haven’t been to the cinema for three, four or five years, but I still hope I can chance upon a human whose

collection of molecules corresponds to what I have in my head and also inside the pages I'm about to write so as not to die in the void feared by Descartes and his world. I don't know if there will be rain showers in the east, but it is raining in Versailles and I'm in no mood for going outdoors, even if this walk may lead me to one of the restaurants where I'm used to assuaging my fears and drying my tears.

My molecules are interlocked with those of the soldiers who perished in Stalingrad and, generally speaking, in the Second World War – I'm speaking of Soviet citizens, not of the Nazis. There's such a thing as a comparison of misfortunes, which helps you to survive in the world where any defeat is more important than Nobel prizes and Olympic medals. Were those soldiers more miserable than I am now? No, I don't think so because they fought from house to house to prevail over the most hideous dictator one could vote for in the 20th century. Our history is full of dictators, but I still wouldn't volunteer to fight in a war – you can accuse me of cowardice if you wish and if you're in the habit of yielding to the pressure of your wishes. That's why I am more miserable than the soldiers who fought the Nazis in Stalingrad.

I hear my alarm clock – my alarm cock – and realise I'm alone in the world where only alarm clocks seem to prosper, for they have to assert themselves, showing to everyone how important they are. I'm deprived of space but not of time; that's why this alarm clock plays such a role in my spineless life. Deprived of space, the world clutches at a straw or rather at a speck of dust and all of a sudden I realise there's enough room for this speck of dust that also asserts itself: in my new cowardly world, a speck of dust is more important than human beings. Of course one can see many humans in a speck of dust, but one is conspicuous by one's absence and so my speck of dust is sitting in my room, enthroned on an old high-backed chair.

'It is this love which must inspire humanity today, if it is to face the crisis of the meaning of life, the challenges of the most diverse needs and, especially, the duty to defend the dignity of every human person. Thus the message of divine mercy is also implicitly a *message about the value of every human being...*' How do you defend the dignity of every human person? You say to this person, 'You should be free. But being free doesn't mean you're free to drink three bottles of vodka every morning. You're not free to drink yourself to death because the life you got from God is not yours.' And what about drinking oneself *to life*? Don't you probe the meaning of time as you drink three glasses of vodka? Time begins to flow into you, withdrawing from the world to make you realise its movement take place inside your body which is prepared to respond to it only if you drink another glassful of vodka or whisky. Vodka tells you a lot about the human condition, about the meaninglessness of life and the meaning of death.

My molecules go on a spree; some of them come back and others do not as if weary of my body and the old age about which they often talk in the films where an old man woos a relatively young woman. His relatives say: 'He's off his rocker – she might be his daughter or granddaughter.' So do some of my molecules no doubt. I mean, they say to each other, 'He's off his rocker' and some of them forsake me for the sake of other bodies whose health and wealth are beyond reproach. Besides, they must be irritated by my search for myself, my

identity, roots and genes that no longer care about their author and his metaphysics. The sword I'm so fond of continues to divide me into small discussion groups and I listen to these discussions without taking part in them.

'Our master is Russian.'

'He was *born* in Russia.'

'Don't forget he's highly critical of Russian history.'

'And Russian ways, manners.'

'He's a Russian patriot.'

'Is he influenced by Brecht and his notion of *Verfremdung*?'

'What did you say?'

'*Verfremdung*. Do you speak German?'

'Our molecules speak only French.'

'Distancing effect. A style of acting that prevents the audience from forgetting that it is all an illusion.'

'His youth is an illusion. So is his patriotism.'

'And what about his birth?'

'It's also an illusion. And so is his death. You're wrong if you think you were born. You're an idiot if you think you'll pass away. Nothing is born and nothing dies unless you don't understand anything.'

'You're acting like a complete idiot! Have you no sense?'

'Get real! Your life, your old age and your idiocy are real. So are your loss of memory, your memory lapses, your lapses of concentration and judgment.'

'Your Romantic concept of sincerity is out of fashion.'

'You think you move the audience because you're moved yourself.'

'I'm not moved, not in the least.'

'Perhaps. But you're not far *removed* from reality which is not real, as a matter of fact.'

'At no point does the ideal Brechtian actor expect the audience to identify or sympathise with him.'

My reason is infinite and I continually spread it to other areas of the universe to keep the Milky Way and Andromeda under control. What do I need them for? And what if Paradise is to be found in Andromeda and not in Dante's trilogy where you go from one planet to another in search of Beatrice and *her* Paradise? And *her* Paradise is linked to that of the Virgin Mary – to such an extent that we may disregard the second paradise, leaving only one paradise at our disposal, which is quite enough, according to our priests and sacred books. But there might be *another* paradise somewhere and I think it is worth my while exploring the universe with a view to taking hold of that paradise's edge. You take hold of one end of that paradise and tug until you have the whole of it in a corner of your infinite reason. And then you discard other corners because you don't need them: Hell, Purgatory, Mars, Jupiter, comets, shooting stars. All you need is your newly-discovered Paradise that deserves your unreserved support: you should write it with a capital P. Didn't you mother say to you many years ago: 'Don't forget to put a capital letter on a proper name, like the name of a place or person'? Your Paradise is more important than proper names and places.

In a way, any paradise is a blanket you can pull as long as it resists your efforts and longings; and then you gather it around you and fall asleep. There are many pieces of fruit above you and, upon awakening, you

may pluck them and bite into them as long as they resist your teeth. And then you find a goldfish in a bowl, on your bedside cabinet. You catch the fish and eat it. The last morsel says to you, 'Why are you eating me? You could have enjoyed my beauty forever.'

And you answer the morsel, 'There are other beauties in Paradise and I'm hungry.'

'You can't starve to death at these latitudes,' says the morsel.

'I'm a fine gourmet,' you say to the morsel.

'You can't be hungry in this country,' says the morsel.

'I'm not hungry,' you say to the morsel. 'I eat for the sake of beauty. I like beautiful tastes and smells.'

'Don't you like beautiful sights and objects?' asks the morsel.

'Of course I do.'

'What about *my* beauty?'

'I prefer your *taste*.'

At first you get the feeling it is your guardian angel who covers you up with a blanket. Then you realise you're doing this yourself because you're just a baby, your own baby; no wonder you cover your baby in a blanket and nurse him, rock him back and forth until you both fall asleep. On the verge of sleep you think that neither ideas nor their absence are present in your mind and in the rest of your substance; not even an idea related to lullabies and fairy tales crosses your mind, let alone takes root in it. But this is not the eighth stage of deliverance, not yet; and one might call this an idea which pushes you beyond this state of mind in order to allow you to reach the last stage of deliverance that you don't really need because you're already fast asleep. Never mind – one day you'll wake up and recall the eighth stage and its advantages. And you'll say to yourself, 'I won't feel happy until I reach the last stage of deliverance. I wish to be delivered from the world and its evils, from temptations and faux pas, and only the last stage of my ascension is capable of performing this superhuman duty.'

'By passing quite beyond the state of "neither ideas nor the absence of ideas" he reaches (mentally) and remains in the state of mind in which both sensations and ideas have ceased to be – this is the eighth stage of deliverance.' First you reach the stage in which there are neither ideas nor their absence, but beyond this stage you'll find no stages at all and that is what counts in your life of a yogi. No more stages, no more effort, no more asceticism, no more Buddhism. You engrave 'No, No, No, No' on your floor and drink a bottle of Burgundy.

IV

Yesterday I went to Paris; for a while, I ambled down a street, stopping occasionally to look in the shop windows. Then I grew tired and returned home because it is easier to sit in front of a television set and watch a film or whatever is shown on a screen that doesn't make you walk around a city or across the Earth where you don't always meet your friends, benefactors, fans and well-wishers. The images you pay attention to succeed each other, but you remain motionless and their movements depend neither on your attention span nor on your curiosity. You may fall asleep in front of this screen of yours and the images will carry on till they've got the job finished; and no one knows when and where this job comes to an end. Perhaps never and nowhere.

In olden times there was the first man and woman and this couple gave birth to a boy because there's no future without boys, girls and children in general. But the first man and woman didn't bother about the future because they knew they were immortal; or rather, they had no fear of death, protected as they were by the Supreme Being who had told them they wouldn't die. Anyway they had a child and death had nothing to do with their decision to have children; they just wished to play with a creature of flesh and blood and there were no domestic animals in their hut and garden. The Supreme Being told them: 'When you grow old, you'll have new skins for your bodies.' So they waited for old age to come and it did come at last, judging from the number of wrinkles they had on their faces and probably elsewhere: they were not in the habit of undressing in front of their biggest mirror. Or was it a pond they consulted whenever in need of their reflections?

The Supreme Being put their new skins in a bundle and entrusted it to the Dog. The Supreme Being lived on another continent and the Dog had to make a long journey in order to convey the skins to their future owners who awaited them as they ploughed through Dante's *Vita Nuova*. The Dog went off with the bundle, but on the way he met other animals who were feasting on rice and pumpkins. Being a fine gourmet, the Dog joined them after putting down his burden. Soon he forgot about the skins because his skin was in order and he didn't really bother about other animals' skins, for he regarded humans as inferior animals. 'Shall we have a bottle of wine with dinner?' he said to a chimpanzee. 'Why not?' said the chimpanzee.

You can lead a dog to water and you can make him drink. They all had a bottle of Austrian wine and a bottle of American wine. The host's wine cellar was almost empty when a snake asked the Dog what was in his bundle. The Dog told the story of the new skins and touched upon the first people who, in his opinion, were 'last and least'. Upon hearing the story and the Dog's verdict, the Snake slipped out quietly, stole the bundle and shared out the skins with other snakes. But when a man says to a woman, 'You're a snake,' he doesn't mean the woman he is talking to will never die thanks to the new skin she received from the primordial Snake.

In whatever I do or witness, I strive to reach my essence. Actually I might replace 'my essence' by 'myself', for one doesn't reach oneself through touch or by looking at one's reflection: one just reaches one's old skin. Through the Jewish Museum I go as far as myself. My road lies underground and I realise it is an underground passage leading upwards, towards light, light, light. It isn't enough to repeat this word; and yet repetition does count, not only in the doctrine of eternal recurrence. Repetitive music thrives on repetition, needless to say, and I have often noticed that this music is more luminous than its counterparts. I even think that

any word is rendered luminous through repetition. Dark, dark, dark, dark. Death, death, death, death. Despair, despair, despair, despair. Never, never, never, never, never.

Let us take *King Lear* again. The protagonist repeats the word 'never' and says after a while:

*Do you see this? Look on her, look, her lips,
Look there, look there!*

Every woman is either Beatrice or Lady Macbeth. Cordelia is obviously a Shakespearean version of Beatrice whom Dante identifies with the Blessed Virgin, with Paradise, purity and poetry, even though poets often speak about unmanageable, headstrong women. Actually Beatrice is also unmanageable and the only way to soften her character is to identify her with the Blessed Virgin – or to kill her outright. So Dante first kills her and then puts a huge mirror in front of Mary; another star is born, another illusion.

So Lear looks at Cordelia and sees life and not death, contrary to what might be presumed. He sees *eternal* life because, as everybody knows, the Blessed Virgin is associated in our minds with Paradise and eternal life – to such an extent that we don't know much about her earthly experience which was, however, extremely important for our history and its ramifications in space and time. Why does Lear say, 'Look at her lips?' He doesn't mean to say we must be drawn to her lips through some erotic appeal or other – there are many of them in the dictionary of eroticism – but we should wait for the words she is about to utter, anxious as she is to save us from eternal fires or devils' teeth. Or do we have to look at them in order to counterbalance Judas's kiss, for Mary's kiss is located on the other side of the mirror – in relation to Judas's treacherous kiss and betrayal from the consequences of which we continue to suffer? Aren't we betrayed by our mistresses only because they all follow in Judas's footsteps? It is easier to follow in someone's footsteps than to come up with a new idea and build the Palace of Love – at least you could contribute to it by putting a few bricks in the centre of the hallowed area where the symbol of Love is to triumph sooner or later. By the way, can atheists be buried in hallowed ground? I mean those who never fall in love, on principle?

The Blessed Virgin is a source of light and Lear plunges headlong into the radiance offered by his daughter as he crosses the threshold of death and sees exactly the same light on the other side of life, on the other side of suffering. 'Light, light, light, light, light,' he repeats; he forgets the word 'might'. A few days later Albany says to one of his sisters: 'Do you remember the day when you fell in the river and I saved you from drowning? In those days, you were resolved to repeat Ophelia's exploit. I should have saved Lear from death and the Hereafter. I feel I've missed my true vocation. I'm not the Saviour, am I?' He repeats this short soliloquy over and over again. And yet he heard what Kent was saying to Edgar:

*Vex not his ghost: O! let him pass; he hates him
That would upon the rack of this tough world
Stretch him out longer.*

Why does he say so? Because if you try to hold back a dying person, you play a tug-of-war with Death himself and this is a dangerous procedure – a dog in the manger. You know your relative is doomed, but you continue to stuff pills into the mouth that no longer responds to food and drink – to life, to put it bluntly. You

don't really need your relative, for you have many aunts and uncles in the neighbourhood and you can rely on them in the event of fire or shipwreck, or bankruptcy and 'oncology', as the Russians say nowadays: they're loath to utter the word 'cancer'. Why do you need that particular relative? Are you prepared to nurse this body till doomsday in spite of the problems you have to tackle every day and every night, especially when you're unable to fall asleep? But you think that life is more precious than death; at least this world is more precious than whatever awaits you beyond it, assuming that something does await you beyond your deathbed, apart from your coffin, your tomb and your cemetery that partly belongs to you, whatever you might say on the subject. Yes, you've got some shares in this cemetery as if, after your death, you had begun to invest in stocks and shares, forgetting your principles and prudence.

Kent thinks that light is more important than the battlefield on which Lear's corpse is lying and he does all he can to prevent Albany and others from using syringes and suchlike. 'This injection will provide some temporary relief from the pain,' says a doctor.

'From death, you mean?' asks Kent.

'From death,' says the doctor.

'From light?' asks Kent.

'What light?' asks the doctor.

'Don't you know that death is light?'

The doctor doesn't know the first thing about *that* light because, whenever someone utters this word in his presence, he says to himself, 'It's a north-facing room so it doesn't get much light,' thinking about his flat where he feels cooped up even when he is outdoors, his memory being powerful and tyrannical. 'I don't think that's a very convincing argument,' says the doctor, taking a syringe out of his attaché case. Kent says to him:

The wonder is he hath endur'd so long:

He but usurp'd his life.

'Do you mean to say he should have died earlier?' asks the doctor.

'He was waiting for Cordelia's demise,' said Kent.

I, for one, don't understand why Kent speaks of Lear's life which, at the end of Act V, was almost completely usurped by his death, and whatever remained of it wouldn't have been worth our attention, but for the words Lear uttered as he was passing away. Never, never, never, never, never. Lips, lips, lips, lips, lips. Mary, Mary, Mary, Mary, Mary. Dante, Dante, Dante, Dante, Dante. Did Kent mean *light*? He but usurp'd his *light*? Or was he speaking about death? In this case, he might have said: 'He usurp'd his life.' Why 'but'? Or does everybody blame death at this point? For what? Of course we are in the habit of blaming death for practically every mistake we make as we plod through the mud of life. (Did I mention the mud of life at the beginning of this novel?) But death didn't enjoin you to declare war on the Duke of Cornwall and his team. Britain and France declared war on Germany in 1939 as a result of the invasion of Poland and no one blames death on what followed. We just blame Hitler and curse warmongers, bellicose statements and politicians – Chamberlain, in particular.

What to do with bad writers? They betray your ideals and humanity, but no private detective would ever tail them in his car because their bad styles doesn't leave them open to blackmail. Their books are read by thousands and you don't dare criticise them for fear of being rebuked by other nonentities: they flock together and it is hard to overcome such a flock. You can't say to the common reader:

*See't shalt thou never. Fellows, hold the chair.
Upon these eyes of thine I'll set my foot.*

Of course you can say it; and you're even allowed to gouge out the common reader's eyes. But this reader will buy an audio-book and you'll have to turn your attention to his or her ears – and their progeny's ears. 'Out, vile eardrums! Where is thy music now?' It is better to let the great Gods help you in this undertaking. The construction of beautiful worlds is a large and complex undertaking, I must admit.

In 1968, a Russian submarine sank to the bottom of the Pacific and the Russians or rather the Soviet government didn't immediately recognise the seriousness of the problems that the military were facing in the historical context. They thought only in terms of cold war and sailors didn't count in this particular context because human life was less important in the Soviet Union than the so-called motherland. And our motherland cared neither about mothers nor fathers, and children always felt supplanted in their parents' affections when Stalin would appear on the mausoleum.

The Americans found the submarine where a few corpses seemed to await them as if they knew the Soviet rescuers would never touch them, let alone bring them to the light of day and God. When asked about the lost submarine, the Soviet authorities replied, 'All our submarines are at home.'

'And what about your sailors?'

'They're at home too. Their motto is "conjugal happiness".'

'Do you think corpses can be happy?'

'Of course they can, provided that you leave them alone.'

The captain's wife asked if she could bury her husband's body and a high official said to her, 'Your conjugal life is less important than the life of our motherland.' Today on Russian TV they show a beautiful actress who talks to you about the most important thing: at least that's how the Russians call this programme devoted to one's health, not to one's motherland. Is Russia more important for me than my health? I don't think there are many Russians for whom their motherland is more important than their bowels, stomachs, hearts, eyes, lungs and so on. And they may go on for hours and hours as they talk about their aches and headaches, about their imaginary cancers and the Alzheimer's patients some of whom are their cousins and sisters-in-law.

Scientists think it unlikely that any species will actually become extinct as a consequence of the oil spill. You hear on the radio, 'Reports are just coming in of a major oil spillage in the North Sea,' and you say to yourself that it doesn't concern you in the least because you live in the South, not far from Nice or Cannes or Majorca. And a few years later some species actually become extinct as a consequence of this oil spill because these species are allergic to oil spills and to oil in general.

Consequences, consequences. For the moment you don't suffer from anything, even though you'd better not eat too much sugar that may contaminate your brain and influence your writing that depends on your brain, on sugar and other chemicals strewn around our bodies and inside it. A few years elapse and you realise you're not what you used to be on account of the errors you make all the time, and I'm not talking about typing errors which may be overlooked – at least within the framework of this sentence. And your legs go numb for no reason at all. You don't say to yourself, 'I've been sitting with my legs crossed for so long, my right leg has gone numb' because you never lie to yourself. And you know only too well that you haven't been sitting with your legs crossed for hours and hours: you're not in the habit of indulging in such a pastime. And you don't say to yourself, 'My legs are tired after so much walking' because you're at home and you haven't walked since the snow began to fall and cover the landscape you can see out of your window.

In a newspaper I saw Peter Falk who was walking down or up the street and obviously had no idea what street his feet were exploring so assiduously, so relentlessly. 'Where am I?' he shouted and a well-read passer-by said to himself, 'He'll soon play King Lear instead of Colombo. He's learning the part.' Peter Falk shouted again, 'Where am I?' The passer-by, who was a professional prompter, whispered, 'Fair daylight?'

'What?' said Peter Falk, turning his head.

'Fair daylight? I am mightily abus'd.'

'I am,' said Falk.

'I should e'en die with pity –'

'I don't want to die,' said Falk.

'Do you know where you are?' asked the passer-by.

'On Earth.'

'And where's the Earth?'

'In the universe.'

'And where's the universe?'

'In a parallel world.'

'Parallel to what?'

'To *my* world,' said Falk.

Suppose King Lear picks up a few pins and rolls up his sleeves. 'Don't prick yourself on those pins,' says Kent. But Lear wants to find out if he is mad or not. If he feels one of the pins prick and puncture his skin, he is not mad. If he doesn't, then Kent and the scholars are right. Of course his arms are numb with cold and even I wouldn't feel anything if I spent a few hours on that heath in Act III of the tragedy. As to King Lear's condition, I've written a lot of pages on the subject and I still don't know anything about *my* condition, roots and the future to which I'm already partly exposed, given that I continue to live.

Whenever I look for an envelope in my desk drawers I invariably get sidetracked by some old letters, photographs, postcards, greetings, meetings and so on. My investigation to which I have already devoted so many pages sidetracks me into idle and superfluous enquiries à la Descartes: I doubt my very existence and hastily replace the Almighty with an evil spirit or the Devil. He immediately turns the tables on his rival – alias God – with allegations of corruption and my wits begin to turn.

I saw a programme on the children they call indigo because they see auras around human faces and live in several worlds at once, proving once and for all that the world we live in is not the only world accessible to human beings, let alone to extraterrestrial creatures. They also saw the end of Atlantis and they paint this end as best they can to show us how it all happened as if we really needed *their* examples to learn the way out of our labyrinths. Their mothers say to us, 'My daughter never took piano lessons in her childhood. She just sat down at the piano and played. She can play something for you now.' Her daughter plays her work entitled *The End of Atlantis* and everybody cries; and yet the work is mediocre and doesn't merit our approval, let alone our tears, exclamations, good reviews and laurel wreaths. But the quality of these children's works does not count; what counts is the fact they used to play the piano in their former lives. What does it matter *how* they played the piano before the Big Bang, before the overture to the opera *Creation* began to resound throughout the universe?

They demonstrate how the end of Atlantis sounded and we see its end; and we don't regret the disappearance of this fabulous country because it was neither beautiful nor harmonious. What a pity it's no longer just a figment of our imagination which is capable of painting masterpieces, provided we don't entrust our children with the knowledge we receive in the course of the years spent in conservatoires and universities. If we say to them, 'You should read Plato – he speaks of Atlantis,' they paint a horrible picture and spoil everything, including our heritage: Plato is no longer Plato, given our offspring's inability to understand the beauty of his thoughts. I am understandably reluctant to do anything that might spoil the harmonious relations between the past and the present; that's why I have no children.

The hostess welcomes several children; they play, sing and talk about their former lives, about the people they can cure by a mere glance connected to the remotest stars. 'Everyone has the same power,' says a 14-year-old girl.

'What do I have to do?' asks the hostess.

'You should believe in God and pray. You should open your heart and body to God.'

'If you didn't say that, you would be burnt at the stake as a witch,' says a clergyman.

'We no longer live in the Middle Ages,' says the hostess.

'But she lives in one of her former lives,' says the clergyman pointing at the teenager.

'There have always been children like that,' says a historian.

'It's not true,' says the hostess. 'That's why we call them indigo. They're bringing light to the Earth. They belong to the new world. Let's call it "the new light world".'

'Why don't you pay attention to the *quality* of their works?'

'Can we judge other worlds, other cultures? They're neither primitive nor barbarian. They're better than our species, our museums.'

'Let them cure us, but it is Plato who'll take care of our brains, not their fairy tales.'

'Our children we'll be better than we are,' says the hostess.

'Why are you so eager to admit you're mediocre?' asks the scientist.

'Can't you give birth to another Plato?' asks a philosopher. 'I'd sacrifice a few years of my life for an opportunity to talk to him.'

'It's better to have Plato than an extraterrestrial,' says the historian.

‘It’s better to have Jesus Christ than an extra-terrestrial,’ says the clergyman. ‘And no extra-terrestrial virgin could give birth to Jesus Christ.’

If a child rings my bell, I will not open the door, and I’ll say to him, ‘Go to Atlantis.’ Well, I’ll let her in on condition that she doesn’t paint anything inside my house; nor should she sing. In other words, I’ll tolerate her presence insofar as it can be instrumental in curing me from diabetes, rheumatism and the disease I can’t name – and I’m not hinting at homosexuality. In short, I’ll use only a minuscule portion of her presence; the rest will be excluded from both my life and house, even if she insists that she needs the whole of her substance to cure me from death. ‘If I don’t paint death, I won’t be able to cure you of it,’ she may point out.

‘You may paint it, but don’t show me the fruit of your inspiration.’

‘If I don’t show it to you, you won’t be cured.’

‘All right, I’ll cast a glance at it. And then I’ll throw you an angry and reproving glance.’

‘If you do that, you won’t be cured.’

‘All right, I won’t do anything of the kind.’

‘You’ll say instead, “It’s a masterpiece.”’

‘That’s your idea and what you say goes, provided you can cure me.’

‘I’ll sing an aria entitled *Death*.’

‘I’m sure it’s a masterpiece.’

There are fathers and mothers in our monasteries and from now on I’ll call our mothers *mathushki*, for the sake of clarity: after all, we’re not dealing with Goethe’s Mothers. One of these mathushki suffered from cataracts and she told her fathushka she was going to undergo an operation in a Moscow clinic – a routine operation that doesn’t seem to require extreme circumspection. But the fathushka said she shouldn’t go to Moscow because this operation wasn’t on his agenda – or on God’s agenda, for that matter. ‘And don’t say to me it’s on *your* agenda,’ he rounded off.

Despite harsh criticism, the mothushka was sticking to her guns on this issue and the fathushka had to put his foot down. He put his foot down, but the mothushka continued to insist that the operation couldn’t harm her because everyone was undergoing such operations now and nobody complained about the outcomes. ‘More and more women are choosing to go under the knife to improve their appearance,’ said the fathushka.

‘I don’t care about my appearance,’ said the mothushka.

‘But you do care about appearances, don’t you?’ said the fathushka.

‘How do you mean?’

‘As far as I know, cataracts are a disease in which an area of the eye becomes cloudy so that a person cannot see correctly. Is that correct?’

‘It is.’

‘So you want to see correctly. Is that correct?’

‘It is.’

‘What do you want to see correctly?’

‘The beauty of the world.’

‘The beauty of the world is in God’s eyes. Can’t you see God’s eyes correctly? If you pray continually, you’ll have no spiritual cataracts. Kneel down and pray! An appropriate operation, the best you can undergo.’

The mothushka knelt down and prayed to God, asking Him to guide the surgeon’s hand and make her eye as submissive to His will as is consistent with our eyes’ capacity to respond to God’s grace. She went to the clinic and also under the knife, hoping to improve the beauty of the world. ‘I love the beauty and fruitfulness of the autumn, when the whole countryside is ablaze with rich golden colours’ was her last thought. She died under the knife, as the Russians say and do so often. When the fathushka heard about it, he knelt down and prayed, asking God to forgive the presumptuous woman and forget her cataracts on the grounds that no one suffers from them in heaven. ‘Why should the elect remember their suffering?’ he said as he rose to his feet and went outdoors. While heading for the garden, he said to himself and to God, ‘Keeping a garden tidy is a full-time job.’

‘I’m going to clip the hedge this weekend,’ he said to himself, determined not to bother God with trifles. ‘This variety of rose is especially hardy and drought-resistant,’ he said to himself as he reached the nearest rosebush. ‘All the rose bushes seem to be suffering from the same mysterious malady,’ he said to himself, touching a few roses. He looked up and repeated the sentence: he wanted God to hear him. The fathushka can cure humans but roses are beyond his ken. And your knowledge should be awe-inspiring if you wish to cure God’s creatures, be they plants, animals or higher animals.

Recently I went to *my* clinic because the mothushka’s problem had a lot of affinities with mine except that I didn’t die under the knife because my cataracts or body were at that point slightly different from those of the mothushka who must have been even older than I am. Knives know what to do and whenever they come across infirmities they make mistakes which are usually fatal to those lying under them; and you can’t lie *above* a knife, as far as I know.

I don’t think I prayed before the operation, but sometimes you pray without knowing it and your unconscious prayer goes straight to God’s heart, contrary to what many ecclesiastics think and advocate. They say, ‘You should pray out loud, otherwise God won’t hear your prayers. You should kneel down, otherwise God won’t *see* your prayers.’ But God hears and sees everything down to the prayers you know nothing about and probably these prayers count more than the ones you say on your knees in front of altars, icons and suchlike. Othello’s proverbial question can’t be answered at once, for Desdemona has to take into consideration her unconscious to answer it correctly and with dignity. ‘Did you pray?’

‘My unconscious might have prayed without my knowing it. Just give me five minutes – I’ll question my unconscious on the spot.’

‘On your pillow, you mean?’

‘Yes, on my pillow.’

‘I give you two minutes.’

‘My unconscious is as big as the universe.’

‘Ask the Americans to help you,’ says Othello.

My unconscious must be very small; at least its museum doesn’t house the biggest collection of Oedipus complexes in Europe. But I’m looking for prayers, not for Oedipus and his wife, his mother and other members of his household. What is a prayer? Heidegger wrote a book entitled *What is Metaphysics?* He said nothing about prayers, as far as I know. He said, however, something to the effect that only God could help us in the long run or on the spot, on the spur of the moment, in the heat of the moment. God doesn’t *always* help us, but He *can* do

it occasionally and whenever such a thing does happens – a great boon to our species – this thing or deed usually happens in the *heat* of the moment and not after much soul-searching, which doesn't mean the Almighty has no soul. It just means that He doesn't have to search in order to find; Picasso knew it perfectly and showed his knowledge of God's impenetrable ways when he said, 'I don't search, I find.'

'I hope I won't die under the knife.' Is this a prayer? It is rather the simplest and clumsiest expression of a hope. Of course you can say to yourself, 'We have to hope and pray that the operation will go well' and you hope all right, but you forget to pray. It's not enough to say, 'I have to pray': you have to utter your prayer or rather the words that sustain it through your ordeal. You can pray for deliverance from your sins, but the chief thing is to focus your prayer on the forthcoming operation and on the knife already hanging in the air like a falcon. You can say to yourself and others, 'Let us pray for those who are not as fortunate as ourselves.' Any prayer is liable to help a man who must spend a few minutes under a knife. Yet any wretch, however pitiful and miserable, can say to you, 'My eyesight is perfect and I can see the bridge under which I sleep every night. Do you see the knife under which you're lying in this clinic? Isn't your vision impaired? Health is more important than money or our motherland and eyes are an important part of our health. Do you want to live in Breughel's ditch?'

Someone said, 'Why should you bother about your eyesight? There's nothing to see.' I might have said that in my youth; and yet when I was young, I wished to see a lot. Alas, my eyesight didn't allow me to enjoy the visible world to the utmost because I suffered from short-sightedness and in those days no one was able to take a knife and remove it from my eyes to enable me to enjoy Creation and fall in love with God at last. I was in love with God and if you're *really* in love, you give yourself over to this feeling one hundred per cent: love is designed to cause the maximum amount of damage or happiness. I don't think I would have been happier had I seen *everything* down to insects and specks of dust that are also God's creatures and should therefore be respected and worshipped: dust and humans ought to be able to compete for life on an equal footing. That's why they say, 'Ashes to ashes', meaning one shouldn't forget the French Revolution's precepts, and equality was one of them, if I remember rightly unless I'm talking about the Russian Revolution now. All revolutions look and sound alike and no wonder you often confuse them as you bend over your writing desk and look at the pictures where you meet hangmen and gallows from which there hang bodies you cannot identify. 'Is it Mussolini?' you ask yourself and you go on leafing through the book without waiting for an answer.

Of course you must see God: 'If you live in this world, God is a must,' they say, pointing at the nearest church and its belfry; and usually the bells start ringing as if in response to their advice because some people need confirmation and proof without which they can't believe in God. 'Do you hear God?' asks your benefactor as she cocks an ear and raises an eyebrow.

'Yes, I do,' you answer.

'So you don't need your eyesight, do you?'

Well, I see much better now. I can watch TV without saying to myself, 'I see only half of what one's supposed to see when watching this documentary on Angkor.' I can also leaf through the books I recently bought in Paris to get acquainted with contemporary painters who often elude my attention on account of their shallowness and facile ways. When you look at their installations, sculptures or paintings, you say to yourself, 'As easy as a pie.' And when you look at a pie, you say to yourself, 'As easy as Jeff Koons.' And Jeff Koons says, 'I don't believe that you can create art. But I believe what will lead you to art is to trust in yourself, follow

your interests and focus on your interests. That will take you to a very metaphysical state.’ Koons focuses on his interests and his admirers open their wallets which can be exhibited along with Koons’ masterpieces – in the same museum and hall. Koons exhibits a cracked egg and everyone realises it is a metaphysical egg that reveals to us the secret mechanisms on which our desires rely as they come to the fore and look around in search of appropriate objects. They see an egg and say to themselves, ‘That’s what we want. But we don’t want an ordinary egg one can buy anywhere. We need a metaphysical egg created by Koons.’

My desire looks at Glenn Brown’s pictures, especially at the one entitled *Youth, Beautiful Youth* where you meet an old man who seems to punch himself on the nose or on all the Christian cheeks he can boast of, and you realise you’re not as old as all that, otherwise you wouldn’t write anything about your soul and metaphysical fears. Yes, you’re King Lear who wishes to get rid of his cares to devote his life to the pursuit of pleasure and ladies to whose charms a lot of roads lead on condition that you have nothing else to do and that your purse is full of money. A conscientious monarch doesn’t give his kingdom to his relatives on the pretext of needing more time for his studies and prayers that anyway resound in his room and in the church to which he goes every day to confess his sins and ask if they can be forgotten rather quickly – before another stroke or heart attack. ‘I don’t know if I’ll be able to pray after another stroke so I humbly ask Thee to erase my new sins from Thy Book of Life, otherwise I may end up in Purgatory.’ The only desire the monarch hearkens to, if he decides to turn his attention to life instead of putting his signature to the decrees on which his kingdom is founded, is related to lust and the energy he needs to conquer women and men alike. He becomes homosexual and probes into the secrets of what is usually called ‘the other side of sexuality’, and his youthful disposition surprises whoever comes across him in the course of his wanderings.

So Glenn Brown’s old man punches himself on the nose to indicate it is time to wake up and choose youth instead of the second childhood to which they shepherd you so as not to allow you to rule the country with an iron fist. ‘The power behind the throne’ is not just an expression one chances upon in dictionaries; it is a slice of life and any life, however insignificant, is full of such slices. You don’t have a throne to speak of and yet you hear yourself repeat again and again, ‘Don’t let anyone bully you into doing something you don’t want to do.’ Why do you repeat this sentence day in day out? You may say to yourself that you talk nonsense because you can’t talk otherwise, but there’s no smoke without fire and soon you begin to feel this fire everywhere, and you can even *see* it because three weeks ago a skilful knife removed a cataract from your left eye.

Your friends and relatives say, ‘You should calm down. You’re too old to court young women and let boys share your ideals and intellectual delights. Why not devote your time to meditation and charity? We know you don’t have much money, but whatever you have can be given to the poor because the divide between rich and poor countries is continuing to grow. And many people come from those countries. Of course you don’t have to meet these people, let alone give them money. Don’t forget that there are poor people in your own country as well, in your motherland and fatherland. Even in your uncleland there are many poor people. And we live in your uncleland. We are your aunts and uncles, brothers and sisters. Do you know what Stalin said to the Soviet citizens in 1941? “Brothers and sisters.” And you’re much better than Stalin who was a criminal, by the way. And you’re not a criminal because you’re a benefactor of humanity. And we represent humanity in your room. We’re not your ungrateful daughters – don’t confuse us with Goneril and Regan. Or with Reagan. We won’t spend your money on Star Wars and other military games.’

You don't give anything to anybody; you enjoy yourself like a young man, going to restaurants with young women who believe that the old are much younger than the young on account of their intellectual energy and manifold interests. You write poems and say to a young lady: 'I'd like to meet your parents and ask them for your hand in marriage.'

'Please lie down and make yourself comfortable – we don't stand on ceremony here,' she says and submissively you lie down. She also lies down and you spend some time without moving a finger or anything else because you feel comfortable and joyful. 'Speak for yourself!' says your bride-to-be and once again you punch yourself on the nose. 'Speak for yourself and speak *to* yourself about how to help me out of my sexual predicament,' she says.

'You're allowed to remain motionless if a beautiful young woman happens to be lying by your side. Don't push me into stripping your clothes off – acting with precipitation is *not* my cup of tea. You need to be taught some manners.' That's how you begin your interior monologue, but the young lady is impatient and she knows that your interior and exterior monologues may last forever, if no one interferes, putting one's foot down. But what *are* you supposed to do? You can't recall the next episode of this saga, but you do recall another picture you saw in a section devoted to Glenn Brown. This picture owes its title – *The Great Masturbator* – to a work by Dali; yet the image is based on Murillo's *Laughing Body with a Feather-Adorned Headdress*.

You're in no mood for laughing so you can't take your cue from him – at least not in the domain of laughter. You say to yourself that some laugh when facing disasters and tragedies in the wake of which they may lose their wives and lives. But you don't run any risk of this kind, given that you're lying in bed and the blanket you pull round you whenever you feel cold hides another body – that of a young woman you may get married to if everything goes smoothly. At this point you realise that nothing goes smoothly because the young lady in question slips out of the room after leaving her absence under the blanket where she must be conspicuous by her presence. You have no alternative but to recall the title of Glenn Brown's picture; and this title conveys you to the halcyon days of your youth where you recover a few lost treasures which might have remained lost forever, had the young lady stayed in your room. Luckily for you, she is already in the streets of the city you hardly know because it is the heart you're interested in, not the streets and squares where one sees only legs and faces, arms and armpits.

Some of our philosophers put God to sleep – Spinoza and Epicurus are in the front line of these anaesthetists – for they thought we could hold our heads high even after devastating wars and bitter feuds over land. So we held our heads high as we perished here and there, leaving no trace of our sojourn on the Earth either in the books destined for our offspring or in the solar system whose citizens were watching our planet in the hope of finding a sign of life and prosperity. And then we began to pray, saying to God, 'We won't be able to hold out much longer under this sort of bombardment. Fate bombards us with diseases, droughts, famines and hail as if heaven had run out of manna, sausages, hamburgers, sundaes and Coke. Is your hail better than our Coke? We don't think so. Our acid drops, fruit drops and honey drops are also better than your hail. Do you think we're stupid enough to mistake it for the Holy Grail?'

But God was already fast asleep, according to Benoit XVI; He couldn't hear our voices and hearts that spoke even louder than our voices. 'Let us hear the words of the prophet Isaiah on the coming of the Prince of Peace,' said our prophet. We heard Isaiah's words, but the Prince of Peace didn't come. Instead, it was the Prince of War we had to welcome in our abodes, in our huts where a few King Lear's had taken refuge in expectation of the storm about which Tom speaks so eloquently in Shakespeare's play: 'The foul fiend bites my back. There will be widespread showers of rain, hail and sleet. Whenever the foul fiend bites my back, King Lear goes mad. Driving snow and sleet brought more problems to the county's roads last night.'

Thus spoke the Pope, 'We are in a castle and someone knocks at the gate of our castle. We should interrupt our dinner and go to the gate to find out who is knocking on it at this ungodly hour. "Ungodly hour" doesn't mean that God forsook this hour some time ago because God never forsakes us. After all, we are not His children. It would be presumptuous of us to think we *are* his sons and daughters. What I wish to convey comes down to this: We shouldn't rest on our laurels. Actually there are no laurels to speak of, but never mind, never mind. Someone is knocking on our gates and doors. Is this death, fate, God, the Devil? It would be presumptuous of me to comment on the matter. All I know is that we have been criticised for failing to heed warnings about the lack of safety routines. What are these safety routines? You should put Christ in your lives – and not on the outskirts of your lives, mind you. Christ should always stand in the centre, for He is the centrepiece of the Earth.'

Not everybody knows that fighting selfishness efficiently means to live *inside* the Other, no matter how difficult such an undertaking may appear at first glance. You look at the Other and then you look at yourself in a mirror, and you say to yourself, 'I'll never be able to stay within the Other, let alone live in that body I see from the outside. Actually this body is smaller than mine and I wonder how one could live inside it, considering that no one's eager to live in a cramped house.' But then you realise you *could* live inside the Other, even if the body you have in mind (and partly in your body) was as small as a pea: what matters is your *spiritual* attitude towards the body you see in front of you and in your mirror.

This is the first step you should take: you look at yourself in a mirror and see you're not alone because someone else is reflected in it and this person stands by your side. All you have to do next is say to yourself you're this mirror and a lot of families can be housed inside your body in permanent accommodation. And then you say to yourself that the mirror where everybody is reflected is the Church and therefore you're the Church too: the Church, the Pope, Jesus Christ and His apostles, the Blessed Virgin and Beatrice, Dante and Virgil, Alexander Pope and Homer.

There are no motorways in human life; there are only folds or *plis* along which we walk as we try to decipher the handwriting of our youth and former lives. It is the same handwriting and we catch sight of it now and then, but we are unable to understand what the letters and sentences mean and we remain in the dark as if only night had been decreed on the Earth at the outset of the Big Bang.

Make a fold across the centre of a picture and this picture will look like a memory, not like a picture you find on a wall as you walk along the walls of a museum where many Madonnas greet you and promise the Promised Land.

It is not easy to find your childhood because it never lies in wait for you, even if you eat a few madeleines and fiddle with your shoes until you're ready to drop. If you go through your room, you may find a scrap of paper on the floor or even under your bed and you immediately think about your cat who likes playing with balls and letters, leaving books and other heavy objects in peace. You pick the scrap up and start reading whatever is written on it, but you don't think, 'This is my childhood' because your childhood doesn't depend on your memory, however bright and large; and even this memory is elusive and slips through your fingers whenever you pick it up. You'll never find that time or time in general: in this domain you can't find anything unless they hypnotise you and say, 'You see your mother, your cradle and hear your favourite lullaby.' You don't hear anything except your own steady or heavy breathing. You can hear the sound of heavy breathing as you slowly climb the stairs and you always climb them, even if you're determined to stay in bed for a week.

I look for my childhood in my chest of drawers where I might have put a few letters, a few loves I don't recall or keep at bay, using my favourite expression: 'to keep at bay', 'to keep at bay'. And then I change my mind and plunge headlong into the past, but the past doesn't seem to accept me on my terms; it rejects me and I travel through the stars in search of a paradise I can't find because it is related to my childhood, to the whole of my life that should be exhibited in the museum of eternal recurrence. Yes, I accept my life and I wish to live it once again – as many times as necessary to feel happy in the Hereafter and also in this world where nothing happens.

I had no tutors and my grandmother told me no stories because I had too many stories in my head and my parents were preoccupied on account of their number: they thought I should pay more attention to *real* life. And of course whenever you say 'reality', you add 'whatever that is' as you open a book lying in your lap as if to demonstrate that reality is a multiple-choice test.

All right, I agree with you because you must be right; and even if you're wrong, I agree with you, unwilling as I am to waste my time on sterile talk and stupid folk. Getting both sides to agree is always a notable achievement and I'm pleased to announce our harmony, showing our mutual wavelength to the whole world and even to the solar system that has nothing against agreements and universal peace. But don't ask me to *communicate* with you, reaching out to local communities, global villages and cities where people identify with literary characters and buy the gadgets used by Mary and John in the course of their sexual activities. Anyway you can't afford the wines I drink; it is pointless to call hotels and motels, hoping to experience what I go through while writing this chronicle. No guided tour will ever bring you closer to my writings unless you visit the Jewish Museum in Berlin with a view to spending a year in its basement. A true idea must agree with that of which it is the idea and my ideas agree with this basement and the openings through which a ray of sunshine comes and goes as it explores our history, souls and the future.

As one might put it, my *authentic* life can be conceived as not existing all the more naturally since I feel only *artificial* lives as they come and go, filling up my house and even the streets where I don't walk: artificial lives are omnipresent. I think about the remotest corner of the world and one of my selves goes there as if I had something to do with this corner where only my thoughts sojourn; but when they do, my eyes brighten up, judging from the mirrors I have in my possession.

Do I write all this to prove I accept the doctrine of eternal recurrence? A month ago I wrote about mimicry and the insignia I assume, whenever exposed to the light of day. I wrote about it differently, but does the wording really matter? What counts is the subject matter I explore as I continue to probe into the mysteries I don't care about – in the final analysis, so to speak. I analyse them as long as my patience allows me to do so without subjecting my body to stress-related illnesses. At some point I meet the final analysis that says to me, 'You are what you are and you should go to Hell, assuming that you know where it is.'

So once again I'm dealing with mirrors and the doctrine of eternal recurrence which is a mirror in its own right, given that it reflects you throughout time – not necessarily *your* lifetime – leaving your vestiges here and there, in Brussels, on Jupiter and even in Versailles where you write about your selves.

Did I also write about a disturbing lack of unity? Do a global search for 'unity' and replace it with 'chaos'. According to my global search, I wrote about unity neither a month ago nor even in my childhood when I must have felt this lack for the first time. No such luck! What does 'global search' mean in the context, I wonder? Did I search for unity on Jupiter?

Nor did I write about what is defined as 'negative hallucination'. Naively I thought there were only *positive* hallucinations in my lives, within my egos and superegos. I'm requested to fetch something from the far corner of my room. 'We hypnotise you and inform you that there's no furniture in the room,' says Freud.

'What did you do with my furniture?' I ask.

'We put it on Jupiter. Don't you wish to settle there?'

I don't walk straight to that corner where something awaits my hands and also my attention, my loving care, my love. To avoid the furniture, I take a carefully plotted route. I know there's no furniture in my room, but there are lots of traps and complexes that lie in wait for me on carpets, on non-existent beds. They also hang on the walls – like pictures of Oscar Wilde's hero who has 'to swing'. Well, this fellow can't *swing* on my wall; he just *hangs* there. Peace and quiet. Why should you swing? You are not on a swing, are you?

There are also my other identities in the room where I head for that corner in which nothing and no one await me – neither my father nor my mother. They're dead and so can't be murdered, devoured and buried. What do you bury if you devour your father? A few bones? You are not a dog, are you? Well, you can hide his bones – just in case. Let's call it 'burial'. And they'll write about it in the 24th century: 'From the findings in the grave, and the location, we are confident that this is a Roman burial.'

Well, I do my best to maintain a false appearance of coherence and completeness. For instance, last night I began to write a diary because I know for sure that this diary is written by one person and this person is myself, whatever they say or do. Of course there are other identities in the room I cross in search of a bottle of wine or a steak and these identities need a few pieces of furniture to feel comfortable within the space allotted to them by God or Freud or Lacan or myself who may assume yet another identity in order to deal with my identities and their furniture. They're reluctant to sit down on the floor. I put a few armchairs in the room from which Freud and Lacan have removed the furniture, anxious as they were to test my capacity to walk from one end of the

room to another without falling prey to negative hallucinations. Well, they received a negative answer to their request: I did *not* walk straight to that corner where the Oedipus Complex awaited me. Freud speaks mainly about this complex and I suppose he must have put it in that corner before asking me to cross the empty room. And Lacan speaks mainly about language where everything is born, down to stars and idiots who talk for the sake of talking and never stop because they think that if they stop, they'll die a natural death.

Here are a few entries from my diary:

I should pay homage to the fantasy of fragmentation. Apparently it can be found beneath the more celebrated fantasy of castration. They castrate me and scoff at my fragments. This diary is a collection of these fragments.

My real body is in pieces. So is my mind. I'll give you a piece of my mind. Here it is. Can't you see it? Can't you smell it? Can't you touch it? You should eat it. Like it or lump it.

In paranoia we can witness a sort of decomposition. I witness it. I am the only witness for the prosecution of paranoia. My fantasy of castration is now above the fantasy of fragmentation I'm always speaking about. Last night these fantasies made love for the first time. Castration should always lie above fragmentation, otherwise they won't sleep together. Castration seems to suffer from a superiority complex.

'The truth of the ego emerges precisely in madness where the world seems to dissolve and the difference between self and other is radically put in question.' This is Lacan's diary, not mine. Here's my entry: *'I've found nothing except a farrago of lies.' Is there any significant difference in quality between these two items? What's the difference between an ape and a monkey?*

'It is in paranoia that we can see so clearly the components, the steps which go to make up the relation to the world which madness can remind us of.' My madness reminds me of nothing except itself. I mean, my madness reminds me of my madness. Does it remind me of the world? Not in the least. And what about the steps they talk about? This diary is a step. The end of this diary is another step. In my childhood I often heard the word which reminds me now of the word 'step', for it sounded thus: 'Two-step.' Isn't that a dance? You take one step. Then you take another step. You dance and your life goes on. Of course it is a Totentanz or a danse macabre. Anyway it is better to dance than to lie on a deathbed, waiting for a priest, a gravedigger and a wreath.

Have I thought about the problem from every viewpoint? I don't think I have really thought about it for the simple reason that I don't know what kind of problem I'm dealing with, although almost everything seems to suggest the word 'identity' as the key to success or failure. Lacan says there are many languages and we are not likely to use all of them at the same time, and even if we devote our whole life to these languages and their usages, we'll speak only some of them, considering how numerous and intricate they are. You can't learn a language overnight: some of these psychoanalysis-born languages are more complex than Chinese and Double Dutch.

For reasons best known to myself, last night I chose madness as a means by which I could communicate with the world and its suburbs where so many people live and enjoy themselves as they go to cinemas and theatres, cafés and nightclubs. All this takes place in the suburbs of the world, but people don't care about where

they enjoy their pleasures – as long as they're allowed to enjoy themselves without being taken into police custody.

Some say it's easier to communicate with lunatics because you don't have to *organise* your discourse upon the nature of life after death: What else can one speak about in the vale of tears? You just say whatever comes into your head and your lunatics nod their heads, saying, 'We'd like to live in the Hereafter. Where could we buy our tickets? We'll never give them back – we are not the Karamazovs.' You open your attaché case and, right on cue, a lot of tickets appear in front of the audience as if to say, 'Welcome to Paradise. Of course we are just cinema tickets. But did you hear about the Cinema Paradiso? Well, it's better than your lunatic asylum.'

There are other languages in Lacan's attaché case and one of them is linked to one's mother who doesn't keep silent during her last months of pregnancy, ignoring her doctor's advice: 'Don't talk! Your child hears everything. And whatever you say will play an important if not decisive role in your child's existence. Have you ever seen a dead sheep covered with swarms of flies? Your child is the dead sheep I'm speaking of, but instead of flies her body is covered with swarms of words. By the way, why did you want to have a daughter? Never mind. What counts is the words you covered your daughter's body with. Your daughter literally *swims* in your words, saying to herself, "I was just left to sink or swim." Your daughter doesn't want to sink; she has no alternative but to swim. Logical, isn't it?'

My mother read a lot during her pregnancy; and she continued to read after my birth, judging by the number of poems she recited by heart when speaking to my cradle where I listened to my mother and Pushkin. My mother always read poetry out loud: I must have heard a lot of poems in her womb, which might explain why I am still a voracious reader of novels, poems, essays and Icelandic sagas.

During the last months of her pregnancy, my mother must have recited a few excerpts from *Njal's Saga*: 'Hrafn the Red was chased into a river, and there he seemed to see down into the depths of Hell itself, with devils trying to drag him down. He said, "Your dog has run twice to Rome already, Saint Peter, and would do it a third time if you allowed it." Then the devils released him and he managed to reach the other bank of the river.' I still don't know why Hrafn the Red speaks of Saint Peter's dog, but what counts is his release from the devils' clutches. I wish I could get rid of them as efficiently as the ancient hero.

'Brodur was taken alive. Ulf Hreda slit open his belly and unwound his intestines from his stomach by leading him round and round an oak-tree; and Brodir did not die before they had all been pulled out of him.' My intestines have been unwound – not all of them, not all of them, not completely. And I won't die before they manage to pull all of them out of my body.

And what about the bliss I experience whenever I recite a poem in Russian, imitating my mother's voice and manners? Sometimes I do it in front of my biggest mirror which reflects not only my present state and mind, but also my past frolics and the ecstasies stored within my body, its own memory, its personal Treasure Island. The Russian language is obviously the root I'm looking for, but what can *one* root accomplish on the Earth where my personal tree of life should stand and show my vitality, my capacity to survive a sleepless night, a nervous breakdown? It is true that I've already felled a great number of trees to provide space for other lives and moods, for other poems and problems. So what? That is what life is about, I suppose: you have to renew your experience every day, otherwise you die – and not necessarily in your sleep, contrary to your hopes and great

expectations. Why have we got all these days and nights? Why not enjoy one eternal day, an uninterrupted flow of light which is the most tangible proof of God's existence? Who would dare to doubt God's existence if we could rely on light and its benefits round the clock? We wouldn't need electricity and other sources of energy, would we? Solar energy, I'm told, is far more powerful and efficient than the nuclear industry that we can no longer trust, according to the Green Party and its loud-mouthed members. Of course we still don't know how to use it and what instruments are appropriate for the taming of the beams to which we owe the beauty of the world, its transparency and closeness: the nocturnal sky is so inaccessible and aloof.

OBJECTS

The object l? Loss, loss, loss. One man's loss is another man's gain. I wonder whose gain I am writing about. Lossky. A Russian philosopher, if I remember rightly. I wonder how many times he felt a sense of loss in the course of his wanderings through the vale of tears. There was a rock group I never admired, but I still recall its name which began with blood or tears and I think there was another word at the end of this name. *The object b, the object t.*

Apparently fame in the world of rock and pop is largely ephemeral, but whenever I see pop singers either in newspapers or on the screen of my old TV set, I can't help envying them, especially if they're accompanied by their girlfriends or boyfriends or both. And whenever I see a beautiful woman in the hall where these so-called artists give their concerts, I draw the logical conclusion that this woman is either their mistress already or on the point of becoming one in spite of their wrinkles and overall impotence. How can one keep a cool head under the circumstances?

There's a singer in Russia and I envy him more than his colleagues on account of his relative youth and the reputation he enjoys amidst the most beautiful women in Moscow, Petersburg and also in the provincial cities where he deigns to give his concerts. Whenever he goes to these remote cities, they lose their provincial character and acquire all the characteristics for which both Moscow and Petersburg are famous not only in Russia, but even in the United States of America. (Let us not forget that many Russian expatriates choose the States as their ultimate haven where Earth and heaven meet, allowing mortal creatures to feel happy in the midst of tears and even during their walks through many a puddle of blood.) This singer is of Bulgarian extraction and he *is* rather handsome, I must admit: his fame and success do not contradict the laws of logic and consequently jar on me only occasionally, on the periphery of my consciousness. In an unguarded moment, I may say to my friends that I hate the world because of this singer's notoriety, but I repent immediately as I recall the evils that are *truly* responsible for the attitude I take whenever I get in touch with today's reality, logic and phonies.

Recently I saw a film on Berezovsky whose rags-to-riches story didn't escape my notice, for all the indifference I may affect when the outside world makes its disrespectful intrusions into my private reality that is mathematically logical and therefore tolerates no phony artists. At the end of the film they showed a psychiatric hospital where this oligarch was undergoing a medical examination – along with the singer I envy so much that I'm prepared to drop poetry which is unlikely to bring me anything except breakdowns of all sorts and the despair analysed by Kierkegaard in *The Sickness unto Death*. I still wonder why this singer wastes his precious

time in the hospital where a handsome young man doesn't necessarily come across many beautiful women who, according to my calculations, must be waiting for him in the cities where he sings and drinks champagne – before his concerts, after them.

Why should I identify with Lacan who lived in a comparatively small flat and was faithful to his wife, as far as I know, in spite of his unstoppable rise in popularity? Given the number of young women he saw in his consulting room and outside it, he might have spent his life like a sultan; but anyway pop singers' harems are much more luxurious and I suppose that, unlike Lacan and other psychoanalysts, the Bulgarian star doesn't have to deal with unbalanced creatures of flesh and blood. It is the other way round, if I'm not mistaken: his fans are forced to embrace and kiss an unbalanced artist who, in a fit of pique, may punch and kick them, let alone throw them out.

Another film tells a story about some men and women who are questioned in a television studio where there are no beautiful women, no pop singers, no successful businessmen. They also have their harems and spend their holidays on beaches, under the sun; and there's always something new in store for them. An oligarch has already achieved his main ambition in life – to become wealthy – and I feel I'm teetering on the brink of another nervous breakdown which might have been cured by Lacan in the Sixties and even in the Seventies. Alas, I happen to live in another century and I say to myself I'm so desperate for success I would do anything to achieve it. I do anything and achieve nothing, however often I may repeat the verb 'to achieve' accompanied by other words that don't mean anything either. I've set myself a series of goals to achieve by the end of the month and I'm waiting for the end of the month which is sure to come, whatever happens in my life and elsewhere where the world is even more alive than whatever I see and feel in my room.

'My main aim in life is to be a good wife and mother,' says a woman in front of a camera. You can say whatever you wish in front of this camera, and any other camera will listen to you as attentively as this one does, for it is handled by a cameraman who will pay attention to what you're saying as long as he is paid to do so.

'What about your profession, your vocation? Don't you feel you've missed your *true* vocation?'

Apparently the woman they're talking to in front of the camera has not missed her true vocation because she neither speaks about *her* children nor looks for other excuses; she just says she writes poetry and the cameraman says, 'Bravo!' This Soviet film reminds me of the popularity enjoyed by poets in the country of my birth where they were cherished not only by the intelligentsia, but also by ordinary citizens who offered them cognac and listened to them till dawn and often till breakfast in the course of which they would drink another bottle of cognac.

The woman picks up a guitar and sings one of her songs. Once the song is over, the host says to the poetess, 'What do you expect from your friends, from life in general?'

'I hope I'll meet a handsome young man, a pop singer.'

'Why a pop singer?'

'Because he'll sing my songs. And he'll give me a lot of money.'

Some people expect instant gratification, but others can wait for a while because pop singers are not the richest people in the world. Another woman. 'I'm happy,' she says.

'What have you achieved?'

'Everything. I've got eight children.'

‘Do you think your happiness is complete?’ And the host goes on, ‘All our heroine needs to complete her happiness is another baby. She needs a ninth baby because she loves Dante.’

March 8, 2013. What do you call it in the West? In Russia this day is designed for women or rather for men who are supposed to give a lot of presents to the women they’re acquainted with either intimately or superficially: they just nod their heads in greeting whenever they happen to pass them in the streets. But today every man sends a woman he only heard about last week a bunch of red roses. The International Day of Women – that’s what they call this day in Russia and you realise to what extent our words are hollow, insignificant: every dignified gentleman feels called upon to replace them with roses, jewels, sports cars and villas on the French Riviera.

March 9, 2013. Once again I think of the Bulgarian singer whose harem continues to welcome young beauties while his body alternates between sexual exercises and sojourns in the famous psychiatric hospital. What does he need psychiatrists and psychoanalysts for? He says to one of them, to all of them: ‘I wish I had said “Yes”.’

‘To that beauty queen?’

‘Yes. But I chose another queen.’

‘Another *beauty* queen, I hope?’

‘Of course. There are only beauty queens in my backstage room. I don’t need queens of fashion, of oil, of aluminium.’

‘What about *movie* queens?’

‘They’ve already come.’

‘Where are they?’

‘In my rooms, in my villas, in my castles and even in your clinic.’

‘What else do you need?’

‘The woman I didn’t choose last month. Actually I did choose her, but a beauty queen said I should choose between her and that woman. I chose the beauty queen.’

‘Don’t you like our chief nurse?’

‘I do.’

‘She worships you.’

‘Will she cure my body?’

‘Of course she will. She’ll also cure your mind.’

The nurse cures the singer’s mind, but his body remains faithful to the woman he kicked out of his backstage room. And his body ends up injecting a lot of poison into his mind which, on the psychoanalysts’ advice, loses itself in free association and consequently associates itself freely with almost everybody. And nobody says to it, ‘Are you forgetting your manners?’ The beauty and movie queens say instead, ‘Why not pamper yourself after a hard day with a hot bath scented with oils?’

‘I’m on the brink of a nervous breakdown,’ says the singer’s mind and the body nods in agreement.

‘Why? I’m the woman you kicked out,’ says a woman.

‘You’ve grown old,’ says the mind. The body keeps silent as it evaluates how the new body stands up to wear and tear.

‘You kicked me out three years ago.’

‘And I’ve been ill ever since that unfortunate episode in my life.’

‘No wonder – you’re the bearer of a knowledge that is separated from you. So you’d better attribute a subject to this knowledge.’

‘What subject?’

‘*The subject k*. I am Katya. Do you realise there’s no longer any knowledge you’re separated from? You know everything, my dear patient.’

‘Do you work in that clinic, in that lunatic asylum? Can’t I live outside it, outdoors?’

‘I’ll sort that out – don’t worry your pretty little head about it!’

And the Bulgarian singer sings a song inspired by a famous Pushkin poem:

*I you loved: love yet, maybe,
in soul mine has gone out not quite
(don’t whine, everything’s white);
but let it you more not trouble;
I not wish to sadden you with anything.*

*I not wish to sudden you with anything.
I not wish to sodden you with anything.*

I feel like going on and on, taking no notice of this chapter’s length because death is not about to interrupt its flow, its walk along the road of life – at least not within the minute I continue to live through in spite of its relative shortness. In the final analysis, I think I’m able to extend this minute beyond the end of the road, whatever road I might have in mind as I write one sentence after another. There are so many roads and I may take all of them simultaneously, contradicting Robert Frost and ordinary travellers who think they’re obliged to choose one road to the exclusion of all other itineraries indicated by maps and electronic devices. Only a poem by Pushkin or another quotation can bring this nine-hour marathon to a standstill.

*I loved you so sincerely, with such tenderness,
as by another loved God grant you be.*

You can write about anything, but it is not a question of killing time or letting it live because it is the other way round, as usual: it is time that kills you and you know this better than anyone else. Daily you’re exposed to the dangers associated with time – and *all* dangers are associated with time and its cronies – so you can’t wriggle through to the other side of Creation, saying to yourself and others: ‘I’m on the other side of my mirror, your universe and our time.’ After twisting and turning for a while, you manage to wriggle free, but time catches up with you and you continue to walk hand in hand as if you were in love with each other, as if a priest was waiting for you in a church to ask you the crucial question, ‘Will you marry time?’ ‘I will not,’ you answer recalling how many times this time – and other times as well – let you down last week and also last month. But

time and its cronies smile from ear to ear and you wonder what time's ear may mean in *your* context and within the space-time framework of the universe.

These are idle questions and answers and you end up buying a newspaper at a newsstand situated at the station from which you usually travel to Paris, anxious as you are to divert your attention from the daily rounds that your life in Versailles burdens you with – as usual I speak about myself, for I don't know anybody's heart of hearts as well as I know *all* my hearts. I just put them together and study the heap I contemplate in front of me as if I were in Egypt or Angkor where either pyramids or temples loom ahead of you as if to demonstrate how majestic and monstrous your life can look when you take it seriously, going deeper and deeper into the subjects you meet on your way to the nearest cemetery. Well, I just buy a newspaper – *The International Herald Tribune*, for instance – and read it, hoping to get rid of my daily worries, rounds and what not: it's better to get rid of everything, once and for all.

Behind acid attack, focus on a ballerina. I read about the Bolshoi Ballet's artistic director – after having seen his disfigured face on television that puts us in the picture about what happens to other people and may also happen to us if we rise to the exalted post of the Bolshoi's artistic director. Most modern kings and queens rule only in a formal way, without real power; even beauty queens don't rule our hearts for long because they grow old and so do our hearts. Last night a decrepit old man sat on a park bench and I didn't ask him whether his heart was still young and bursting with curiosity and energy. They often say the heart can remain young on condition that you go on dreaming about young women, beauty queens and other queens, disregarding your capacities that have been impaired by the years you have already spent on the Earth, in front of some screen or other.

Contrary to what one might say about queens, the Bolshoi's director doesn't rule in a formal way because he can pick and choose which dancers to put on the stage during a performance of *The Swan Lake* and other ballets one is used to reviving whenever classical ballet comes back into popularity and attracts everybody's attention. So the director in question, Sergei Filin, thought he could pick and choose any dancer he saw inside the theatre that he ruled with an iron hand, but there were other dancers around and they were likely to bear a grudge against him for refusing to cast them as swans or sleeping beauties. One of them couldn't be cast either as a swan or the sleeping beauty, for he was a man and we see mostly ballerinas when the action takes place near a lake renowned for swans and other waterfowl. I'm writing about an up-and-coming young dancer who, being generous to a fault, invariably spared a thought for all those deprived of leading roles. He is no longer an up-and-coming dancer, although no one will forbid him to dance at home or even inside his future prison cell where he is unlikely to meet talent scouts, let alone the Bolshoi's directors who are afraid of him and his cronies.

This dancer fell in love with a ballerina, Anzhelina Vorontsova, and he thought she should dance the leading role in *Swan Lake* where there are many swans and only one demon who keeps a tight control on his subjects. Vorontsova is not yet in the lake where the heroine of the ballet – the one she was dreaming about – lives and waits for her prince and also for the Bolshoi's director who is expected to confirm his faith in her inborn gift and perseverance. She is rather far from the pool where other swans indulge in their games as they work on their last, farewell songs or pirouettes; but she continues to dream about it along with her admirer or husband whom they're willing to put under lock and key. Actually, the criminal whose career is over, Pavel Dmitrichenko, hasn't yet married Vorontsova, but this fact didn't prevent him from hiring two men to attack Mr Filin, splashing his eyes and the rest of his face (and life) with sulphuric acid. The criminal – they're all criminals, by the way – said on video that he 'organised this attack, but not to the extent that it occurred' as if his

cronies might have used sulphuric acid in another way, splashing the victim's legs, for instance. 'They should have splashed his toes or rather his shoes,' Dmitrichenko might have said to his future prosecutors and persecutors. He didn't say anything of the kind, but his legal defence may seek to shift responsibility to his associates – in the light of what he said when facing the camera held by one of his cronies. Criminals don't always keep silent as they wait for their lawyers or relatives; sometimes they talk, but they seldom say what they ought to say and no lawyer will ever protect them from their unguarded words.

'Will my girlfriend be allowed to dance the lead in *Swan Lake*?' asked Dmitrichenko.

'No, I don't think so,' said Filin.

'Do you think she's just an ordinary swan?'

'No, I don't think so,' said Filin.

'Do you think she's the Sleeping Beauty?'

'No, I don't think so.'

'She'll become one if you go on keeping her away from the stage. Do you think she needs beauty sleep?'

'No, I don't think so.'

'You mean she's beautiful and needs neither beauty sleep nor plastic surgery? Don't you need a beautiful swan? And don't forget she's a natural leader.'

Filin forgot everything down to Vorontsova and her name. So Dmitrichenko said to him, 'I'll show you, I'll give you a New Year's gift you won't forget.' Sulphuric acid. Is that the best remedy for memory lapses? You're horribly disfigured by acid, fire and knives, but you remember everything. What do you need your memory for? To remember swans, lakes, holidays, inns and beauty queens who are no longer beautiful?

They said Vorontsova's career had levelled off in recent years and a woman in charge even touched upon injuries and post-adolescent gains as if all this could matter after the attack and the effect produced by the sulphuric acid. Some said she had moved a few rungs *down* the career ladder – as a result of the attack; others disagreed with them, saying she no longer had any career to speak of. 'Why speak of Vorontsova?' they added, giving the cameraman a conspiratorial wink. 'She's fat and she breaks the floor as soon as she attempts to jump. She can't take one step on the stage without falling. Filin has nothing to do with her failures. And don't forget there are other swans in our theatre.'

'For this stupidity, his entire career, his whole life is a disgrace. It's all gone,' say Filin's colleagues.

'For this stupidity, *her* entire career, *her* whole life is a disgrace. It's all gone,' say *her* colleagues.

'Love is more important than any career, any swans.'

'Love is more important than beauty.'

'Love is more important than sleep.'

'Love is more important than sulphuric acid.'

'You can't destroy love with sulphuric acid.'

'Whatever the degradation, the human spirit can be indestructible. And love is the human spirit. There are no other spirits in the world.'

'Love will save the world, beauty and the human spirit.'

'The Pope said so several times in a row.'

'The cardinals charged with electing a new pope were embroiled in a clash of cultures on Wednesday over sharing information with the news media, with American cardinals, who had held daily news briefings,

facing off against fellow cardinals who had seen American forthrightness as a violation of protocol' (*International Herald Tribune*, Thursday, March 7, 2013). The cardinals say to the Americans that they – and also ordinary citizens – are allowed to speak of love, whenever they're in the mood to do so. The Americans say, 'Yes, we know that love will save everybody, if everybody falls in love with everybody else. But we also know that electing a new pope is the pet subject that no one can keep under wraps because everyone is eager to know the new pope's identity and biography. Electing a new pope is the sort of work that calls for a high level of transparency.'

'Now they see the election through a glass, darkly,' say the Europeans looking at the journalists. 'Do you want them to see the future pope face to face?'

'Yes,' say the Americans.

'But, according to St Paul, they can't see anything or anybody face to face unless they're dead and buried. Do you want them to die? Do you think every journalist should believe in transparency? Do you want all journalists to die for their beliefs?'

I don't think the end result of this election will in any way affect my life because I'm unlikely to swallow contraceptive pills, even though I know for sure that the nearest clinic provides a free supply of contraceptives on request; nor am I interested in condoms despite the risk one runs when indulging in unprotected sex. Even if I'm unfortunate enough to catch Aids at the end of my life, I may die of something else, for Aids and cancer are not the only diseases debated about in clinics and outside them – in parks, on benches, in trains and planes. As for my faith and my God, I will not change my attitude towards them, whatever the new pope might say about love and God's presence on Earth, on Jupiter and on every comet, however distant from Golgotha.

Somebody said about the former pope: 'He now thinks that retiring early was a stupid thing to do.' But the pope didn't retire early, considering that at his age many people die on their deathbeds or in deserts; and some of those people – or other people – are already dead because you can die at any age and even in your mother's womb, and in this case your life and death do not depend on extraneous factors such as abortions and alcoholism. I don't know whether Chavez was an alcoholic or a teetotaller, but he died and no one seems to question his death, not even those who wish he could have lived forever in order to help the poor with the costs of buying a house: he thought that every family should own a house, 'otherwise life has no meaning', he declared after a military parade.

The former president was carried through the capital and no one said there was no corpse inside a modest brown wood coffin that a few relatives and ministers were trying to convey to the nearest cemetery: cemeteries are never too far from your body, even if this body of yours is still alive and kicking. Everyone knew that inside this modest coffin was the corpse of the immortal leader whose deeds are engraved on his own monument and on many hearts and souls: they're not prepared to forget the former benefactor of humanity. 'Thanks to God and my commander,' says one of these hearts, 'I have my apartment. He helped lots of people.'

William Neuman says to this heart, 'Your former president was a self-declared Socialist who expropriated private businesses and property but looked the other way as opportunists enriched themselves off government contracts.'

'I couldn't care less about opportunists,' says the heart. 'After all, I am a heart and I feel a lot instead of thinking about how people behave and what they do to enrich themselves. I don't say Chavez was poor because he must have been rich. I don't forget that our country –'

‘We’re speaking about Venezuela,’ says William Neuman to television viewers who usually have short attention spans.

‘I know we’re speaking about Venezuela,’ says the heart.

‘I’m speaking to our clients,’ says William.

‘And I’m speaking to their hearts,’ says the heart.

‘What is it you want to say to their hearts?’ asks William.

‘He has made people who didn’t feel they were part of democracy before feel like they’re part of the system.’

‘Of what system?’ asks William.

‘Of our system,’ says the heart.

‘He excoriated capitalists and lectured about service to the country but tolerated or ignored widespread corruption,’ says William.

‘I ignore it too,’ says the heart.

‘And he warned ceaselessly of enemies,’ says William, ‘who he said were poised to take away from the poor the benefits they had received under his government.’

‘The Americans take everything away from us and other countries,’ says the heart.

‘But they don’t take away your hearts, do they?’

‘Our hearts are hard,’ says the heart. ‘Our nuts – I don’t mean testicles – have very hard shells and we’re these shells. We’re also nuts. Is that what you think?’

‘I don’t think anything,’ says William. ‘But I know that your former president’s policies –’

‘He’s still my president,’ says the heart.

‘– including the expropriation of private companies and price controls, have hobbled the economy, led to shortages of basic goods and created a system that cannot be sustained.’

‘I’ll see to it that it *is* sustained,’ says the heart.

What does *my* heart say as I read the article entitled *Measuring the Legacy of Chavez’s contradictory revolution?* It says, ‘Don’t trust revolutions.’ I listen to my heart’s advice and I turn a deaf ear to revolutions because I think that revolutions should see only deaf ears in front of them and even behind them, assuming they have something at the back of their minds. Well and good – they have deaf ears behind them, in front of them; and even when they walk with a sideways motion, they see and contemplate only deaf ears. But this doesn’t prevent them from being active now and then, for revolutions *are* on the world’s agenda, even if their leaders say modestly, ‘What we need is a change in the situation.’

‘What change do you have in mind?’ say their opponents.

‘We need a change of government,’ say the leaders.

‘But we’ve changed our minds,’ say their opponents.

‘Have you?’ say the leaders.

‘You need our votes, don’t you?’ say the leaders’ opponents.

‘Of course we do. We’re friends, aren’t we?’

‘We are not. Go to hell.’

‘Mr Chavez prided himself on winning election after election,’ says William, ‘and his government put in place a digital voting system that is considered generally free of fraud. His opponents called Venezuela’s elections free but not fair –’

Free, fair, free, fair. You’re free, but you’re not fair. You’re fair, but you’re not free. You’re free to become fair – not a fair maiden, needless to say. If you’re a man, you can’t become a fair *maiden*, even if you are *fair*.

Chavez reminds me of my youth and one might conclude that everything reminds me of my youth because there’s nothing in front of me. Anyway, the only way to survive and wake up tomorrow is to look back at a series of yesterdays, hoping to get as far as one’s youth when everything was more or less all right. Yes, one was in love and healthy and there was a lot of futures in one’s pockets, in one’s rooms and in front of one’s eyes that could see other planets and former lives and the future – an endless road to happiness.

You’re already happy, but you’re sure you’ll be even happier in the future, in the light of what happens to sages who grow more and more intelligent as time goes on. And time always goes on: you grow more and more intelligent on condition that you’re a sage or at least a sage-to-be – the Buddha’s disciple and follower who knows everything and is not shaken either by the world or by the Russian Revolution.

I saw a programme devoted to a Russian poet who had always dreamt of becoming a member of the Writers’ Union, although I never regarded this membership as an honour when I lived in the Soviet Union, in Moscow where I was writing poetry and essays on literature. This poet – for once I’m not speaking of myself – used to write poems for singers who sang them in films, in concert halls and elsewhere, contributing to the poet’s celebrity: many ordinary citizens adored him to the point of gathering under his windows whenever he awaited his colleagues’ decision. But they always decided not to accept him, barring his way to the building where the Writers’ Union, or rather its members, united every week to decide who should be published and honoured in the Soviet Union.

But ordinary citizens sang his songs under his windows, in parks and on benches where they could sit, eat sandwiches and sing other people’s songs till dawn, saluting the sun by another couplet, another note. The poet would make his appearance on the balcony under which the crowd had gathered in expectation of his appearance and they all sang a multitude of songs and one couldn’t say whether the number of songs was superior to the number of performers. The poet died at the age of 64 and they said his death was caused by his sadness, for one couldn’t be happy outside the Writers’ Union, even though the number of its members was inferior to that of the fans you see under your windows or in front of the bench on which you’re in the habit of sitting after a long walk through parks and woods.

I am neither a member of the Writers’ Union nor an idol of the crowd I’ll never see either under my windows nor in front of the benches I count as I walk through our woods, hoping to cleanse my lungs and thoughts. As a result of this walk, I can read my thoughts easily and even my mood makes no secret of its dislike of this day and age which doesn’t scream with disgust upon learning that ordinary writers are idolised by the multitude whose members ignore me completely. The sadness unto death – is that what I’m suffering from? Yesterday I drank three bottles of wine and I think that this drinking bout had been induced by my mood, my frustration, for my life has more than its fair share of frustrations, it seems to me and to others – to my friends, among other people. At some point I began to shout and then I said to myself and to those who are used to shouting under the circumstances: ‘Please don’t shout – there’s no need to vent your frustration on me.’ When I

am in a suicidal mood, I make as if someone else was in my shoes and thus I thwart my plans and go on living in spite of my frustrations and suicidal moods. If this doesn't help, I say to myself, 'Don't let your frustration spoil the event.' And I never ask myself what event I'm talking about.

v

Francis Bacon said something to the effect that he was trying to approach reality from different angles in search of immediacy, and one knows he meant the wounds he had consciously and unconsciously inflicted upon his sitters. As Bacon was a non-believer, he didn't think about his sitters in terms of sin, and the wounds he was fond of stemmed from his desire to reflect life as faithfully as one might to become a *real* hyperrealist painter whose realism and hypersensitivity have nothing in common with the petrol stations depicted by *ordinary* hyperrealists. In a way, he wished to become an *unreal* hyperrealist, uncovering the intricate web of nature's deceit – the tumours painstakingly hidden beyond glossy surfaces and well-shaven faces. He liked painting beautiful faces, for if you disfigure a *beautiful* face, you catch God's ministers red-handed and consequently are allowed to bring nature, destiny and other features of our life to justice without further ado – without waiting for critical judgement and your friends' approval or disapproval.

Salvador Dali, who was also an unreal hyperrealist painter, looked for the hidden in scientific publications where he could light upon particles and articles devoted to light, atoms, waves and quantum mechanics that are often summarised as follows: 'The dictator's grip on the country has loosened.' Of course one immediately asks a few questions related to the identity of the dictator who is not necessarily God, as might be hastily presumed, for God is not really a dictator, given that He allowed our mind to make decisions in conjunction with our free will. Let us say that the dictator in question is nature, overloaded with a multitude of laws which we obey whenever they turn out to be prepared to impose increasingly heavy punishments for minor offences, transgressions and delusions. Some physicists say there are no laws to speak of; they don't speak of them and die of natural causes, unable as they are to knock our law-reinforced nature off its pedestal.

As everybody knows, science and religions help us traverse the mirror we are used to calling 'nature'. It is a courteous and hypocritical exterior, a surface, shallowness and so forth: there are many signs and symbols of what we have to deal with on our way to the hidden or our wounds, as Bacon might have put it. For instance, Isaiah says to us: 'And a man shall be as an hiding place from the wind, and a covert from the tempest, as rivers of water in a dry place, as the shadow of a great rock in a weary land.' What is the meaning of this text? Dali didn't believe in God, but he had so-called faith, according to what he said to some journalists; and one might conclude he trusted Isaiah's words and didn't fail to unravel their mysteries after his life-long training in how to understand scientific books.

The man Isaiah touches upon hides from those who are unable to understand him and see his wounds; and yet his wounds have many affinities with what a conscientious tourist comes across in a well-known museum where the Crucifixion must have pride of place. Bacon saw the wounds that let him in on a majestic secret. He succeeded in turning them into the stigmata he talked about to David Sylvester and a number of television viewers. As a work of art, such a portrait might serve as a covert from the tempest and any connoisseur takes refuge in it as he savours every nuance he spots in the course of his analysis; and this aesthetic or rather ethic ritual gives birth to yet another Aristotle-celebrated catharsis. A real masterpiece may be equated with Isaiah's river that makes its appearance in a dry place: but for art and its life-saving qualities, our world would be nothing but a dry place, a red desert. Are we the shadows of great, magnificent pictures, books and operas? And what about our shadow-boxing? Leonardo is a great rock in a weary land. The same goes for Bacon and Dali, which doesn't mean they're as great as Leonardo who is in a class of his own, in a galaxy of his own.

‘What is the characteristic feature of life? When is a piece of matter said to be alive? When it goes on “doing something”, moving, exchanging material with its environment, and so forth, and that for a much longer period than we would expect an inanimate piece of matter to “keep going” under similar circumstances.’ On Dali’s deathbed one found a book by Schrödinger, which only goes to prove that the painter was in search of inspiration until the very end of his life based upon natural laws, genes, helices, atoms and nuclear energy; it is no wonder that he found his works in the domain of science and in the books of its apostles. Until the very end he was doing something: he kept going until the age of 85 as he continued to exchange material with his environment, symbolised by pictures, books, paintbrushes, colours, nuances, formulas, triangles, golden sections and the fourth dimension. Of course he was not an inanimate piece of matter, but to some extent we may subscribe to Freud’s belief that the death instinct holds sway over our bodies, gradually turning us into stones and great rocks. In this case, no one should expect us to keep going for 85 years at a stretch.

When a system that is not alive is isolated or placed in a uniform environment, all motion usually comes to a standstill very soon as a result of various kinds of friction; differences of electric or chemical potential are equalised, substances which tend to form a chemical compound do so, temperature becomes uniform by heat conduction. After that the whole system fades away into a dead, inert lump of matter. A permanent state is reached, in which no observable events occur. The physicist calls this the state of thermodynamical equilibrium, or of ‘maximum entropy’.

Erwin Schrödinger, *What is life?*

Our global village is the uniform environment about which the physicist speaks in his book – in his prophetic book, one might say, because when the book was first published – at the end of the Second World War – no one yet spoke about global villages, their inhabitants and our common destiny. One might even say that our train of thought has at last come to a standstill as a result of the friction which necessarily occurs in the world where one nation rub shoulders with another, without singing Beethoven’s *Ninth*, the final movement. A number of people feel they can do business with the Spaniards and all of them – the former and the latter – frequently hold conferences at one hotel, at another hotel or a ski resort. None of these people really enjoy these conferences, but the latter – I mean, these conferences – offer all of them a good opportunity to do some networking. And of course they enjoy skiing: there are some nice gentle slopes that they can ski down, unless they prefer unkind, ungente slopes and break their legs as they break every speed limit. In spite of this tiny little difference, all these people are uniform and their views coincide on a range of subjects, which enables them to celebrate another victory for common sense. ‘Such good news calls for a celebration!’ they say to each other almost every week. In the long run all differences of electrical or chemical potential are equalised – another victory for death. ‘The whole system fades away into a dead, inert lump of matter. A permanent state is reached, in which no observable events occur.’ The state of maximum stupidity.

‘Practically, a state of this kind is usually reached very rapidly. Theoretically, it is very often not yet an absolute equilibrium, not yet the true maximum of entropy. But then the final approach to equilibrium is very slow. It could take anything between hours, years, centuries...’ We still haven’t given up hope of finding the world alive and some of us continue to search for it as if to repeat the exploit of Diogenes who, in broad daylight, kept looking for Man, a blazing torch in his hand. Or do I confuse him with Nietzsche? One of them

was looking for God, the other for Man. And a third party was looking for both. 'These ultimate slow approaches to equilibrium could never be mistaken for life,' writes Schrödinger, 'and we may disregard them here.' What kind of equilibrium did he have in mind? One's inner equilibrium? The point at which mind and matter are in equilibrium? I, for one, am not inclined to disregard this slow approach to equilibrium, however illusory it may appear at first glance.

Whatever we say, we speak of death. Whatever we look for, we find death. I never say, ‘Sorry, could you just say that last sentence again please?’ Why should I? I know what the last and first sentences spoke about, for there’s nothing else in the world, as they say. ‘My life – and I know it’s a cliché – has been the other side of death, the bright side of death,’ says a dying man (or woman) and we don’t listen to him because we know what he is about to say and think. He thinks that life is beautiful in spite of death. He says that death is ugly, for all the delights one may experience in one’s lifetime. She also says that she has been happy in spite of everything because her children will live forever in the bravest and most organic world – her indigo children, needless to say. They utter a lot of clichés – all of them, not only their children – and I wonder if they need to utter anything, considering that everything has already been uttered and written. I wonder if they have already sung everything in churches and concert halls – and in parks, at open-air concerts.

On television, too, they’re preoccupied with illnesses that can be cured by children, not by professional doctors, and one can see these children and their hands hovering over half-dead bodies, promising them eternal life. Of course neither these hands nor their owners are allowed to promise eternity to those who don’t deserve it, but at least they can put them – their unworthy patients – on their feet again because once again we meet some indigo children, our future and hope. The hostess says, ‘Do you know what illness you’re about to deal with?’

‘Yes,’ says a child.

‘You can get closer to your future patient.’

‘I can nurse him from here,’ says the child.

‘What do you feel?’ says the hostess to the patient.

‘I feel much better,’ says the patient.

‘The world doesn’t,’ says the child.

‘Are you trying to cure the world?’ says the hostess to the child.

‘It’s pointless,’ says the child. ‘I know when the world is doomed to die, but I can’t prevent it from dying.’ And the child begins to recite by heart an excerpt from The Revelation of St John the Divine, confusing horses and their colours, for the child’s memory is deficient and therefore its capacities are impaired beyond redemption. No one can redeem these capacities, not even another indigo child, but none of the children one sees on the screen is worried about the situation, for death is coming anyway and it doesn’t really matter what brings him and on which horse he sits. Death is an old man again and one can see him thanks to the Bible where death rides on many horses, brandishing swords and scythes. His eye sockets are hollow and yet these eyes can see whatever should be murdered in this world of ours – the whole world; otherwise St John wouldn’t have revealed anything to humanity. Why should St John speak of one man, two women, three children? Why should God say to St John, ‘I am Alpha and Omega, the first and the last’? Even if the death of Lenin is on the agenda, God doesn’t announce it to anybody because Lenin doesn’t deserve it. And what about Leonardo da Vinci and *his* death?

Another child comes in and says, ‘I see the sky and the snow. This snow is fire and it falls on humanity, but humanity looks up and says, “It’s raining tonight.” Humanity doesn’t understand that this rain is death. This death is full of stones and these stones are falling on humanity, on our heads and hearts. We can’t defend our bodies against these stones and their fire. I see a lot of fire and this fire is coming down instead of flying up. It is not a mere bonfire. It is God’s wrath. Are you prepared to hear God’s voice, his words and their truth?’

‘What did God say to you?’ asks the hostess.

“What thou seest, write in a book, and send it unto the seven churches –”

‘Congratulations,’ says the hostess to the child’s mother. ‘This is the best way of training your child’s memory.’

‘These mental exercises are designed to encourage creative thinking,’ says the mother.

“Write the things which thou hast seen, and the things which are, and the things which shall be hereafter,” says the child picking up his own book and showing it to the cameraman.

‘This child died last year,’ says the hostess to the television viewers. ‘He predicted the fall of the Siberian meteorite – I can’t recall its name – and now they worship the ground he walked on. They literally worship the path on which he used to walk. They kneel down on this path and kiss it tenderly because this child is a saint. At least they say he is a saint and every saint deserves such tenderness and worship. Here’s the book he bequeathed to us, his revelation. There are many horses in this book and every horse carries a lot of fire, illnesses and meteorites that will fall on humanity and destroy it completely.’

‘Children often retreat into a fantasy world, where they could be anything they want,’ says a psychiatrist.

‘I know,’ says the hostess. ‘But their fantasy worlds grow darker and darker.’

‘I know,’ says the psychiatrist. ‘They take us right back to the Dark Ages.’

‘Do you know what Freemasons say about the future and our Golden Age?’

‘I know,’ says the psychiatrist. ‘They think our Golden Age is located in the future, not in the past.’

‘Do you know what this Golden Age looks like?’ asks the hostess.

‘The Golden Age you have in mind is symbolised by indigo children and their revelations,’ says the psychiatrist. ‘They predict our destruction. That’s what Freemasons call “our Golden Age”.’

And then they show a film entitled *The Golden Age* and one sees what one is used to seeing in one’s dreams unless one doesn’t dream on account of the depth of one’s sleep. If your sleep is very deep, you can’t find anything at the bottom of it: no dreams, no hints, no revelations of any kind. Why should you sleep if nothing is revealed to you in the course of your dreams? This time your dream comes true and you see – one sees it too – a bevy of bathing beauties, but for once these beauties do not bathe in sea water: they dance for their master and idol.

You see a beautiful palace and realise you’ve been conveyed to the Orient, to one of Scheherazade’s tales where you’re likely to experience what any Russian oligarch feels and sees in his own palaces and saunas. A bevy of bathing beauties dance and their governess says to them, ‘In a few minutes I’ll tell you what your master thinks.’ And the governess talks to the master. ‘So what would be your top choice for tonight?’

‘Veronika. Did the last interview show her as a self-assured and mature geisha?’

‘No. I wouldn’t sleep with her if I were you.’

‘I want her, I want her, I want her.’

‘You listen to the Beatles too often.’

‘Mind your own business.’

‘I’m your sister.’

‘You’re no longer my sister. You’re just their governess.’

But Veronika refuses to dance for the master; nor does she want to share his bed and his body. Contrary to what the Beatles sang for years and years, she doesn’t want him; and she repeats this sentence many times so as not to yield to the temptation about which Oscar Wilde talked for many years as he counted his temptations

and their fulfilments. Instead of counting out his money, he was fully engrossed in his temptations and his destiny took notice of this pastime, informing on Oscar Wilde and sending him to prison – the jail known to every lover of poetry. Even Francis Bacon quoted it in one of the documentaries I saw. You kill the thing you love because you can't do otherwise: death is unavoidable and omnipresent. And omnipotent.

Why do these girls love their master? He doesn't offer them poems; and he is not as handsome as Andy Warhol's friends. (The same goes for Francis Bacon's sitters.) There's no denying that he is rich, but there are many oligarchs in Russia and none of them is impotent, if I'm not mistaken; and all of them like the Bolshoi's ballerinas. So I'm not surprised at hearing that Veronika can be happy only if they give her a ticket to Moscow where, according to her tale of woe, her son must be waiting for her in their old flat that doesn't look like a penthouse, whatever her rivals might presume. Her rivals – other girls and dancers – never dream of their fatherlands because they're happy where they happen to sojourn and they hope their palace will become *their* palace at last, turning their sojourn in it into an everlasting life. They never think of death as they embark upon their journeys into happiness and they experience no fear, contrary to what Orson Welles' film seems to suggest.

Veronika is on the brink of a nervous breakdown and a healer says to her, 'You're not on the brink of a nervous breakdown. What you call a "brink" is just a riverbank. That's right – you're near a river and this river is blanketed in fog.'

'What are you doing?' asks Veronika.

'I'm about to put up a notice saying "Danger! Keep out!"'

'Why? I like rivers,' says Veronika.

'Do you like water in general?'

'I do,' says Veronika.

'But two minutes ago the fog swirled thickly around us. Did you see this phenomenon?'

'I did.'

'No wonder – I'm a professional hypnotist. Do you know that the danger of shipwreck is much greater in fog?'

'I do.'

'So we won't board this ship.'

'What ship?'

'It's sailing tomorrow, but we won't board it. We'll wade across this river at a shallow point.'

Veronika and her saviour are wading across the invisible river at a shallow point and the saviour says to Veronika, 'Don't look back! Don't look back! I can see you're tired because your eyelids have started to droop.'

'I could hardly lift my head off the pillow this morning I was so tired,' says Veronika.

'Getting up too late seems to be a thing of the past, doesn't it?'

'I don't know,' says Veronika.

'Your ignorance is a thing of the past too. We're already on the opposite riverbank. You're now out of danger.'

'Am I?'

'You are. But don't forget that the future of our planet is in danger if we continue to plunder it as we do.'

'I'm not in Russia, am I?'

‘You’re in Versailles. Do you really wish to go back to Russia? And what about counterfeit alcohol? In Russia you can’t drink a bottle of wine without getting poisoned. You are *not* out of danger! I don’t mince my words. What you want is another consultant!’

‘And another master,’ says Veronika.

Her former master enjoys his ballet company and their performances while I watch Ligeti’s opera *Le grand macabre*; and I can’t help wondering why I enjoyed this opus magnum when I saw it in Paris in 1981. Can’t we say about Ligeti, ‘He was a 20th-century author who wrote parodies of other people’s works’? What I might have enjoyed related to cadenzas, to the multitude of notes he used to express fear, horror, love and other sentiments that seem to inhabit our life without turning into human beings: we just *experience* these sentiments. But Ligeti does turn them into human beings, for the protagonist of the opera comes to our planet in order to announce the end of the world and I, for one, do not think he is a human being or an extraterrestrial creature; and yet he eats, drinks and sings some truncated arias. In other words, he is just the symbol of a prophet who speaks of fire, meteors, stones and ruins; and he looks like a child whose mother is fond of St John’s Revelation. So her child commits it either to memory or to paper and says to television viewers: ‘And I John saw these things, and heard them. And when I had heard and seen, I fell down to worship before the feet of the angel which shewed me these things.’

‘Where are these things?’ ask some viewers.

‘And where’s the angel?’ asks the hostess.

The child falls down and crawls towards the hostess and television viewers because he can’t do otherwise: he is the guest of honour and they’re about to pay him a huge amount of money for his performance. But they paid the angel nothing and the things St John speaks about do not appear out of thin air, although they may perform miracles now and then – away from cameramen and the curious. A child comes and says, ‘I saw the Blessed Virgin’, and they erect a monument to both the child and the Virgin without trying to see the Virgin in their turn: they know that the Virgin comes only to the innocent, not to the curious. But this time they are sitting in front of their televisions and they wish to *see* what the child has just revealed to them during an unusual outburst of creative activity. It is true that video and television rentals have decreased this year, but notwithstanding this and other facts, the viewers who are lucky enough to attend the child’s performance want to see *everything*, not only the child who opens his mouth and points to his mother, to the Bible and St John. ‘Where’s St John?’ ask the viewers.

‘In the Book,’ says the child.

‘All right. But you must show us the angel, otherwise we’ll shout, “Money-back guarantee, money-back guarantee!”’

‘Do you need an angel?’ asks Ligeti. ‘Here he is.’ And he shows us his hero whose name is Nekrotsar and we no longer shout anything, being carried away by a few notes we hear as Nekrotzar turns into a tsar or rather a despot who bullies a poor peasant and says something to the effect that the end is drawing nigh. As usual, I hope to see a beautiful lady and I can trace my hopes’ roots back to the 19th century when composers – Mussorgsky was of their number – had to put ladies in their operas in order to get them performed by imperial theatres. In France you had to include a ballet in your opera; in Russia they needed women, not necessarily beautiful women. In those times singers were usually fat and managers took care of them only on account of their voices,

disregarding their misshapen bodies. But Karajan paid a lot of attention to how his singers *looked* on the stage and all these singers became bathing beauties overnight.

I'm waiting for a beautiful lady as I watch *Le grand macabre* and I see none; and yet one doesn't have to engage Maria Callas for any of the parts one hears and sees in this opera, for there are no Toscas, no Normas in *Le grand macabre*. After all, it is a man to whom we listen as he talks about the end of the world – not to a woman; and I wonder if Norma couldn't replace him, being a prophetess in her own right. But I may be mistaken and I'm afraid my mistakes grow so numerous they easily outshine the truths I *may* light upon in the course of my life, of its pitiful ending. A prophetess or a priestess? Anyway, no one needs Callas in *Le grand macabre* unless one says that one *always* needs Callas, whatever the opera one is dealing with and whoever tries to raise the stakes by refusing to listen to a second-rate singer.

VII

Whatever you do, you come across not only death, as many pessimists know, but also war and peace which is a theme you can't avoid, even if you hide yourself at the bottom of the sea or beyond some cloud or other. You're not an angel and you don't know how to live in the sky because you have no technical know-how in this field, in this and other heavens. (And even cutting-edge technology proves to be of little avail.) In the skies, too, you would be confronted by angry crowds and harmonious infatuations – by war and peace, in other words; and you might remember the fallen angels who, once upon a time, fought against the Almighty and lost the battle and hit the bottle in the wake of their defeat.

Lacan laughs when he utters the word 'communication' and he even says to those who listen to him, 'You laugh? I see you understand what communication means. You understand that it means nothing. All right. To get off to a good start, you need either an Audi or this piece of knowledge – communication is a Freudian dream.'

But the matter stands differently if you try to communicate with God – on account of the situation you get into or rather on account of its absurdity and of life's basic absurdity that has nothing to do with Ionesco's plays. You wish to communicate with God and you put a lot of questions to the new pope who is believed to know the answer to all your questions – one big answer that resounds all over the universe. This answer boils down to a few words and principles: 'Faith, poverty, loyalty, purity, chastity, God.' You choose the last word as you say to yourself, 'I'm neither chaste nor pure, but if God believes in me I'll get everything down to money and a Q7 Audi. And then I'll give everything to the poor – on my deathbed. What do you need on your deathbed? A glass of water. I hope my wife will bring me this glass of water. She might bring me a bottle of water, for all I know. Will she ask me if I prefer sparkling water? "San Pellegrino" I'll say to her in the hope of getting closer and closer to the new pope. Hope, pope, hope, pope – how nice!'

You don't need to communicate with God because He knows all your thoughts and prayers. You say to yourself, 'I should pray tonight, otherwise God won't forgive me. Of course I'm not Desdemona – I'm not even a woman. But not only Desdemona is supposed to pray every night and so I'll pray tonight to let God know what I think about life – about *my* life in particular. I think I'm poor and I don't think that God will contradict me because He knows everything about oligarchs and *their* bank accounts. And if He compares their bank accounts with mine, He'll realise I'm rather poor. The repairs to my car cost much more than I was expecting. Does God know that? If he doesn't, I'll shout, "The repairs to my car cost much more than I was expecting."'

And both God and the new pope will speak about peace and love. You don't need to speak about anything else because you'll have everything if you say, 'Love, love, love. You have to love each other. Peace, peace, peace. God exerts His authority to restore peace in the area, on the Earth, in the universe. So do I. So I am God. You should love me. You don't need to pray because love is big enough to fill up my castle and my home. You love each other and death recedes into the distance. Do you see this distance? And what about death? Do you see *anything*? You don't, do you? If you can't go there this afternoon, so much the better. I'm speaking about the Hereafter, the there and the after. Don't forget the here and the herebefore. You should be born every day, otherwise you'll die today.'

Two years ago I bought a book on John-Paul II and I'd like to read this book inside which I might find a lot of words that pertain to local issues, wherever these local issues might be located. I hope they concern my mind and whatever I'm tempted to write about because the rest seems to be outside of the world – not only beyond my mind, my worlds, my interests and my life. We are only interested in the *parts* of the proposals, as they say and they're absolutely right because if you're interested in *everything*, you lose *everything* or at least a

few things; and among these things you might find the thing, the only thing you really need in this and other lives. Concentrate on the main points of the argument and try not to be distracted by incidental details. Why don't I *always* follow this golden rule?

I've got the book on John-Paul II and I even know on which shelf I put it last year, for I often transfer my books from one shelf to another. Oligarchs transfer oil and gas from one country to another and they always look for someone with drive and ambition: driving ambition is what most great leaders have in common. I'm not a great leader, but I hope I'm a great writer and my ambitions are centred upon eternity, not upon money, oil, Audis and the Mercedes in which every pope must drive so as not to belittle himself. Should I add 'herself'? The other day I watched a programme in which they spoke about a woman who aspired to the Vatican and the Mercedes where a real pope spends his time. Apparently she wasn't elected: her Mercedes stood empty, as if forsaken forever, and no driver wished to transfer it from one square to another, from one Rome to another Rome. Let us not forget that Moscow is the third Rome.

Suppose I'm a minor poet and the only chord I can play on my Aeolian harp is a C Minor chord or a D Minor chord: both chords were dear to Mozart, to his Black Masses and Black Piano Fantasies. I hope my chord will resound inside one ear in the 24th century.

PART TWO

I

This is already *Part Two* and I know what it means – at least in part, for no one knows for sure what another part means except if it is the part of a clock you took apart to see what the problem was; you saw the problem, you saw the agony of your clock, of your time, and you decided to put these parts together in the hope they would work for a month at least. A month is better than nothing and nothing must be better than the lack of nothing, although I don't know what this lack may mean under the circumstances and under the sun: if you have nothing at hand, you may work with it saying you have Nothing. What counts is your action, intention, and you know that if you fall asleep you may never wake, even if all alarm clocks shout, 'Wake up, otherwise you'll die forever.' You don't die forever. Why should you? You don't die for nothing either.

I should be born every day and probably every minute: if you're not born all the time, you're bound to die and this truth is unbearable as far as I can judge; and I'm sure my judgement extends beyond the end of this truth. I know I should be reborn as often as necessary to survive, to write poems and say to everyone, I'm alive and fresh as many daisies or roses that can also be fresh for two or three days unless you prevent them from drinking and eating and living. I say to everyone, 'I'm alive,' and everyone hears me because they cock their heads on one side with a slight frown; though in fact I'm not sure whether this frown is slight or not. A dog cocks its leg against a tree and I know this dog does something or everything, but I don't know what other creatures do and I don't judge their movements, their moods and whatever they might have in their minds and bodies: they're situated rather far from *my* body and mind, let alone my soul.

I wonder what is near my soul – in the neighbourhood of this parcel that belongs to God and not to the Devil whose dominion over my being has been shown on my computer screen for 20 years at least. I must be near my soul, otherwise I wouldn't have a soul, any soul to speak of; and I wouldn't speak of anything else, for only the soul counts in one's existence. So I speak of my soul and my body isn't far from my soul – it is even related to it to the point of being its receptacle and house where only souls live and have fun.

The body counts too and it talks to the soul very often, whenever it has enough time to speak of abstract things that belong either to the domain of religion or to that of philosophy. They talk to each other and I talk to them as well because I have to talk to someone or something, according to psychiatrists and mere doctors who always talk to us in order to relieve us – and all the elements hidden inside us and our former lives – of all the burdens connected (or related) to our numerous childhoods and maturities.

I often give up my soul – and also my body, for that matter, because there's only one matter on our planet, in our souls, and we have to take this matter (and also our souls) into consideration whenever we discuss our agendas, their items and other matters of some importance. God, the Almighty. The point is you don't know what is important and what is not, apart from God; neither do I in spite of my bitter, sweet and other experiences strewn all over my life, lives, souls and substances.

So I give my soul up and my soul says to my body, 'What have I done? Why are you treating me like that? Why should you forsake me for the sake of God? The Almighty and I are one and the same person.' My soul tends to adopt a falsely cheerful tone when she is upset about something.

'I'm just a body,' says my body. 'Speak to the substance.'

'Where's the substance? What is it?'

'The substance is the life and soul of whatever happens on this planet and elsewhere.'

'I am the soul and eternal life,' says the soul. 'What do you need this substance for?'

'I need *something*. I need food. The substance is my daily meal.'

‘And what about nonsense?’

‘This is *your* breakfast and dinner.’

Why should I talk of the substance when nonsense is far more important, given the stupidity of our government, of any government, unless you don’t know who guides you through time, as Borges put it. The less you know about presidents, prime ministers, foreign ministers and local government elections, the better. (I forget the precise wording of his argument. And I forget the rest as well.) Our government is in France, but it could be elsewhere – in a Swift country or any (Swiss) county, on any other planet; and I’m pretty sure that any other planet could have a government like this or that. I don’t know whether this government is like this or that, but it is a government, for what it’s worth and, as everybody knows, a bird in the hand is worth two in the bush. And any government has a few birds, either in bushes or in counties, countries and companies that fly all over the world, resolved to conquer the world and other worlds, other words. They say, ‘One million dollars’ and you say, ‘Two million dollars.’ And your two million dollars are bound to conquer one million dollars. A foregone conclusion, as easy as falling off a log. And everybody knows *that* – even your enemies, friends, animals and servants who often fall off logs, although they have neither one million dollars nor two million dollars; let alone three million dollars.

Again I’m feeling a pain I’ve known for more than 12 years and, though I was nervous on the day it reappeared near my liver, or right at the core of it, I was somewhat reassured to realise I was facing an old problem: cancer would already have killed me several times. I can’t say I was delighted to meet an old friend and no pain ever looks friendly, assuming it is a sort of visible structure that often shows up on the X-ray; but I wasn’t really scared, thinking I had to come to terms with another muscle spasm.

Why am I lying to myself? I should face the facts or the truth or my lies which delude me into believing I’ll live forever. I’m dying but I refuse to face the truth, which doesn’t mean I won’t die, for burying your head in the sand leads nowhere – not to eternal life anyway. Of course I can’t know for sure I’m dying, for I have no idea where my virtual tumours may be located unless a doctor shows me a huge dark spot – not a beauty spot, alas – on an X-ray, saying it is my tumour and not someone else’s death in disguise. When you look at an X-ray, you may think whatever comes into your head or rather what you *wish* to think at this particular moment and that’s why such a procedure is called wishful thinking. You may think that the dark spot is just a particle of the dark matter you read about in the *Herald Tribune* and that this matter brings out the structure of your body or even reveals the outline of your soul. At last you can contemplate your soul to your heart’s content without being bothered by busybodies – on condition that the doctor doesn’t mind your being too curious in her presence. Nor should she spoil the fun by uttering the word ‘death’ after tapping you on the shoulder several times, a look of intense concentration on her face. To face death and partial destruction.

For some reason people assume that the soul is white as if you couldn’t appear before God in a black dress or a black dinner jacket worn at formal social events, with matching trousers and a bow. After all, your first meeting with God is a formal social event during which you come to learn a few truths you’ve been unaware of during your lifetime spent on Earth and in cloud-cuckoo-land. Of course God (or Saint Peter) is likely to tell you a few home truths, for theologians affirm that our real home is heaven and not the Earth: the truths we learn up there are *home* truths. And they’re not in the habit of playing with words (God and Saint Peter). They just understand this idiom differently and wish to imply that a lot of punishments await us beyond the clouds and even beyond the sun.

So the soul is not necessarily white and it may be a sort of tumour, for all I know: after all, Gogol's famous novel enlarges upon the dead souls sold to the protagonist by a number of landowners whose peasants are dead along with their souls. Let us not forget that Russians serfs were called 'souls' and they felt imprisoned in their own huts on account of their masters who treated them badly, being tyrants to their fingertips. (Let us not forget their long whips.) Let us not treat this matter light-heartedly: I'm in no mood for playing with words, although words often – if not always – lead us to eternal truths, according to Lacan, among other people. The soul lives inside the body which is nothing but a prison where the soul is left to rot for most of terrestrial life, according to many philosophers. Sometimes it is given an opportunity to escape from the body – at night, for instance, assuming that the body in question can fall into a lovely deep sleep. (An Indian doctrine?) Any serf was a spitting image of the soul imprisoned within the body – hence the title of Gogol's novel.

When living in the body, the soul is not dead, otherwise the body would die as well – at least its divine portion would die forever, its eternity that depends only on the soul (and God of course). But it is partly dead because no one allows it to communicate with its Creator or at least with a few angels who have always faced the daunting task of keeping our souls in very good repair. I'm not sure that our souls can fly as far as God's abode during this proverbial deep sleep which, according to Indian philosophers, enables the soul or Atman or Whatsisname to leave the body in charge.

So, during its stay inside the body, the soul is partly dead – or imprisoned at least, which amounts to the same thing unless we are bent on splitting hairs. And half-dead souls are bound to wear black clothes that are worn in some countries as an expression of sadness about someone's death. Well, they can wear half-black clothes, adding a white touch to them – a white bow, for instance – but they shouldn't walk around their bodies in bikinis, especially if every bikini is one of those expensive designer jobs.

I don't think the pain I'm feeling has anything to do with my soul unless my soul feels like airing its grievances – by putting a complaint in the suggestions box. But where's this suggestions box, I wonder? In my liver, in my stomach, all over my body? I think this pain or whatever it is – the soul perhaps – has just set off on a round-the-body cruise because I detect its presence even in my shoulder blades, let alone in my groin, in my bowels, in all my vital organs without exception. These organs are not dead yet and I hope they're not even *half-dead*, which might allow me to live for another five years at least, otherwise I won't finish my oeuvre and life *en beauté*, as the French put it. And beauty is as important as the soul.

But, whatever I say, this pain does travel around my body and I'm partly reassured on account of its omnipresence: it doesn't seem to focus only on my liver, which would be disastrous, given the amount of alcohol I've been consuming for two weeks at least. Cirrhosis of the liver. The commonest cause of cirrhosis is alcohol consumption. I'm sick and tired of such sentences which sentence me to death – no doubt about that and other things related to death or fatal illnesses. And everything is related to death and a multitude of illnesses – if not to *all* of them – as every pessimist knows and writes in books and newspapers that are empowered to impose the death sentence for the crimes and misdemeanours committed in our world. So am I, by the way.

'Syria's heritage imperilled.' 'Job growth falls off surprisingly fast in U.S.' 'Judge subpoenas Spanish princess.' 'Prison death prompts new violence at Gaza border.' 'Kosovo talks break off as deep ethnic rift persists.' 'Putting profit over clients hurt Barclays.' 'A new gun lobby gains clout in U.S.' 'A new kind of class struggle.' 'Leaked files pull back curtain on trillions in hidden wealth.' 'Tribe sees its culture for sale. Hopis of Arizona seek to halt Paris auction, but laws to help are lacking.'

No comment. Let's watch the news first, and everyone will have an opportunity to comment at the end. I watch the news and read these articles, but I have no wish to say that everything is for sale in our world because it goes without saying and I let it go; it goes very far indeed and nothing can stop these sales, emails and what not. There's an article I like very much, which doesn't mean I don't like *all* of them to some extent, provided they announce the end of the world and my end as well. Why should the show go on after my death? Let the death of the world coincide with my own death, otherwise I might feel sad on my deathbed, saying to myself, 'Why should they live in my absence?'

The article I have in mind is entitled *The urge to purge* (by Paul Krugman). 'The push to see an economic depression as a necessary punishment for past sins is as strong as ever.' We are inveterate sinners and our daily misdeeds give rise to depressions and nervous breakdowns, for if God allows a situation like that to go unpunished He is asking for trouble or the Second Flood. So what to do? Should we thwart God's plans and obliterate his punishments? Or should we bow down before Him and beg for mercy? Some think we should bow to the inevitable and liquidate everything instead of trying to hasten recovery, saying to ourselves, 'We need monetary and fiscal stimulus. Liquidationism is a destructive doctrine – by turning our problems into a morality play of sin and retribution, it helps condemn us to a deeper and longer slump.'

I don't feel like talking about economic slumps; and yet they bother me now and then, making me think about how to enjoy life fully without going bankrupt twice a year. I no longer go to three-star restaurants on account of my diabetes which, luckily for me and my girlfriends, doesn't yet hold sway over my whole body, being in its prime, so to speak. 'It's rather immature for my age, don't you think?' I said to my doctor.

'Yes, yes,' he answered. 'But you'd better not say to it, "Stop being so silly and immature, my dear diabetes!"'

'What's the origin of this illness? The original sin or the sins I commit round the clock, even in my sleep? A non-stop sinning, I call it. A non-stop flight to Hell.'

'The notion of macroeconomics as morality play has a visceral appeal that's hard to fight,' my doctor said with a frown. 'The same goes for diabetes and other fatal illnesses. You're always dragging morality into the conversation. This pernicious habit of yours is also a sin, you know. And in your case it may become a mortal sin because you should go on a diet instead of liquidating your body. You drink too much, you think too much. Don't tense your shoulders, just relax. And don't forget to take my magic pills. They won't cure you, of course, but they'll allow you to live a little longer. Some people try hypnotism to cure themselves of addictions. I suspect you have a drinking problem. And you should tighten your belt if you wish to reward me adequately for my kindness and medical skills.'

My doctor is addicted to long-winded monologues and often pontificates on how I should behave to please him and deserve his esteem largely dependent on my status symbols and bank accounts. And my bank accounts are not voluminous enough to make sure that his investigation of the pain I mentioned earlier will give a satisfactory answer to my question: Am I dying? If I say to him I feel this pain all over my body, he will not speak of metastasis, but may insist on a sort of overall analysis – cell by cell – to find out which cell belongs to the family of cancers. And there are many cells in my body and probably some of them are devoted to the cause of diseases to the extent of destroying my body in spite of its apparent hospitality. I don't think my body treats them badly; and yet I drink wine, beer and even whisky that is sure to kill a number of cells, making their comrades swear vengeance on their killer. And this army isn't likely to kill whisky or even champagne because,

whenever I get a cork out of a bottle, the contents of this bottle begin to die; all these alcoholic beverages I'm speaking of crumple up in agony as I pour them into my glasses. Once inside my body, they die definitively and the army of vengeful cells invariably aims its rifles at my vital organs that are unable to withstand its numerous and murderous onslaughts.

Are they cancerous cells or not? That is the question and this question can't be answered unless you know *exactly* what goes on inside your body – and not in your absence, mind you. Suppose you read the following sentence, 'The smell of cigarette smoke confirmed what he had suspected: there had been a party in his absence.' You go away and come home a week later only to find that your house is regularly used by your friends who need a lot of rooms for their cocktail and bachelor parties. Immediately you ring them up and they say the accusations are not true, but there's no smoke without fire – that's what *you* say to them in an accusatory tone of voice. What can you say to your cells? I smell a rat? You know they're up to something, but you simply have no idea what to say and sometimes it is important to resort to a lot of right words uttered in the right place at the right time. 'The key to success is to be in the right place at the right time,' as they say and they're right for once; at least the words they utter belong to the category of 'right words'.

Of course I'd rather speak to my cells than to my doctor who is a pompous old prig, judging from what *he* says and does in my presence, and probably in my absence as well. Besides, he is totally incapable of taking a joke. I wasn't serious when I broached the subject of original sin in relation to my diabetes which, incidentally, *might* have originated in original sin, come to think of it: Wasn't that apple too sweet? Anyway, the doctor is totally wrong when he blames me for being too moral because I'm rather *amoral*: I am at one with Nietzsche for whom humanity is situated beyond good and evil – but not beyond the grave, mind you. We're of the same mind on most moral, amoral and philosophical issues, given that most of these issues dance with Zarathustra on his and his master's mountains.

Nothing happens in your absence, as far as your cells and illnesses are concerned: they love you so much they can't bring themselves to take leave of you or let you leave them for the sake of some journey or other. You're not allowed to leave your own house which, to all intents and purposes, belongs to your cancerous cells all the more irremediably since they *own* your house and you're just a glorified lodger. It's often said that if you have a cat, you no longer own the house where this cat lives and eats: just feed your cat who tolerates your presence insofar as you feed him or her properly. But cats are adorable creatures and cancerous cells can't even play the part of the Beast in the famous story that features a beauty and a monster – everyone knows this story or a film version of it and ugly people hope they'll be loved by princesses even if they never go to beauty parlours.

Not every beast is a prince in disguise and the cells I'm talking about – it is better not to repeat the word 'cancerous' too often – are just beasts and nothing or rather nobody else, given their propensity for destroying you. Even if these cells *were* beautiful princes and princesses, I wouldn't fall in love with them; and yet many people fall in love with those who kill them, as Oscar Wilde put it. Actually his account of this affair differs from mine: he depicts the same situation, but in reverse order. From *his* point of view, my cells love me to such an extent they can't refrain from killing me; I'm supposed to reciprocate and love them in my turn. I mean, every true gentleman thinks he is duty bound to love the woman who loves him dearly: he shouldn't spurn her love unless he doesn't mind behaving like a cad. But in this particular case I'm prepared to behave like a cad, kicking these pernicious cells out of my house or rather out of my body. Anyway, my body is my castle, isn't it?

I often talk to my soul and I don't see why I should shun any verbal contact with my cells that might prove to be sensitive to my words, provided I'm persuasive and pathetic – an old disfigured gentleman. (My face swelled up where I was stung by a bee.) But first I talk to myself, for my mother used to warn me against making hasty decisions: it might be better not to speak to my cells at all, otherwise they're sure to swell with pride when listening to my speech. (My leg puffed up all round the insect bite.) It is difficult to know how to approach such a complex situation, but I really ought to approach it in a more scientific manner – in a very mature and systematic way. By the way, I *am* disfigured and try as I may, I can't hide my new ugliness between parentheses and suchlike ploys destined to conceal our approaching death. I wonder if there are *really* so many insects inside my room. Does the fault lie with the cells?

On second thoughts, I decided to talk to them, saying to myself, 'No harm in trying. If you don't talk to them, they might think you're resolved to ignore and offend them. Your cells take professional pride in their work and you should respect their feelings, otherwise they won't respect yours. They'll no longer respect your body and whatever happens to be inside it. They haven't killed you yet because they respect your body and the advantages it offers them – creature comforts, so to speak. You should talk to *them* and not to *yourself*. Why *should* you talk to yourself? You've no intention of committing suicide. Of course your doctor never fails to remind you of your drinking problem. And I shouldn't forget that I'm under my doctor's orders to cut down on fatty food and to drink no alcohol for at least six months.'

Usually I stop talking to myself as soon as my doctor turns up in one of the corners of my interior monologue. So I do my best to forget about him, but since I can't forget about my cells – the pain reminds me of them all the time – I turned to them last night and struck up a conversation with these complete strangers. (I know them only through my pains and fears.) I wished to tell them, 'You're full of good intentions, but you never do anything about them!' but then I changed my mind and decided not to rub them up the wrong way. So I said, 'Good morning! How are you today?'

'We're fine, thank you.'

It is no easy task to interpret these words because they sound so conventional you're at a loss to know what they mean, what their intentions are; and you doubt their sincerity. People do all they can to sound cheerful whenever they're asked about their health, wealth and projects – even if they're dying and their companies are on the edge of ruin. Some of them even say 'fine' on their deathbeds because they want you to believe they're sure to take a non-stop flight to Paradise – no stopover in Purgatory, if you please – and so they already see the light at the end of the tunnel and then the tunnel fades away, leaving the light alone. If you ask them, 'Do you see the light at the end of the tunnel?' they may answer, 'There's nothing but light. No more tunnels, no more lives. Nirvana, nirvana, nirvana.'

But I shouldn't forget I'm not talking to these people who walk through their tunnels and pay no attention to my cells and their destructive work bent on destroying my hopes, prospects, projects and the bottles I intend to drink in the near future; and also in the *distant* future. I say to the cells: 'Do you intend to ruin my hopes and remove all these bottles from my life?'

'Of course we'll remove them,' they answer. 'You have to give up drinking for health reasons.'

'Are you my benefactors or enemies?'

'Do you recall what Mephistopheles says to Faust?'

‘He wants to shower us with presents but destroys everything instead. Or he’s bent on destroying everything but willy-nilly has a beneficial influence on humanity. I confuse Goethe with Dostoevsky. Doesn’t matter! Could you please tell me what *you* intend to do?’

‘We want to shower you with presents.’

II

These cells multiply, replenish the Earth. The whole history is swarming with them: wherever you go, you find these cells and their progeny that crawls under your feet and bites you from time to time. And you have no time to elude the bites because they're everywhere, not only in Gibbon's *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* where they proliferate so fast you can hardly turn the heavy pages. You turn them as fast as you can, but the cancerous cells go even faster, leaving the book and invading your private space, your privacy on which they shamelessly obtrude as they disregard the laws of physics and common sense. You can say to yourself and your mind, 'I am sure that common sense will prevail in the end,' but it doesn't prevail, contrary to your expectations, and the book enters your life as if it was an unexpected visitor, a newborn gatecrasher. It barges through the crowd of your thoughts and sensations, and you have no alternative but to accept this intrusion: you're not dead yet and only death can allow you to get rid of this decline and fall – of our history.

Of course our history pursues you, even if you withdraw from the world (and history) to live a solitary life on a desert island where no savages will ever keep you company in spite of your admiration for Daniel Defoe. The point is you can't withdraw from history (and from parentheses) either on desert islands or at home – in your bed in the depth of which many nightmares are bound to remind you of the Second World War, of Stalin's cruelty. You can't withdraw from yourself either and your own self is linked to history – not only to your mother's life and her body which also has its own history where you were born and where you would like to die, according to some philosophers.

The decline of the Roman Empire has a lot in common with your own body, its decline and decay due to the military action of cells and other instruments of doom which never leave you alone because they're the emissaries of the Devil; and His rule is everlasting, according to some theologians. Without the Devil, they argue, there's no good and no God, for good should be counterbalanced by evil, otherwise no one will ever know the difference between these two phenomena and also the value of good and virtue. Virtue can shine only in the darkness of evil, as the saying goes: you're doomed to suffer for the sake of light and hope radiating from the end of the Bible, from many resurrections and hymns methodically performed to the glory of God.

Unfortunately the virtue of my body cannot shine at all – even in the presence of the malignant tumours I've got inside my self, ego and other components of my body that continues to decay either rapidly or slowly. What is certain, however, is that it decays and rots like the fruit you leave to rot either on the trees or in the fields, which amounts to the same thing because it doesn't really matter where you rot: what counts is your decay and death. I'm tempted to compare the decay of my body to that of the Roman Empire, and yet I know for sure that in none of my former lives did I live at that time or fight either for Roman Emperors or against them and their legions. Decay is universal. You can compare it to anything and anyone, provided you speak of earthly creatures, either animate or inanimate: no one knows for sure what goes on in other corners of the universe where there's probably enough room for unpretentious immortals.

'People want to work at home and avoid the tumult of being in an office. More and more students are opting for online courses and avoiding relating to teachers and other students.' I got this piece of information from an issue of the *International Herald Tribune*, not from any screen; and yet I've got a computer and a television set through which I communicate only with the dead who can't walk by my side to instruct me in the use of pen and pencil, of quill and water music. 'Cities were once the engines of civilisation because the collision

of many personalities and ideas and dreams created technological, social and political innovation and progress.' I can't agree more with this newspaper printed a few days ago and not in the days of Marcus Aurelius who might have said something along these lines, judging from his famous book which I opened on my lap last night when in the mood for his thoughts; they coincide with mine and therefore do not estrange me from my species.

My species doesn't always think about life in terms of dignity because it simply forgets this word that can be replaced by more useful words and expressions such as: 'investment', 'capital investment', 'investment bank'. What could they say about dignity, I wonder? They don't say to themselves, 'I think everyone should be able to die with dignity' because they don't think about death at all as if they could carry on playing with their computers and cell phones forever, even in the Hereafter about which they don't think either. They pray, of course, but they pray for their lives, not for their afterlives, and they're probably right if they keep in mind Nietzsche's teaching and Jewish precepts. The point is that they don't think at all because their thoughts are more akin to four-letter words than to the Talmud, the Kabbalah and the basement of the Jewish Museum from where I look at the world, at the stars. If you wish to go up, you have to go down first, otherwise you risk losing your self-esteem and probably your very life, given that your life means nothing unless it is a real life, whatever it means.

Marcus Aurelius says we should behave with dignity and independence to the detriment of the thoughts that are likely to distract us from dignity and the point where death and life meet in a warm, fraternal embrace. We may accomplish our task in less than 10 minutes, but even this task should be accomplished with dignity – as if it was our last action in this world. Everything should be done on one's deathbed so one shouldn't content oneself with one's groans and moans, with one's agony and last words. To some extent, every last word is a first word and vice versa – otherwise we can't live properly either on earth or under it and even heaven isn't likely to accept our bodies and souls unless our last words are also our first words.

Marcus Aurelius also says the outside world is bound to involve us in its plans for this and that – for cities and countries, for ecology and democracy, for home economics and growth hormones, and consequently our job involves travelling to London and Singapore, to Geneva and Madrid. And our friends say, 'The plot of his life is too involved – we can't understand it.' 'The plot of her life is too involved – we can't understand it.' Neither she nor I understand it, to tell the truth; and both she and I are always telling the truth. We just move from one place to another, from one thought to another as if we could really move within space and time, within their bounds, within the bounds of eternity. How often do we forget about the point where life and death meet forever?

PART THREE

In one of my long-winded speeches, I said to myself I should wait before tackling the problem of Part III because I had many other problems to turn my attention to and these problems were connected with my moving to Belgium where I had found an English cottage about which I had dreamt in my youth. Sure enough, the very word ‘cottage’ used to excite me to the extent of excluding palaces and castles from my imagination and the daily Soviet routine which might allow me to catch a glimpse of Russian equivalents of what is called a ‘chateau’ in France and also in England – when the English deign to speak about the monuments one admires in the neighbourhood of the Loire. In the 19th century, the Russians adopted the word ‘cottage’, thinking they were mature enough to metamorphose it completely, adjusting its contours and contents to their own needs and deeds – to their notion of architecture and its usefulness. What they nowadays dub ‘Russian cottage’ has nothing to do with its English counterpart. I shouldn’t use the word ‘counterpart’ in this connection, for fear of blurring lines, distinctions and boundaries between reality and fantasy, authenticity and inaccuracy, originals and fakes. During my speeches I swear quite a lot, but even I draw the line at saying certain words which remain beyond these lines; and yet they’re not fakes, contrary to what happens in the domain of architecture, especially if the Russians attempt to re-write its history from *their* point of view.

What I mean to say boils down to a clear distinction between a Russian cottage and an English one, and this distinction is so clear and important that, when writing to my friends about this joyful event, about this new page in the book of my life, I make it crystal clear I bought an *English* cottage, not its *Russian* equivalent, counterpart, cousin or colleague. I also send them a few photographs which corroborate my assertion, excluding from my friends’ visions and thoughts any vestige of what they’re used to visualising when reminded of Russian houses; these look like huts maladroitly borrowed from some remote village.

We all know that the outside world is a mixture of nationalities and languages. No wonder we often hear the following question, ‘What are the basic constituents of the mixture?’ Men, animals, roundabouts, shops, boutiques, trees, several moons – Jupiter has at least 16 moons – and a lot of black holes into which these constituents invariably plunge headlong as if hoping to have a swim in the Black Sea. At least within my walls there are no black holes; and yet I wouldn’t mind having a swim in the Black Sea which doesn’t necessarily remind one of black holes and death, of the decline and fall of the Roman Empire, of Babylon and Schumer, of high culture and writers of genius. Of course Pushkin often looked at the Black Sea as he stood on some crag or other, but he didn’t disappear in it because the Black Sea wasn’t a black hole in the days of Pushkin and Lermontov. Today, there are only black holes in the cosmos and even snowwomen are black – not only on account of pollution and frightful weather reports.

I can’t devote my time to the cosmos only and it is high time I paid more attention to a small portion of it; however small and insignificant, this portion, alias my flat, must eclipse for a while the rest of Creation and even the stars. I don’t always look up whenever I take a stroll by night – Thales’ destiny doesn’t appeal to me – but when I do notice the stars I don’t analyse them because I can’t tell one bear from the other and even Andromeda escapes my notice, overpowered by my crass ignorance. Is that what they call two proverbial constellations? There’s a small bear in the sky, if I remember rightly; and a big bear keeps her company.

I park my car in Versailles. A man comes up to me and says my car is parked illegally. I answer him and he says, ‘You’re not even French.’

‘Careful you don’t slip – there’s water on the floor.’ My guardian angel said nothing of the kind. Actually he (or she) didn’t say anything when I put a plastic bag into the rubbish bin and turned back, heading for my car which was to take me to the market. My guardian angel saw me slip on the marble floor and he knew I would break four ribs as a result of his negligence. Why didn’t he protect my body from the harmful effects of this fall? Of course I ought to have clasped my hands, and glancing upward, implored divine assistance – before leaving my flat that morning covered in a thick shroud of snow. I did not, but I’m sure my guardian angel paid no attention to this sin of omission: his mission was to make me realise I had to leave my house, my castle and France in order to settle somewhere else. Nor did he prevent the man I touched upon in the previous paragraph from insulting me near the marketplace, for he knew I would feel offended and reflect on human injustice and iniquity related to Versailles, to Paris – to France in general.

I spend a week in Touraine and when I come back, I have dinner and go to bed where I often forget my worries and the fatigue I accumulate in the course of my long forays into parallel and perpendicular worlds. I wake up around 2 a.m. and reach for the nearest light switch. I wish I could write at this point, ‘Mysteriously, the light came on, although no one was near the switch.’ It is always pleasant to speak of light, even if the light you write about doesn’t make its appearance at the end of the proverbial tunnel, on the threshold of some imaginary paradise.

My hand was near the switch and it actually touched it ever so slightly: my light is activated by the slightest pressure. Contrary to my expectations – for once they were neither great nor small – the light didn’t come on. I can’t even say I had expected anything: over time, switching on lights becomes automatic and you don’t think about this action in biblical terms, harking back to the Creation and God’s mythical injunction. Instead of light and its benevolence, I saw darkness and I didn’t say to myself we needed another god – or the same God, for that matter – to switch on the universal light, destroying darkness in my flat and also elsewhere. I won’t remain in my flat for the rest of my life, and to go to my new house, alias my cottage, I must drive more than 300 kilometres, which is out of the question if some light, however weak and sickly, doesn’t assist me on the road.

To tell the truth, I didn’t pray; and yet I know that sometimes one *must* pray, otherwise darkness settles down in one’s flat and castle, covering furniture, bathrooms and other rooms with its blankets and even with one’s blood, for one can’t live without light and, if surrounded by darkness on all sides, one has no alternative but to bump against tables and their legs, wounding one’s own legs and other parts of one’s body. That’s how blood is born in one’s flat which would never have seen blood, if the light hadn’t shown its true nature, its treacherous disposition. Of course I know my flat by heart: it’s not for nothing that I’ve lived in it for more than 32 years; but some chairs – I don’t know their whereabouts by heart – always get in the way and I fall and may break another rib or two, if I don’t manage to protect my fragile bones from the law of gravity. ‘*C’est grave, c’est grave*,’ as the French say; and yet, when talking about a situation in these terms, they don’t *always* think about the law of gravity and its cruelty.

Well, I didn’t fall as I proceeded to the nearest corridor to find out if the disappearance of light was a local phenomenon confined to my room, to the space where my bed and consequently my dreams are located at night: daydreaming is a more spacious phenomenon, for it can take place even in the middle of the street, in the midst of cars, buses and bicycles. I grope my way along the walls – why not use the present tense? – and realise that the light I’m looking for doesn’t hide in the corridor where darkness seems to have replaced it forever; at

least that's the feeling I get as I continue to grope my way along the walls which do not really differ from the ones I had to cope with when trying to get out of my room. Yes, all this is part of eternal recurrence, of the doctrine propounded by Pythagoras and others: I *continue* to grope my way along the walls as I write about this incident, this bad or good omen that seems to intimate the following absolute truth: you must leave France before it is too late.

Well, I am in the entrance hall now and I desperately try to locate the key I left in the lock last night; I know that if I don't succeed, I won't be able to open the front door of my flat to find out whether the light I've lost in the course of my life *continues* to shine on the landing which separates my flat from that of my neighbours. Everything seems to be mine at present with the exception of the light on which I no longer am eager to count, for I never forgive those – men and women or just a phenomenon – who let me down and don't care about my wellbeing and creature comforts. I touch another switch and the landing responds by showing me all its nooks and crannies; and yet I don't really need them for the moment, given that I have no intention of going out around 2 a.m. Why should I leave my flat in the middle of the night? It is not a midsummer night and I can dream in my bedroom, provided I reach it despite the problems I may encounter on the way, in the corridor where my cat often ambles as he looks for my body and fingers, their warmth. And since my cat is not afraid of my feet, I should walk very carefully so as not to trample him to death. In this case, I'd better get down on all fours and head for my bed in this way, otherwise I may trip over my cat and hear a scream I don't want to hear because this kind of scream is associated in my mind with pain and death, not with the Hereafter and eternal bliss.

But I have to go to my cubbyhole first because the main switch – the one that lords it over the other switches and electricity in general – is situated within the bounds of this dark hole where I also keep the bottles I bought at various auctions many years ago. I get down on all fours – my cat might stroll in that area – and reach the cubbyhole in no time at all, for I can move rather quickly whenever I take the trouble to get on all fours. I even ask myself if I shouldn't spend the rest of my life like an animal, imitating my cat to some extent. My cat's movements and life in general do not seem to be hampered by the posture to which poor humans resort only exceptionally, when they have no other way of solving their problems and getting their neighbour or uncle off the hook. Actually my cat wouldn't be pleased if I asked him to walk on his hind legs because he is used to his present posture, to his present way of moving about, and he is unlikely to change his mind and habits on account of my requests and desires. It is I who should adopt his ways so as not to think about death all the time; and the only way to get rid of this thought, of this persecution, is to become an animal who doesn't know the first thing about death. 'Man has created death,' says Yeats.

Of course, on the threshold of death, many animals go to the woods where a number of deathbeds await them, making things easier for any dying animal who dies on the lap of the cosmos instead of being cooped up in some cubbyhole provided by his or her master. Nothing prevents me from going to the woods on the eve of my death; actually I go to the woods almost every day as if I thought that death could come at any moment, even during a period when my wellbeing and health seem to be beyond suspicion. Well, he *can* come at any moment and I wonder whether it's not better to stay at home all the time, not far from my bed which is unlikely to let me down in the presence of death and his scythe.

To cut a long story short – why doesn't Proust ever use this expression? – I touch the main switch and the light I've been looking for is suddenly restored to its original splendour which is associated in my mind with the

moment when God spoke to it for the first and last time. Actually I don't know whether God really *spoke* to light during that mythical moment, for if you say 'Let there be light', you seem to speak to your servant who is supposed to touch the main switch of the universe to illuminate entrance halls, landings, corridors, nebulae and planets: all of them need light to struggle for life successfully, without suffering defeats every other minute.

In the Soviet Union, they used to tell a lot of jokes and one of them related to the light we come across when re-reading the Bible; but the light about which they used to joke was manipulated by an electrician taking his cue from God Himself. 'Let there be light,' said an electrician as he took a candle out of his pocket. Well, I went one better when I switched on my lights through the agency of the main switch situated in the cubbyhole where I've got five *eurocaves* and more than a thousand bottles of wine.

'Let there be light,' says an electrician.

'Do you take yourself for God?' asks the hostess.

'It would be presumptuous of me to rule the world and its numerous waves. Besides, I'm not eager to shoulder all the blame for poor exam results.'

'What exams? What results?'

'Our life is nothing but a series of exams. And we fail all of them, don't we? Look at the world. And look at my candle. Isn't it beautiful? It's better not to use too many spotlights when dealing with our everyday life. Would you like to be standing alone on stage in the spotlight? Everybody would see your sins. This candle is able to hide them. Even your furniture looks better during your candlelit dinners. Why not spend your life at a dinner table adorned with candles and their lights?'

'What about jogging and other exercises? Should I run round the table?'

'Absolutely no sport! What counts is your spirit. You can drink a bottle of whisky every day – whenever you're in the mood for taking a cigar out of your mouth.'

'Are you alluding to Winston Churchill? He would have lived to the ripe old age of 120, if he hadn't drunk three bottles of champagne every morning.'

'Why should you train all your spotlights on death? Just watch the wax as it drips down the side of this candle.'

To cut a long story short, I finally managed to restore the lights, but I thought I should wait for a while before allowing myself to fall asleep because the lights could play another dirty trick on me, disregarding the wines and their fragility: the life of a bottle chiefly depends on the temperature to which it is exposed. But the lights turned out to be kind and caring: they were reluctant to prevent me from sleeping my fill after a long day – not the longest day in the history of mankind, I must admit – during which I drove from point T (Touraine) to point V (Versailles) without any coffee or tea break.

Nothing about my life excites me at present; and yet I felt excited as I returned to my bed after imitating God's exploit which I didn't accompany with the words known to every schoolboy, even if the schoolboy in question knows these words only because of the story I told some time ago – the story featuring an electrician and a curious hostess. I felt overexcited and even doctors say you might and indeed must drink something to appease or placate your nerves which are very sensitive to alcohol, to its soothing influence and all-too-human warmth. So I said to myself, 'I think I'll take their advice and open a bottle of Pomerol,' and I didn't add, 'It's easier said than done' because I did open the bottle I had in mind when hitting upon the idea of soothing my nerves with a bottle of red wine. I opened and drank it, emptying one glass after another, taking my time and that

of the night I was living through, and consequently the night grew smaller and smaller until it reached the size associated with dawn and sunrise. In other words, I spent a quasi-sleepless night on account of the darkness created by my electricity which had been attacked neither by a glass of water nor by another example of my customary negligence. Indeed, I spilt no water on the wires over which I usually jump as I walk around my cubbyhole, and for once my cat had no desire to fiddle with the same wires – not in the course of that night anyway. I can't help wondering why I had to cope with that darkness after having slept for two hours in my bed which is not in the habit of springing surprises on anybody. I don't think the aforementioned power cut originated in one of my nightmares. For all their influence and magnitude, my nightmares have a tendency to remain private as they spread around my brain and body, answering to some sort of energy which is resolved to stuff a number of horrors into my sleep; but these horrors do not overstep the bounds of this sleep of mine and usually I don't wake in the middle of the night to find I can't avail myself of light and its biblical overtones. So I attribute the power cut I lived through three weeks ago to the energy I enlarged upon when talking about my mishaps and the insults made by a French passer-by who was keen to exclude me from the list of his compatriots.

Is that how one can prolong one's life beyond its limits? You write a huge paragraph, dwelling upon an unpleasant episode and this episode, which actually lasted only a quarter of an hour, becomes eternal and beautiful. You no longer remember its unpleasant aspects and plunge instead into immortality, into the Bergsonian duration you can undeniably trust as you struggle with time and its incurable shortness. By using the Proustian stratagem you dilate the arteries of time and realise that time no longer suffers from high blood pressure and is therefore unlikely to have a stroke, depriving you of the rest of your life: you would die as a result of this stroke or paralysis. God helps those who help themselves and, according to this saying, you're supposed to do your share of the work by writing long sentences, long paragraphs, long novels, which may enable you to dwell on an insignificant power cut for hours and hours.

And what about God's share of the work? Two days ago, I saw a documentary on God's power which is so omnipresent and omniscient one wonders why, now and then, God fails to interfere in our internal affairs; in other words, I say to myself there are power cuts in the universe. Our wars and other disasters we have to deal with round the clock are entirely due to the incidents related to these power cuts, to God's absence, to darkness.

In the early Eighties, two pilots felt it was their duty to tell the authorities about an object they saw in the sky while carrying out their customary tests. They might have been tempted to destroy this UFO, although they didn't say anything to this effect; but UFOs and their pilots have the knack of reading human thoughts through an in-built telepathic machine. No wonder the UFO's owner was annoyed by the earthlings and their murderous thoughts circulating around his omnipresent brain, and he began to annoy them in his turn – it was a male for once – by pulling their tail, so to speak. As a result of this mischief, the plane wasn't flying through the air as fast as it used to and the authorities, who watched the competition from their airport, got the feeling that, in spite of the noise made by the engines, the plane was literally *crawling* across the sky like a nine-week-old baby. Shortly afterwards it crashed into a clump of trees and unfortunately the pilots didn't live to tell the tale, as they say; in other words, they said nothing at all and the authorities didn't take the trouble to question them about their meeting with the extra-terrestrial warrior who stood amidst the same trees. And even today his white dress can be seen in the film I've been writing about for some time.

In the Russian film they talk about extra-terrestrials, but the white figure they show when describing the plane crash as a result of which two pilots died after a short battle with a flying saucer reminds me of angels, not of ordinary extra-terrestrial citizens. Is that what my guardian angel looks like? A white dress, not a black dinner jacket. I like the contrast of the white trousers with the black jacket, but for once I'm prepared to sacrifice the elegance of my taste to the requirements associated with guardians angels and the role they can play in one's life; and if wearing white dresses is their wont, a sort of ritual without which they can't guard one against heart attacks and road accidents, I bow to my guardian angel's pressure and allow him to wear whatever he wishes.

I shouldn't devote too much time to the Hereafter and its affinities with the world where I continue to struggle for life and murder death which doesn't want to die because death must fear death as much as other creatures. Is death a creature, my own flesh and blood? The answer to this question is beyond my ken and even God can't answer it, I suppose, because He has other fish to fry; and so do I, by the way. I mean there are many questions on my writing desk and even on the walls of my room where I probe into the mysteries of the world; and even this room of mine is a mystery to which I have no keys. I can't open anything in it, either a wall or a painting I hung on this wall many years ago. And I shouldn't busy myself with the Hereafter as long as I look perplexed while sitting down in front of my computer which waits for my fingers and their solutions to universal problems. As a Russian song has it, 'It's too early for me to die. I always have so many things to attend to when I come back home.'

How to reach the eternity I read about in Spinoza's works and *elsewhere*, as I often say to intimate there are other worlds on screens and in the streets where we walk and talk, thinking we know the streets in question and have no need to look up their names on a street plan. In point of fact, we walk, talk and think in the middle of *other* streets about which we know nothing or next to nothing, but we continue to talk about presidents and prime ministers instead of trying to find out where we are in order not to lie when answering the following question, 'Where is your office, then?'

'In another street.'

'What's the name of this street you're talking about?'

'I don't know.'

'You may get lost if you talk like that. Your office will get lost too. You'll lose your job as a result of your ignorance. And they'll say about you, "He's never managed to hold down a steady job."'

'There's nothing steady in this world of ours.'

'You're wrong. The last few years have seen a *steady* increase in the number of infections.'

There has been a *steady* decrease in the number of minutes I'm allowed to spend on Earth which happens to be the only planet accessible to my feet and hands: sometimes I just have to get down on all fours. Minutes, seconds, hours. Their procession moves through the streets and rooms at a steady pace and nothing can stop it – not even the universal conflagration, for eternal recurrence is already under way, paving the way to circular time and another decline and fall of the Roman Empire. These two processions – my time and theirs – are bound to meet in the middle of some street, but they will not fraternize, contrary to what usually happens when two armies are weary of the war and a lot of soldiers hug and kiss each other in the middle of a battlefield where their comrades say pensively, 'I think I'll have a bloodbath and go to the Hereafter.' As soon as my time gets in touch

with the future, it will disappear of its own accord without taking the trouble to consult my doctor who might say to both my time and the future, 'I've given him a clean bill of health.'

The only problem I've been facing since my birth is time and its procession which I'm tempted to compare to the manifestation I didn't take part in despite my aversion to the present government and its doings, moods, whims and hesitations. Millions of people could be seen in the streets of Paris, provided you had enough money to hire a helicopter and fly over Paris for hours and hours: 'There has been a steady increase in the number of demonstrators,' as a journalist said to his microphone. I wish he could say something along these lines about my life, my time-procession, my minutes and years, my future. Millions of hours will gather to demonstrate against death.

II

I've achieved a lot in my life and I feel I've had a good run for my money. My last words? Even if I had a time machine on my writing desk, I wouldn't travel as far as my death to find out what I'll say on my deathbed, right before the very last moment when only angels speak to you to let you know where and how you have to go: I'm not sure you're allowed to *fly* in their company in the direction of Paradise and St Peter's keys. Usually they say 'a pair of wings', but I wouldn't mind having as many as *four* wings: in my childhood I preferred dragonflies to birds. It is probably more useful to find out how many wings I'll have upon my arrival in Paradise, but I have no time machine at my disposal – I don't even have a pair of stilts – and therefore I'll have to wait until my last conscious moments when I'll tell my dearest friends, 'Please, pay attention to what I'm about to say. These are my last words, my last word – duty. By the way, can you see any wings sprouting from my shoulders?'

Can one be happy in the world where I live and try to achieve a lot, although there are heavy odds against people succeeding in such a bad economic climate, as they point out in the newspapers I buy almost every morning as I go to Montrichard – a small town in Touraine – and buy whatever I need for a bottle of wine I'll drink around 8 p.m. You can add that artistic climate is even worse than the European economy, the euro and other components of material life; in other words, our spiritual life has lost its stuffing or *prima materia* out of which humanity used to create our masterpieces. Suppose you're acclaimed by both the multitude and your peers and, after finishing yet another masterpiece, you say to yourself, 'Now I can rest on my laurels for a while.' And no one says to you, 'Just because you've got the Nobel prize for literature doesn't mean you can rest on your laurels.' On the contrary, everyone says to you, 'After 50 years of literary labours, you should lie down for a much-needed rest.'

Let us compare your laurels to an ordinary cushion that has lost its stuffing over 40 or 50 years of loyal servitude. You remember what your mother said to you 20 years ago, 'This cushion is losing its stuffing,' but you paid no attention to these judicious remark as if taking your cue from those managers and agents who declare that the number of geniuses in today's world is equal if not superior to what our ancestors used to come across in concert halls, theatres and libraries. The world is losing its stuffing, but there are many journalists on the editorial staff of the *New York Times* and they write day in day out, 'Masterpiece, masterpiece, a stroke of genius, masterpiece, a touch of genius, masterpiece, from the age of three, she showed signs of genius.' Now she is 33 and I can't find any signs of genius in her brain, but there's a laurel wreath on her head.

Let us compare these laurels – or any other laurels, for that matter – to an ordinary cushion that continues to lose its stuffing, for the show must go on; and it is a genuine show, given that every time you go to bed, you find one or two feathers on the sheets and, needless to say, these feathers are very beautiful, almost as beautiful as a laurel wreath. But you don't feel comfortable when you put your head down on the cushion and try to fall asleep before your organism gets used to the fatigue you've felt for more than an hour so that you did all you could to reach your bed – and this questionable, unreliable cushion of yours – in no time at all. You're resting on your laurels now – I'm sorry for such a down-to-earth comparison – but the sleep you've been waiting for since you first felt the onslaught of the fatigue eludes you. This reminds me of Glinka's opera *Ruslan and Ludmila* in the middle of which one of the heroes finds himself in a harem or a brothel. No wonder the long-awaited sleep 'flees him', to use his own expression. He goes on as follows, 'A multitude of familiar shades are dancing around me and I glimpse them fleetingly through a door left ajar.'

Once I found myself in a similar situation and my virtuous soul wanted me to take a sleeping pill, but I wouldn't hear of it, needless to say; for an hour or two I kept a watchful eye on those women to see how they

behaved in the vicinity of my room. There are no women either in the vicinity of my bed or anywhere else: when I look out of the window, I see no women, but two tractors move in the field I've never crossed for fear of getting lost; and a few birds are singing someone's praises. Nor are there any laurels, but I still cherish the idea I hit upon last night – to compare this day and age to a cushion that is losing its stuffing. Why am I so fond of this comparison? Because today you can't rest on your laurels or rather you can't *fall asleep* on your laurels and, as every poet knows, sleep is the best cure for fatigue and anxiety. You're used to keeping your head in a higher position, which usually enables you to get in touch with God Who never condescends to join you on the cushion that continues to lose its stuffing in spite of your frustrations. So today you can't rest on your laurels because the cushion your head is lying on is too hard and therefore uncomfortable.

'I've achieved a lot in my life,' and your relatives nod their heads so as not to contradict you at a critical moment, in the middle of a turning point, otherwise you may take a right turn instead of a left turn, getting lost in another afterlife situated *beyond* the Hereafter. What *have* I achieved, may I ask? In my youth I wrote an essay on Balzac's creative output, but I've lived without him for almost 50 years and, frankly speaking, I'm in no mood for resuming our relationship which might have got lost in another universe. But during my visit to a local bookshop, I lighted upon a CD for which one of my favourite actors – Michael Lonsdale – had recorded *Le chef-d'oeuvre inconnu* – a short story I must have read in my youth, and I bought the CD as if I *could* recapture my youth through words and images. A painter of genius – for once the word 'genius' is not out of place – explains at length what an artist should achieve in order to resurrect a fragment of the past, a human body one has been in love with for many years, if not for eternity. I've achieved a lot in my life, but what about the past? Have I raised it from the dead? And what about eternity? Have I reached its borders, its own garden of Eden?

The old man, alias the painter of genius, talks about space, life and the lifeless bodies which often meet you in the middle of a picture gallery where you're bound to stumble upon many corpses – along with the masterpieces created by Giovanni Bellini and Giotto. Lifeless creatures, corpses. The old man repeats these words over and over again, taking no notice of the saying 'Sarcasm is the lowest form of humour' – because he's got only a smattering of English and has no intention of learning Shakespeare's sonnets by heart. He talks about light and numerous shades, about volumes and a leg that has lost its stuffing: you're not eager to hold it for a while, pressing it against your cheek; you know that any display of affection would be incongruous, if not ridiculous. And then the old artist shows his masterpiece to a few young colleagues who see a lot of colours and lines that seem to reflect disorder, the Dark Ages, the Darkest Ages, this day and age – not the 19th century, mind you – our declines and falls, our mess, our Black Mass. But the visitors spot a foot that seems to have escaped from the disaster to which humanity bows every day, saying, 'Technological progress has been so rapid over the last few years,' and 'The recent free elections mark the next step in the country's progress towards democracy.'

Is that what my novel looks like? A number of lines, cubes, colours, a criss-cross pattern, another criss-cross pattern, a dark passage, my underground, my Jewish museum, my Holocaust.

Eternity lives at the centre of a circle or probably inside it, covering the whole of its space with the exception of the circumference used by time that can't help moving along it as if this circumference was a motorway of sorts. Time is duty bound to *travel* along this motorway or road – without either reducing or picking up its speed. In the Old Testament the sun comes to a standstill, allowing the Jewish army to do what had

to be done in accordance with eternal laws, but time continued to move along its circumference to enable the Jews to do the job, which means that time never stops – as long as it preserves its old name and identity. The sun comes to a standstill and resumes its journey after a while, whereas time cannot afford the time off work to drink a cup of herb tea after dipping a few *madeleines* in it.

Suppose I live through the same moment in a few millennia, in a couple of eternities: I'm not supposed to bully time into doing something it doesn't want to do by saying, 'I hate to hurry you, but I have to rise from the dead in a few minutes.' Anyway, time isn't likely to obey commands and listen to my pleas: it would resign from the universe rather than submit itself to new rules. I have no alternative but to wait until my turn comes at last and the circumference along which time keeps walking with a limp enables me to join the Eternal Recurrence Club. And what about my body? Can it wait until this tangible proof of immortality deigns to unveil itself? And what about my cells and their potential tumours? Will all tumours disappear on D-Day, on N-Night? And what if they say to my body, 'We couldn't care less about your immortality and circular time. Our time isn't circular because it looks like any straight line and this straight line of ours will never become a circle, however often you may bend it, hoping to rise from the dead and enjoy yourself in a night club.'

'Do you think you're a cut above Pythagoras and Nietzsche?' I'll say to them, brandishing my fists.

'We don't know who they are and what they think about in their leisure hours. But we do know that your cancer is ready for action.'

'How do you mean?'

'You've already died many times, but you've never risen from the dead.'

'You can't die if you're not alive, if you're dead already.'

'Death can visit you as many times as he wants, paying no attention to what state you're in. In a way, you die on the day of your birth and whatever you happen to live through occurs within the framework of death.'

Even if my cells keep silent, I'm bound to hear some voices warning me against my body's fragility and whims, and I'm weary of my body's whims, caprices, quirks and foibles. My mother said to me once or twice, 'You have to get used to other people's quirks and foibles,' but she never said anything along these lines about my cells; and yet our health depends on how we adjust to our cells and their foibles, otherwise we would never care about varied and balanced diets. And our doctors would never say to us, while nodding their heads and wagging their index fingers, 'A good diet helps build the body's natural defences. You should adjust to your cells' quirks, you know.'

'What are the quirks you're talking about?'

'Diabetes and liver cancer.'

I *am* weary of my body: I've been going out and in with the same cells to the same doctors for years and I've just grown weary of it; and I'm not in a class of my own whenever I complain about my body's crimes and punishments. The body is a nuisance and everybody knows this truth – even those who are destined to die in their sleep. In the meantime they jog and go swimming to keep their bodies in proper repair or in a state they regard as compatible with the requirements voiced by Alain Delon two decades ago, 'I've no dread of death but I don't want to be bedridden.' So they die in their sleep and their bodies don't seem to be impaired by time and space to which they're always subjected, even if their owners wish to preserve them from outside and inside shocks. They live in a sort of glass container where some astronauts – at least those one spots in Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey* – are obliged to spend a few years before landing on Jupiter or another distant planet from

which we receive no messages as if its inhabitants awaited our visits, not our signals. They die in their sleep – our healthy individuals, not Jupiterians – but before falling asleep for the last time, they curse their bodies which are unable to ensure the safety of their organs and members throughout eternity or numerous immortalities.

Anyway the body cannot rival the brain in complexity; your own brain, however prehistoric it may prove to be in some context or other, is ambitious enough to require your guardian angel to put its needs first – to the detriment of your body, mind you. They read your works in the 24th century, but your body continues to rot in your tomb or elsewhere: there will be a lot of body- or bonesnatchers in the 23rd century. And your brain, for all its intelligence and ingenuity, won't be in a position to guard your mortal remains against those immortal forces that one can chance upon in any bestseller.

I always complain about my memory and its proverbial shortness, and thus I may push it away or even banish it from my presence, let alone from my room where I try to remember so many things during my solitary nights punctuated by bouts of insomnia and nightmares. It has become a sort of proverb or saying because I can't help repeating the phrase, 'Loss of memory is a natural part of old age,' although it is not true, as a matter of fact: even in my childhood I couldn't remember much, especially if asked to memorise a poem. I might have developed and invigorated it – my memory, that is – had my family illegally owned a prayer-book through which anyone is bound to get in touch with God, if only perfunctorily, for God must be pleased to learn that you're interested in His persona. And it is in God's power to improve your memory – or anything, for that matter, because even a plant grows quicker and gets more sun if it looks at God; like a sunflower, for instance.

They say that St John of Kroonstad – the spelling suggested by my computer – was far from brilliant in his childhood: at least the school reports never described him as a very promising pupil. Of course his teachers would have changed their minds, had they learnt he was to become a Russian saint, but they were neither seers nor fortune-tellers and he continued to get bad marks in maths and dictation. At home he devoted his spare time to tears and prayers, and in the long run the Almighty heard both so that He must have said to Himself, 'I should take care of this boy, otherwise he may never become a saint.' Of course God must know that ignorance is a trump card often played by saints and ordinary ecclesiastics who say to you, 'Do you remember what St Paul said about knowledge and science? Your faith provides both – that's what he said. So think about God and you'll be happy forever, even in the Hereafter.' But God must have seen that the future saint was unhappy and melancholic, otherwise he wouldn't have cried so often and with such intensity: according to a legend, his weeping was heard three miles away.

According to Nicholas of Cusa, ignorance is the only tool one may use on one's way to God, but this kind of ignorance doesn't seem to be entirely divorced from learning: they go hand in hand towards the goal or God that only one's bewilderment and helplessness can reach, if only partially and insufficiently. Mr Learning says to Miss Ignorance, 'God is over there.'

'God can't be over there,' answers Miss Ignorance.

'Why do you think so?'

'Because no one can know for sure where God is.'

'But if I go in this direction, I'll reach His abode sooner or later. His abode and even His body.'

‘If you’re presumptuous enough to submit a report on your pilgrim’s progress, I’ll issue a denial of the report. My denial will prove to God that I respect and worship Him because I don’t think one can grab God’s arm to stop Him from running into the void.’

You’re aware of your own ignorance and that’s what brings you closer to God Who doesn’t care for those whose faith declines to sink into the never-ending, boundless substance of the inconceivable. Neither to yourself nor to others should you say, ‘God is like a sphere and His circumference is right under your nose. His centre is further off, but if you walk straight on, you’ll come to a T-junction. His centre is in the centre of this T-junction. And you’d better walk a bit quicker – it’s going to take forever if you go at this pace.’ Nicholas of Cusa thinks you should walk towards God, but whatever your speed, you’ll walk forever: even in the Hereafter you won’t meet God unless the Blessed Virgin intercedes with the authorities on your behalf.

This Road to God is well known for its unfriendly atmosphere and demon-infected pits into which a lot of pilgrims have fallen since the triumph of Christianity in Europe and elsewhere. A mystic writes in her diary, ‘When I thought I heard the Devil following me, I quickened my pace. The Devil wished to prevent me from meeting the Almighty.’ But whatever your speed, you’ll never get rid of Satan altogether unless the Blessed Virgin intercedes with the authorities on your behalf and St Peter welcomes you with a large smile and a pat on the shoulder.

At least I remember who talked about ignorance or rather a very particular kind of ignorance called ‘*docta ignorantia*’, which means I even remember a few Latin words, although my ignorance of the Latin language is known to my friends and enemies. But I don’t remember who advocated the complete overthrow of metaphysics by saying we should look for ultimate situations or borderlines cases: life or death, suffering or the end of suffering taught by Buddhists. I know what the word ‘threshold’ means in my case, within my death-oriented mind and even now, though rather healthy and full of beans, I can see the other side, whatever that means in any philosophical context. I transcend personal, natural and cultural barriers for the sake of Transcendence which knows what to do with my angst and the suffering inflicted by the world, by the pits where so many corpses can be found.

Once or twice God saw me peeping through His curtains and keyholes; and yet I have no first-hand knowledge of what is traditionally called ‘Revelation’ which is said to overcome every barrier, however impenetrable and secret. I’m told that only ultimate situations can bring us to the threshold of real knowledge where all the opposites known to humanity have an inborn tendency to unite – like proletarians in Marx’s famous doctrine or saying. At least in my Lenin-influenced mind only proletarians unite day and night because they have nothing else to do: as usual they’re striking for a reduction in the working week and improved safety standards. (My *Marx*-influenced mind?) They say to each other, ‘The only option available to us is to strike,’ and they repeat this union call for revolution whenever they’re in no mood for filling their masters’ pockets with the money earned by them and their fellow workers, by their labours and horny hands.

So we can unite the opposites through proletarians only unless we decide to make them *coincide*, which can’t be done by workers: none of them really coincides with his fellow worker, even during demonstrations, strikes and *bals populaires*. Many philosophers insist on the importance of what they call ‘Unity’ – the word that always evokes memories of their visits to churches. In a provincial church, churchgoers often find this unity as they look at walls and other surfaces where God is depicted in all His splendour, either amidst clouds or near the sun whose influence can’t be overestimated in the domain of religion, be it paganism or Christianity. God

seldom stands amidst constellations; and yet I always see Him flying through them as if He was an interstellar traveller for Whom the Earth did not mean a lot, being just one planet among so many astral bodies.

Many philosophers enlarge upon freedom and for some of them there's nothing else in the world because the world itself cannot exist without freedom of choice, freedom of speech and so on and so forth. But this proverbial freedom stems from your own soul or body; it may also stem from the outside world where there are passers-by and foreigners who bother you, get on your nerves or inspire you with determination. A pair of legs, on the other hand, often jolts you into action and you follow this pair of legs as long as they remain within your field of vision and in your mind: you can continue to enjoy their sex appeal through the agency of your imagination, even if you no longer recall their curves and length.

The inner and outer freedoms clash somewhere in the middle and this collision may give rise to Unity or some entity about which you can't say anything because the phenomenon in question lies outside your powers and thoughts. Try as you may, you cannot pinpoint precisely the whereabouts of this Unity (or entity). You think it is everywhere and do not bother to investigate the matter any further; and then you come across an object that jars with the rest of the world and you say to yourself, 'This object cannot belong to Unity.' And then a philosopher says something to the effect that Unity is not really One, and you think, 'This comment jars with the opinions I have heard expressed elsewhere.'

'You can choose whatever you like,' says one philosopher.

'You can't because someone else wants that too,' says another philosopher. 'Your hands clash in the middle of the table and you begin to quarrel instead of eating caviar.'

'I can choose another table.'

'But there's no caviar on that table of yours.'

'I can make do with oysters.'

'You can't choose the oysters you're used to because they're not available on the market. Besides, no one eats oysters in summertime. Do you think you can stop time and choose the season you like best? Do you like winter sports? But it is summertime you're confronted with.'

'I'll go to Norway, to the mountains.'

'And what if the snow melts before your very nose? Can you choose the right temperature for your life?'

'I can choose another life. I can even choose death.'

'And what if that other life doesn't feel like spending eternity in your company? Can you choose another eternity, another time?'

'I can embark on a spaceship and fly at the speed of light.'

'You should train for this journey day and night. Are you prepared to choose such a way of life?'

'Get off my back, will you?'

'I choose to stay on your back.'

'How long do you choose to stay on my back?'

'As long as I please. In my childhood, I decided to choose what I please. And ever since I've stuck by my decision.'

'So you agree with me, don't you?'

‘How do you mean?’

‘Your freedom of choice is boundless.’

Of course they also talk about the body that you cannot choose either before or after your birth which doesn’t depend on your will either; it doesn’t even depend on your mother’s or father’s will. They love each other or your father sleeps with your mother only for the sake of her heritage; in other words, he hopes to spend his life – or a part of it – sponging off your mother’s late father. One day, your mother says to him: ‘We campaign for the rights of the unborn child, don’t we?’

‘We do indeed,’ says your father.

‘But our children are neither born nor unborn. Don’t you wish to have a beautiful daughter?’

‘I’m not a paedophile. And even if I was one, I wouldn’t sleep with my own daughter.’

‘Of course not. But don’t you want to have children, a boy and a girl?’

‘I’m not ready yet for this experience.’

‘Indeed, I wish you would be a bit more mature. But I’ll take care of our child to allow you to mature at a snail’s pace. Take your time, my dear.’

‘And what about my dissertation on Chateaubriand? Children cry a lot and such a noisy environment isn’t conducive to a good night’s sleep, let alone to a dissertation on French literature. Besides, my mother always says to me and my father, “Get a good night’s sleep and you’ll feel better able to cope.” I won’t be able to cope if our daughter cries and screams round the clock.’

‘She’ll live in my parents’ castle.’

‘If we do have a daughter, she should stay with us. I trust your parents, but I’d like to see my daughter every day. And I wouldn’t like to hear her screams. And the noise she’s bound to make seems to be an insoluble problem.’

‘A problem shared is a problem halved.’

‘I think you missed the point of what I was saying.’

‘Have you got the truth into your thick skull yet? You won’t get any money from my parents, if we don’t have three children in the near future.’

You’re one of these children and you don’t love your father because you know why he had no alternative but to consent to your birth in the vale of tears. You cry a great deal and whenever you indulge in this hobby of yours, your father storms into the room in a fit of pique, shouting that he is on the point of losing his inspiration. You’re aware of the fact that your body is stuffed with your father’s genes and therefore you’re unable to fall in love with your body, let alone with your immortal soul which might have got stuck in your body by accident. Some time ago, it left the body of a criminal and was on its way to a crocodile – its future incarnation. At some point your body got in the way of its doing its job; the wandering soul had no choice but to accept your body without a murmur.

You would have chosen another body, another soul, had you been asked a few questions – prior to your conception, your sojourn in your mother’s womb. You might have answered these questions as follows, ‘Unless my potential father’s sperm is contained, irreparable damage will be done to my future body.’ But nobody said a word as if the army of guardian angels had been on holiday, skiing in the Alps or swimming in the Atlantic. You might have said to them, ‘Give me a call when you get back from holiday,’ but you didn’t say anything and

when you did say a few words and let out a piercing scream, it was already too late: your father's sperm was having the time of its life at your mother's expense.

VALERY ALEFF

A POSTSCRIPT

2014

PART ONE

1

Don't you know who I am? It's too late to speak about these matters which are no matters at all, as I always say, because you need to tell a story in order to please everybody, including undertakers and funeral orators; but also some reader, another reader, another man in whose pocket you may find eternity, provided he's got all the money you've been dreaming about for centuries.

Your former lives, all this nonsense. What counts is your present life or death – call it what you wish – and it's pointless to write about it or anything else, even if you have this itch or that ditch in which you can lie forever, thinking about your posthumous glory and eternity which eludes you whenever you think about it. So you don't think about it any longer, and this 'longer' of yours is longer than any *longer* you've come across in the course of your destiny – as if it was your *real* eternity. Do they care about your personal eternity and not about the eternity they always talk about in their poems and problems? Eternity, eternity. Nobody, nothing, no problem, no poem – only this moment I can't relish because I'm in no mood for enjoying anything, not even a *salade niçoise* which I normally like so much, to the point of forgetting all other dishes, meals, products and olive trees. Only those that contribute to this *salade* of mine are admitted to my abode where I wait for anything or nothing, for I don't know why I'm sitting in this chair, armchair, saying to myself, 'I don't wait for anything.'

Whatever you do, you die – everybody (or nobody) knows pretty well it's better not to think about these matters in order to put everything in order: your life, your wife, your meals, your wheels that may bring you to any point B, provided you're an invalid. Otherwise these wheels won't serve you as faithfully as your legs which refuse to serve you as if they were women or slaves, bent on campaigning for their rights. Nobody will send you the wheels you need if you're not an invalid who needs some outside help without which you can't get out and about, looking for another slice of meat, another deed of valour. So you don't get up, out, away, and your deeds aren't recorded by chroniclers and computers: there are no wheels to assist the disabled in the preparation of Paradise.

The meals and wheels are my books and I know that neither these wheels nor the meals they may promise to someone will ever nourish me because they're neither money nor gold for which I might go to Siberia if I was capable of doing anything of the kind. I am not and so I count on so-called eternity where somebody – preferably a young man, a beautiful woman – will read every sentence of mine, prepared to repeat whatever I wrote many centuries ago as many times as necessary to squeeze every nuance, every allusion from every word I'm about to write this afternoon.

So they read my words and repeat them out loud to ensure my immortality or eternity – call it what you wish, provided you don't stray too far from the subject – and I don't turn in my grave, contrary to what traditionally happens to those authors who are displeased with their admirers and commentators. Our descendants repeat my words and relish every sound of what they repeat in their beds, living rooms, parks and palaces. 'I was born in Moscow.' They utter these words and wonder what I did in Moscow on the day of my departure from my mother's patient and generous body where I might have lived forever, had I been allowed to do so without passing away or fading into insignificance. And then they meditate on the words I wrote on the prophet nor a seer; nor do I turn my tables every other night. 'Fading into insignificance.' What did he mean? spur of the moment, without thinking what they might mean in the world I know nothing about, for I'm neither a

I didn't mean anything except that I left my mother's womb – and God's womb as well – on that fateful day that saw me make my way into the world. I'm not fit for it or any other contraption devised by the same God

who let me down on that fateful day. God is my mother and vice versa; I don't think my mother is the Blessed Virgin because she is the Almighty thanks to Whom I made my appearance in this world where I'm always in bad repair, so to speak. And I often say to myself, 'Repairing my memory costs much more than I was expecting.' I also say to myself, 'I've had to dip into my savings to pay for the repairs' – if my blood test comes up to my expectations that are willing to allow me to drink another bottle of champagne. 'There will be extensive repairs to the motorway,' I say to myself whenever I think about my road to Paradise, drawn by Verlaine in one of his poems I knew by heart 20 years ago. Now only my heart knows it; the rest of my body lives without it as if one could live without Paradise or at least without a road leading to it, to one of its gazebos.

I no longer ask myself if my writings are worth anything; I even wonder if I've ever done *anything* because you don't do anything if you want to do something. Sometimes you just do something on the spur of the moment without thinking about whatever can come out of what you're doing or have done: in these matters time gets lost so you don't really know *when* you did this or that and you wonder if any cause awaits its effect. There are causes that don't expect anything and their effects – or other effects, wherever they can come from – go abroad, compose operas and sing individually and then together as a group. And life goes on as if it had nothing else to do: it could go out, away, upwards, so as to join its archetypes about which Jung spoke rather often as if determined to impart to life and its inhabitants the importance of unison. But life didn't listen to him or any of the archetypes he had unearthed for the benefit of life and its assistants who can be found in clinics, hospitals and suchlike. Life goes out as if somebody was saying to it, 'Out, out, out!' People (and Nietzsche) say, 'In, in, in!' Life goes out.

She goes out and you stop her to say she can't go anywhere because she belongs to you and therefore she can't act on her own, even though she is a woman in Russian and French; and all women, whatever their origins and status, are involved in the process known as feminism which postulates that women should be allowed the same rights, power and opportunities as men. Neither women nor men thought about death when they agreed to bestow this sort of decoration on women who nowadays become presidents, prime ministers and supreme judges as a matter of course, almost every night and every morn – round the clock, in some countries. Death says, 'In Russian I'm a woman so I've every right to be your president and prime minister. And I shall send you to our Russian gulag because I don't like you, whoever you are. And even if I happen to like your face, which never happens, to tell the truth, I shall send you to our gulag all the same. To tell the truth, I don't like human faces, nor any other faces for that matter. I have no face to speak of – only a mask and scythe which can't be regarded as a face even if you're fond of futuristic thrillers where a scythe is often treated like a face and vice versa. In short, I don't like human faces and humans in general. And whenever I deign to speak about faces, I'm not sure I am not actually speaking about faeces. Does my treatment of your woes leave a bad taste in your mouths? And what about *my* bad taste, *my* mouth? What do you think I feel whenever I talk about so-called human beings?'

Life continues to go out as if it had nothing better to do, and probably it does not, for life as well as death are both women in French and in Russian; they go hand in hand wherever they go. They drink to our health in some bar or other where they're accosted by men who have no idea what identities they assume in the world of signs. Semiotics says that death is a scythe or rather a multitude of scythes, swords, words and mobs that trample you to death when some stadium or other collapses and many people rush out onto the football pitch. Another mob tramples you to death in the streets where you walk in the hope of meeting a beautiful woman. Why does this happen all over the globe? Because we live in our global village where scythe, mobs and machine guns vote

every day to elect another victim of their wrath that you can't detect on their faces because they have no faces to speak of. So you don't speak of them; neither do they. They don't even say that actions speak louder than words, and they discard words and synonyms of all kinds to the point of forgetting the custom-blessed prescription: Acting on impulse can get you into a lot of trouble.

They act on impulse and win, for they cannot lose: death is always victorious, whatever they say in their poems, their dreams or upon perusing their blood tests which say to them they're as fit as many fiddles – as fit as the Berlin Philharmonic under Furtwängler's baton. Their blood tests perform Beethoven's symphonies and every performance is a legend in its own right. They think no one will ever be healthier than they are today – healthier from every point of view, given that Beethoven's symphonies are also *spiritual*, not only physical and sentimental. So their souls are as healthy as their bodies and any orchestra conducted by Toscanini and consequently they're already on their way to Paradise, wherever this paradise of theirs may be situated – on Earth, beyond St Peter's keys.

I can't deny I was elated when looking at my last blood test that said I no longer had any diabetes, either fatal or playful; the same went for my liver whose capacity to welcome wines and beers is exceptional, judging from my doctor's exclamations and congratulations. But my liver is as fragile as any liver and therefore can't be compared to the lever by means of which Archimedes was determined to raise the Earth from where she had lain for millions of years. I can't raise anything except my hands which may announce my unconditional surrender to destiny, to the '*amor fati*' you can read about in Nietzsche's works; and yet it doesn't mean I'm free and own what is regarded by our Christians as the most precious possession of every human being in whose blood and genes the Almighty's presents swarm, swim and daily disport themselves, unmindful of death and its signs. Free will, free will. I am free and so is my will. And so is my representation. I visualise death as a bunch of roses or peonies.

2

Let us not speak about death any more because we don't need to speak about an object – or a subject – which is always within our reach, within its own reach, so that we can't get rid of it, however often we say it doesn't exist, given the Cross and all other sacrifices we find in our history and even beyond it – in other worlds, in *arrières mondes*. These worlds are beyond whatever we can picture to ourselves, and we end up picturing nothing either in our minds or anywhere else; it's better to live our lives and eat *foie gras* without asking too many questions to which we'll never get any *objective* answers. And subjective answers are a pack of lies, as everybody knows; at least St Augustine knew that because he counted on God's assistance as he probed the mysteries to which the so-called academics had no keys.

The truth is ahead of us and all we have to do is go towards it without looking at the woods and their hospitality praised by so many poets and even by Montaigne who says one shouldn't think about philosophy or domestic problems when walking in the woods because one's eyes are supposed to be riveted on the path one follows and not on other worlds, not on *other* aspects of the world where one lives and walks. You go towards the truth and you know you can't be blessed unless you find this truth and put it in your pocket, so to speak: your mind and memory are unreliable and therefore can't be entrusted with the safekeeping of the truth. The academics think there's no such thing as truth – so does Nietzsche, by the way – but St Augustine thinks otherwise because he doesn't think that God is dead and buried in a lot of cemeteries one can find on the surface

of our globe and mainly *under* its surface. St Augustine is against sceptics and nihilists who flout conventions and religions, being aware they're the only people who know the truth or rather its absence: one *can* know absence as such, according to them.

Between you and the truth – or rather between ourselves – there's a straight line, a motorway, and you're supposed to zoom along as long as the truth eludes you, hiding beyond walls and shopping malls where you may find only lies and the allurements of the world in which your body belongs. You know – at least St Augustine does – that even within hard shoulders there are pitfalls and potholes at the bottom of which you may spend your eternity instead of seeking for the truth and its derivatives. So you zoom along in your Ferrari, paying no attention to the woods where robbers and other bandits await you, determined as they are to despoil your castles and villas, to empty all your pockets and attaché cases. You sacrifice a breath of fresh air for the sake of truth, but unfortunately you die on the way to this truth – or another truth, as the case may be – in spite of your prudence and patience. You avoid robbers and other criminals; yet some cancer of which you know next to nothing lies in wait for you on the motorway where no car will ever run it over, however dense and unbearable the traffic turns out to be on weekends and even on ordinary nights. You die and the truth laughs as it looks at your corpse lying in the middle of the road that has always led to the truth – to the only truth one can find in the world where monotheism holds sway over whole districts, ensuring the popularity of religious leaders.

According to the *International Herald Tribune*, 'a business owner in Russia has a better chance of ending up in the penal colony system once known as the gulag than a burglar does'. You read this issue of the *Herald Tribune* and relinquish any idea, however lucrative it may appear, of doing business with overseas customers and other customers as well because business is frowned upon in Russia where traditions – Soviet traditions, as it were – are stronger than economics. You know that the truth is far more important than any business, any money, any bank account, any stock market. You embark upon your journey towards that truth which is everlastingly linked to God and His invincible armies. But you read St Augustine first and realise you shouldn't have a picnic in the woods you'll see on the way to the truth, considering the numbers of robbers who wait for your pockets and wallets behind their bushes. You've got a Porsche in your garage, but you're aware of the fact that any pilgrim's progress should be accomplished on foot, otherwise God may disregard your feat of valour and relegate it to the lower spheres of the Hereafter where brimstone lords it over angelic perfumes.

You go to the truth and robbers look at your figure as they hope to make ends meet thanks to the contents of your Iago-praised purses and small mercies, as they call them. But you walk on towards the truth and robbers convert to Christianity, overwhelmed by your adhesion to the faith they treat with nonchalance, their attention spans being focused upon money, profit and creature comforts. On the other hand, they know they may rob you as many times as they wish, for in Russia they're not likely to be imprisoned, given their immunity from prosecution. After all, the defending lawyer is sure to ask for leniency on the grounds of their vagrancy. 'My clients are no business owners. They don't own anything except the woods where they rob business owners.' Anyway, robbers or no robbers, you die on your way to the truth.

The academics think you can't reach the truth on account of its vagueness: you're not likely to distinguish it from lies that grow everywhere like herbs that have no medical properties. Be that as it may, you go towards the truth and the process itself – your determination, in other words – doesn't fail to prove you're a sage and probably even a holy man in whose life there's only God and nothing (or nobody) but God. So if asked to say, 'God and nothing but God,' you say these words and believe in them, even though you may not believe in God

Himself. But you believe in words and that's probably enough because any prayer – with a few exceptions – is founded on words and on egalitarian principles, as they say in democratic or free countries.

But someone is bound to say you're not wise because you don't know the truth which separates the elect from the reprobate, according to St Augustine and his followers who continue to follow him in spite of Aristotle's victory. (St Augustine was Plato's partisan, wasn't he?) 'I'm following the path that leads to the truth,' you say.

'That's not enough,' they say. 'You may die on the way. Besides, you don't know the way.'

'I've got four copies of the Bible,' you say. 'Four languages tell me where to look for the truth.'

'What about the Russian robbers?' they say.

'I won't go into the woods.'

'The Russian robbers are now in the middle of the motorway you're walking along. They're even in the middle of nowhere. You can't escape their clutches because nowhere is everywhere.'

'Looking for the truth is enough. I'm a holy man.'

'A hollow man,' they say. Or they don't say anything. What does it matter?

3

They pursued neither evil nor good, living without infamy and without praise. Not living, in other words. Not alive; not dead either. Something or somebody in between, just in between – something in between somebody and something. Dante met them in the anteroom of Hell. On Earth those people had been indifferent, lukewarm.

The word 'nice' is lukewarm: it's neither an insult nor a eulogy. We've already passed through the door of Hell; we're in the anteroom now.

Computers are also lukewarm; broad smiles light up their screens. A smile usually expresses a positive feeling such as happiness, pleasure, amusement or friendliness, but it can express sadness or regret. Their smiles are neither positive nor negative; they express neither happiness nor regret. Computers smile at you. They don't stick out their tongues, nor do they really love you or your dog. They merely smile at your dog, at everything and everybody. Smiling at those who are in between.

Everybody is in between now; and everything. Even inanimate creatures are in between: flowers are in between, heaven is in between, not too high, not too low.

Neither...nor. Either...or. That's how they live and die; they're not even afraid of death. The baby's food needs to be heated until it's just lukewarm. And everything is baby's food to them. They heat death until it's lukewarm and swallow it. They also heat the Mona Lisa until it's lukewarm; and swallow it. But the Mona Lisa will never be lukewarm and her smile expresses happiness, pleasure, amusement, friendliness, sadness, regret and many other feelings. Her smile expresses Hell, Purgatory and Paradise, not just the anteroom of Hell.

I must have written all this a long time ago, but time doesn't count any more because I don't count it as if aping Kirilov or whoever it was: these Russian heroes use revolvers to become gods and democrats who are free and may do whatever they like on condition that they respect the social contracts written by Rousseau and his followers. There are social contracts and other contracts, and I live on and away, casting a quick look in the rear mirror where all these contracts, laws and mores (and whores) are reflected forever unless God says anything to the effect that all these woes are outdated.

Hear now the similitude which I am about to speak unto thee. Take a stone, and throw it up towards heaven; or take a spout of water, and mount it up thitherward; and see if thou canst reach unto heaven.' That's how they spoke in those days. And they took stones and threw them up towards heaven. And those stones landed on the Milky Way. Early Christians were walking towards heaven in spite of natural disasters.

I'm not an early Christian; I'm not a late Christian either, but I'm walking towards heaven in spite of my moods, attitudes and desires that guide me towards restaurants and wines instead of showing my photographs to angels whose merciful attitude is described by poets and theologians, by sinners and tinkers.

I pick up a stone and throw it towards my salvation or eternity which I worship in the quiet of any room I happen to spend a few hours in, browsing through books or watching TV where people love, kill, take pity on victims and fall down whenever a revolver is held by a hand, a monster, a computer. I'm weary of these worlds and I can't even write another poem to celebrate Thy Creation, my dear God – I am your ward – so that I just write whatever comes into my head or another head to which I'm connected through our brotherhood.

4

All our machines say 'Hello' and seem to smile as we switch them on. And they continue to smile as if approving our use of them. They say 'Goodbye' as we switch them off because their makers believe we should be surrounded by the things we love and admire; they love us in return. We are fatally ill, but our doctor's waiting room is bright and cheerful with yellow walls and curtains. We say to an early Christian, 'Turn that dreadful wailing music off and put on something cheerful.'

'Don't you like Mozart's *Requiem*?' he asks.

'Come on, why aren't you dancing? Enjoy yourself!' we answer.

'The end of the world is drawing nigh,' he says.

'We're no longer in the first century. On the eve of the 21st century some people thought the world would be torn to pieces. As usual, nothing happened. Nothing ever happens. We'll live forever and listen to requiems with a smile.'

'I have every right to listen to this and other requiems with a smile because I believe in the City of God where I'll see two men on whose faces I won't be able to look,' he answers. 'A light will come from them, shining nine times more than the sun. They're Moses and Elias.'

'But you're neither Moses nor Elias, are you?'

'At his coming, Christ will raise the dead and make the righteous shine seven times more than the sun. Their crowns will shine like crystal and like the rainbow in the time of rain.'

Even if you say to sinners they will be pardoned after spending a thousand years in a penal colony located at the centre of the Earth, they will refuse to leave their villas and swimming pools for the sake of the distant yet everlasting happiness. 'I wouldn't say I'm a multimillionaire, but I'm doing all right.'

'If you don't go to Hell at once, you'll be conveyed to Paradise in only three thousand years.'

'I don't mind – I'll have plenty of time in the Hereafter. But time's in rather short supply on the surface of the Earth. You know, I had a strange dream last night,' the sinner goes on. 'An angel lands on my roof and

speaks to me through a hole in the ceiling, “If this bill isn’t paid within five days, your time supply will be cut off.” And he drops a sheet of paper on my bed. Funny, isn’t it?”

The sinner does his best to laugh it off and even tells a joke about crocodiles. He always tends to adopt a falsely cheerful tone when he is upset about something. At night he speaks to death, not to time.

‘Is it true I’ll die in five days?’

‘Yes.’

‘And what if I pay the bill?’

‘Do you know what kind of bill it is?’

‘Not the foggiest idea.’

‘How could you pay it then?’

‘What a pity I lost the sheet of paper the angel had dropped through the hole.’

‘Do you want to know what was written on it?’

‘Of course.’

“‘You’ll die in five days.’ So you’ll die in four days.’

‘Can’t you postpone my death until next year?’

‘I can’t.’

‘I’ll become a newborn Christian, I promise.’

‘Too late.’

‘You know, when I saw you from the other side of the room, I thought “that girl’s really got taste”. And when someone who looks like you has taste in clothes, then what is a poor guy to do?’

‘I don’t know,’ says death.

‘Well, I do,’ says the sinner, giving her a seductive look.

‘What makes you think I’m a woman?’

‘Because I like your dress. It’s beautiful.’

‘Thank you.’

‘Look, why don’t we go off and have dinner somewhere?’ asks the sinner.

‘What?’ answers death.

‘I know a really good Italian place near here.’

The sinner’s solicitor said last night they’d be lodging an appeal against the sentence, but the man died this morning. So his wife strikes up an interesting conversation with death.

‘My husband didn’t die a natural death. You killed him. And you gave him no opportunity to confess his sins and dictate his will.’

‘He didn’t ask for a confessor or a notary!’ says death. ‘He might have said, for instance: “O, banish me, my lord, but kill me not. Kill me tomorrow, let me live tonight. But half an hour, but while I say one prayer!” Anyway he wouldn’t have prayed to God. He didn’t believe in God. I do. And I also believe in democracy. And I believe in educating women.’

‘Why did you kill him?’

‘He was gored to death by an infuriated bull.’

I can't say I can't write any more because I'm not Scott of the Antarctic; my journal, if any, is not finished and I'm not freezing to death, although I *am* freezing to death as many other people do without knowing it. The polar night is our destiny, but we go on reading books and watching films in which superheroes and extraterrestrial friends display their energy for the sake of teenagers who have nothing else to do: they just watch these heroes and eat popcorn. They can eat whatever they wish: I allow them to eat my body, for I'm fed up with them and they're not fed up with me, as far as I know. I allow them to devour my body so they become saturated with my sinews and thoughts, saying, 'We're fed up with him.'

6

You say to yourself, 'I prefer to be one of the crowd' and you find yourself in the midst of it. The people you see and hear don't speak to death; they speak to life. But they talk rubbish all the same and you can't put their words in a rubbish bin. You're not allowed to say to them: 'What a load of rubbish!' If you do, they'll expel you from the crowd and even from the world. So you stay and listen to all this rubbish – patently, painstakingly.

They speak about bills and villas, about health and yachts, about status symbols and stars, about their gods and God. They attempt to seduce you – just in case. They compliment you on your handling of a very difficult situation and you have no idea what they're talking about. 'Life's a very difficult situation and you handle it perfectly,' they say, howling with laughter.

I'm standing in the midst of the crowd gathered in the centre of Europe. 'Are you Russian?' I'm asked. 'Your government has promised to uphold the principles of democracy. A strong opposition's vital to a healthy democracy, but there's no opposition in your country.'

'I'm fed up with convenient scapegoats,' I say. 'The Soviet Union, secret police, totalitarian regimes...'

'Do you approve of Lenin and Stalin?' I'm asked.

'Everybody speaks about totalitarian regimes. Many writers wrote novels about them and fought against tyrants and generals in the jungle. *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. And *Brave New World*. But there are other pitfalls.'

They wave their hands around a lot when they're talking: 'The temptation of making easy money through drug trafficking.'

'Those responsible for the violence should be punished!'

'Stop talking about violence,' I say to them. 'It's non-violence I'm interested in: non-violent stupidity, non-violent lack of curiosity.'

'You seem to misuse this term,' a linguist points out. 'Non-violence is the use of peaceful methods to try to bring about change.'

'It's just the contrary,' I say. 'I've lived long enough to have my own language. In my vocabulary "non-violence" signifies the unwillingness to bring about change and the refusal to think. Whenever a human being takes the trouble to think a new thought he violates his brain. He rapes his brain, as a matter of fact. And a child is born – a new thought, a new idea. But you call it "domestic violence". So there are no new thoughts today, no ideas. And the old ideas and thoughts are withering on the vine. A non-violent end of the world.'

Is that how I should talk to death? 'I'm not afraid of your coming because you don't exist. You do exist of course, but there's no point in your comings and goings. The idea of time is an abstract notion – not only in the domain of art. In life as well we encounter time occasionally and our handshakes lead none of us anywhere. Time can do whatever it likes – it's just a notion, nothing else. For centuries I've been sitting in the same room.'

If I go out, I'll realise at once I'm looking at the wall I saw from the middle of the room. The wall recedes as I get closer and closer to it. I left a note saying "Gone out. Back soon." I didn't go out. The painful memories gradually recede in my mind, but the walls of my mind and my memory recede as well. The painful memories put a farewell letter on my writing desk. I read it from time to time. I was born in Moscow and studied at the Moscow Conservatoire. In 1974 I settled in Western Europe and found I was looking at the same wall. I'll be born in Moscow again and I'll study at the Moscow Conservatoire. No point in dying – nothing will happen during the intermission. It's the same concert over and over again. You disappear in the wings, but come back as if the audience couldn't live without your music-making. And even if you hear no applause, you come back because you've no choice. I won't go out so as not to have to come back. Why should I waste my energy on these comings and goings? I'll play one sonata after another, one composer after another. I hear a voice saying, 'The sun's going down and it'll be dark soon.' House lights, house lights. They're switched on and off. Sometimes I play in the dark, but I don't mind because I know all the pieces I'm supposed to play by heart and my fingers don't need my eyes. Only my ears are indispensable – if it weren't for them, I wouldn't be on the stage, at the piano. I would be nowhere. Is it better to be nowhere? Is it better to be nobody living nowhere? Some species exist in this small area of forest and nowhere else on earth, but I don't belong to these species. So I'm nowhere. No such luck – I was born in Moscow, I'll be born in Moscow. Are you hungry, death? I know a really good Italian place near here.'

7

Pina Baush was keen on repetitions. In one of her ballets a woman repeats the same poem three or four times. A famous poem by Heine. The second time it sounds different; and yet the words are the same because they're unable to leave the poem. No one, not even God, could get them to leave the poem. They stay for good, but their meaning shifts from one place to another, from one corner to another. And there are other corners around these corners. I haven't lost anything, have I? Perhaps I have. I even know what I've lost over the last 50 years. I lost nothing in my childhood—or next to nothing. But over the last 50 years I've suffered a gradual loss of memory: now I don't recall what I lost in my childhood. A number of toys, no doubt. I've got other toys now and I'm not likely to lose *them*. Every word is a toy, although I'm often reluctant to play with words. It's words that play with me, their creator. The word 'loss' is playing with me now. It's not, properly speaking, a word: it's life itself. This life speaks and lapses into silence. Today life is silent and I can't do anything about it. I can't talk it into talking, for all my efforts. 'Why don't you talk?' I say to life. 'Say something – and that's an order. Or does it gall you to take orders from a younger and less experienced brother? I'm your brother, am I not? I've got my life, you've got yours. You're life with a capital L. My life is quite young and small in comparison with you: you don't take orders from me and fall silent whenever you please. I don't want to hear you – not *all* of you, not *everything*. Not Speaker's Corner, for instance. I want to hear your music, your Beethoven quartets, your King Crimson. One sound would be enough—one *musical* sound, one chord, one harmony. Typical, isn't it? You begin with crumbs, saying, 'Just a crumb of hope, just a crumb of comfort.' After a while you say, 'It's a little too hot for comfort' and demand an air-conditioner. And then you say, 'I haven't enough money to live in comfort in my old age.' The cost of your life-project has increased dramatically since it began. It's not just a 'life' you're striving for; it's a *happy* life. And what about losses? Your life turns out to be a loss-making business. You read in a glossy magazine: 'There was a kaleidoscopic explosion of A-list stars, designer gowns,

flashing diamonds and wild all-night dancing in the middle of the English countryside’ and you complain about the program of your life. ‘What’s the matter with your computer?’ you say to God. ‘Is it kaput? Why am I excluded from *this* life? One more loss – I wasn’t invited to the gala I’m reading about. “Some of the most gorgeous rising stars mingling with beautiful, established A-listers, £7 million of art, and a wildly outrageous menu that included tin cans of cocktails and sea bass with lemon purée, edible flowers, mint oil and citrus froth – ” What’s going on? If you can’t fix your old computer, you should buy a new one. Or you should get someone to fix the old one. I’m afraid you don’t know the first thing about computers.’

8

A: Do you know anything about the ‘happiness index’?

B: Does it measure the rise and fall of happiness?

A: Not exactly. This index measures economic growth in terms of wellbeing rather than finance alone.

B: Just another stock idea. People doing yoga benefit from an increased feeling of wellbeing. This kind of thing. Happiness can’t be mass-produced. Neither can you say when you’re *really* happy and how much happiness you experience. You think you’re happy and you’re actually not because you know a man or a woman will betray you sooner or later. This knowledge poisons your happiness. The index isn’t likely to take notice of our background noise, so to speak. Nor do we always hear it, but it spoils our harmonies. I know a woman who goes white as a sheet when she hears soldiers patrolling the streets. The noise reminds her of the war, of the Germans in Paris. She’ll always hear their boots, even when playing with her grandchildren. How to measure *her* happiness? Or do you just mean that happiness doesn’t depend on money?

A: There’s proof that happiness has a physiological effect on conditions such as diabetes and heart disease.

B: Until another betrayal, another patrol. Even a highway patrol may kill you on the spot.

A: People who are happier heal more quickly, have stronger immune systems and, on average, live longer.

B: Those who live in fool’s paradise? Is it better to live in this paradise than to die? Anyway, diseases betray us too. They say ‘Bye-bye’ and leave, but they come back, uninvited. Why swallow pills and undergo operations? There’ll always be another pair of boots, another cancer, another unhappy ending. An open door. Through this door so many people have come and gone. So many people, so many diseases. Actually they don’t come and go. They stay and you go on dying. It was cold and wet outside; they stayed with you. It’s always cold and wet outside, isn’t it? They come round to see you on some flimsy pretext, determined to stay forever. They’re your background noise—or music, if you wish. The humane way of dealing with a suffering animal is to kill it quickly. But this music kills you slowly, like *Tristan und Isolde*.

A: They found a link between happiness and fast recovery from surface wounds.

B: There’s no such thing as a surface wound. You watch the sunlight dancing on the water’s surface. And you don’t even ask, ‘What’s the depth of the water here?’ Are dolphins better than humans? Many of them can dive to depths of 200 metres.

A: Those with an optimistic outlook have a 90 per cent lower risk of suffering heart disease and are 14 per cent less likely to die than their pessimistic peers.

B: Your optimism seems to infect all those around you.

A: There are no obese individuals among my friends. Happier people eat better, exercise more, meet their friends more often and are less prone to obesity.

B: I could never measure up to my mother's expectations. She wasn't very happy, I suppose. Am I to blame for her death? Another piece of background music. I may die earlier because of her death unless I jump for joy day in, day out. Your body jumps for joy because an optimistic outlook can stave off diseases. But your brain won't stand for any nonsense. Your brain knows that whatever you do you're doomed. So you jump for joy, a look of utter devastation on your face. You say to yourself, 'Smile! Smile!' There's the faintest trace of a smile on your lips. Will this smile add a week to your life, a month? And what about a *broad* smile? You smile, but your brain goes on painting a gloomy picture of the future. Your smile's of little avail. So are your jumps.

A: Well-being is being promoted in schools and at work, where enlightened employers are carrying out wellbeing audits to make sure people are feeling appreciated and fulfilled.

B: Michael Jackson was appreciated and fulfilled. So what? I'm not sure he jumped for joy, but he jumped a lot when performing his dances. Did the jumps help him? Even his brain was attuned to optimism, to eternal childhood. The background music of his life was the music admired by so many people. Did his music help him to stave off diseases, to fight death to the death? There are so many deaths in every sentence that your optimistic outlook is bound to suffer from an inferiority complex.

A: Wellbeing can be transmitted by a process of 'emotional contagion'. Both happiness and unhappiness can spread, but happiness spreads more reliably across network ties. Your happiness is associated with that of your friends, your friends' friends – and your friends' friends' friends – that is, people you've never met.

B: I've never met happy people.

A: Further hope has been raised by another study which identified two new antibodies that neutralise a broad range of HIV strains.

B: So these are your hopes and dreams for the future.

A: The future's mine. I believe in the future. Don't you?

B: I believe only in the past. You can touch the past. You can dive into it.

A: Do you know what 'silent face' means?

B: I know that my face will soon be silent. You just say, 'His face fell silent.' Beautiful, isn't it?

9

A bunch of roses on my writing desk where only roses should grow and die because nothing else really dies, grows and says to us that life is short, beautiful, wonderful, and we know there are other roses in the wings; and there are other wings which bring you and me and everyone else to what they call Paradise. I don't call it and there are no roses – only rose-tinted glasses, landscapes where I'll always be happy with my cat who needs the grass, and I'll need to look at him as long as I can look at anybody.

10

What am I to do with the time I'm allotted in this space where I sit and think about the future? I'll move to Belgium for the rest of my life, assuming there are some *beaux restes* in this life of mine or any other life, be it mine or anyone else's. I'm writing and sitting and dreaming in August, 2013, and I have no idea why I put this part of my narrative in the year which may not see my eyes, my face about which Levinas speaks at length as if

he had seen my face and its transcendental aspect, its divinity. Yes, I think I wish to trick time into believing I'm immortal and even if I die before the advent of the next year, I'll live in it somehow because I'm writing my story within its long, interminable chapter, paying homage to human history – to any history on which our world can lean as it goes from one metamorphosis to another.

My flat has become a box of late. There are many boxes in it and every box encloses a particle of my flat where I won't live at the beginning of September when someone else is supposed to come and paint the walls, putting a lot of pictures on them; and these pictures won't have anything to do with my life. In other words, I'm leaving my flat forever and it doesn't know anything about my sadness and madness which drives me mad because if you think you're mad, you *are* mad to some extent. I do think I am mad and yet I am just sad and my sadness lies on my furniture, on these boxes and even on my cat – like a shawl, a sail, an email from another world.

Of course I won't move to another world and actually I'm fed up with other worlds which land up in my flat and ask me to take care of them as if I really had to transfer them to my English cottage where I may live for another year in order to put all my things and thoughts in order. There's one world only, I say to myself, and I calm down because I'm right for once: there's only one world where these books of mine need to be packed into the boxes.

13

POSTSCRIPT

The tale is not over and yet there are ups and downs in both the tale and the rest of the story, of the remains, because in two days we shall have a new New Year and nothing will be new, anew, except this year and its figures, digits. Digits are always new, even if you never go to the Stock Market or any market, be it a fish market or pastry market right under your window. If you wish, you may take your father's fishing line and catch a few operas for your tea ceremony unless you prefer lemon curd; unless you prefer nothing at all. So you put your fishing line away and go away, if you are allowed to do so without bothering your cats and dads who always grumble when you leave them behind. But your dads are always behind whatever you do; and even if you do not go anywhere they are behind, on the slow side. And you are still on the fast side; not for long, though. You are not on the fast-food side; you are on the slow-food side, which does not mean a set of dentures you have to take care of before going to sleep. In this domain – or kingdom, as you usually express yourself today – you are on the slow side because you still manage to relish the food you find either in a restaurant or on your dinner table. Your charwoman puts all your forks, knives and spoons around you and you pick and choose, making sure you will not prick your finger on a bone. There are so many bones around you do not know whether they belong to the dead or the quick, to dogs or to human mobs.

There are bones and tones, and some of these tones can be heard through bones; perhaps all of them. At least that is how Beethoven listened to his piano works, holding a metal tube in his mouth. It is his bones – teeth and other bones – that heard his masterpieces and we might hear them after our deaths, provided our bones remain as sensitive to sounds as they are in our lifetimes. Our lifetimes go on and so do many chronicles and myths to which you may listen in your spare time, if you have nothing to listen to either in your spare time or when you are very busy – so busy you cannot answer your mobile phone and cries for help. 'Help, help, help,'

you hear in the streets but you are too busy as you are listening to your inner music that does not cry for help, for it needs none.

December 29, 2014

As if all was done. Not all has been done
And there are no daggers, no kings. I'm alone.
I'm in the air, in the water. Call this water
And you'll hear what it says. Nothing,
Nothing. Take your coat and go. You go, go, go.
I can see you. I can't.

I've found a lot of yours – faithfully,
Truly. You live on pedestals
And I go from one to another, other.

Love comes now and then.
I don't say anything. I could say, 'a bush.'
I don't say it because someone else
Has said it many times.

Many times.

What's left? Leffe, a glass of beer.

I don't conquer space; neither
Do stars say goodbye and hold me on their
Lap.

'Don't' is in the space I can see and hear.

I can hear the last dust.

A postscript to the postscript. Is anybody
There? I am here and you say what
They sing. One, two, three. They sing our world
As long as you wish.

They stop singing. I breathe.

I am your breath.

Not a word, a prayer. A drop.

A drop of what? Of whom? Of love,
Hate, another soul mate.

A drop, a prop, another god, another,
Another, another eternity, forever.

