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HOMEMADE ESSAYS

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MIRACLES DO HAPPEN

That is the answer (the only answer) to the enigma we come across almost every day as we wake and look for a while at the ceiling or at the magnificent canopy over the top of our bed. A sort of display indeed, a useless manifestation of what a human being is capable of in the domain of decoration, design and mindless doodling. I do exactly what I am writing about: I look at my canopy and not at the ceiling that belongs to me only as a part of my house, not as a particle of my soul; whereas the canopy has grown attuned to the innermost nooks and crannies of my being that even I – the core of my being and existence – can hardly spot in the network of tendencies, desires and death instincts. And I cannot help wondering if life is not limited to this display, to this play of lines and colours that has nothing to do with daily suffering and the nightmares we are subjected to, even if we are presidents, geniuses or just a number of cogs in the machine created by God, a dozen gods or one huge and malignant demiurge.

I look at the canopy and wish I could never come across anything else, be it Dante's *Commedia* or a blade of grass highly praised by all and sundry, by lovers of organic food and the tourists who never walk on the grass, let alone on flowerbeds. And the blackout I am at pains to describe does not belong in the realm of miracles: all I have to do is stay in bed until doomsday, taking advantage of meals on wheels and other generosities provided by humanists and their secretaries. Others might say they cannot visualise such an existence deprived of others, of their looks, words and helping hands hypothetically destined to propel a human being to various goals: to international stardom, for instance. But if I resolved to stay in bed for the rest of my life, I would say to all these hands one is likely to see above one's body (given our innate humanism), 'Let us confine our exchange of niceties to wheels, meals and thanks. I need neither international stardom nor even the books you might lay your hands on in my library. I've read all of them. And I know all the blades and their grass by heart, if not by my whole body.'

I remember my visits to the woods near my Versailles flat where I used to search for the books I relied on for enlightenment, for inspiration. Let us not forget that what I am trying to describe is a reciprocal action in which the whole world is involved. In other words, if the world decides not to let you go, you stay with it to the point of reading newspapers and their fake news. You also study every autumn leaf, saying repeatedly, 'What a beauty, what a beauty!' – to yourself and others who maintain that, unless you are determined to give vent to your feelings in their presence, you are not likely to feel anything at all. Let them think that I have no feelings either in my stomach or in my fingers and that my toes are so cold I have lost all feeling in them. On the other hand, whenever they walk out on me, I

am left with a horrible feeling of emptiness – according to them and *their* feelings. All right, I accept their verdict, and if I have occasion to say in their presence, ‘I’ve lost all feelings except a horrible feeling of emptiness,’ I shall open my mouth for the very last time. But I do hope this occasion will never arise – outside the scope of this text.

During my visits to the woods I would read the books I was sure to find in my library where I still come across ‘minor miracles’ – the books I wrote off a long time ago. For years and years I thought I had given them to somebody (my contribution to humanism), but reality often contradicts our logic and *Weltanschauung*. Thanks to our frequent jumping to conclusions, we attribute these contradictions to nature’s (or God’s) capacity to create both minor and major miracles. The books I used to discard almost nonchalantly may come back to me in the guise of a mystery to which I am duty bound to find a key so as not to miss yet another turning point in my life. I am still eager to turn and look at different scenery, at an unknown sky and my capacity to accomplish this feat does not leave me in spite of my age. What differentiates these turning points from their predecessors is the amplitude of my turns: they concern mainly or rather exclusively my head. I no longer go to the woods I touched upon as I endeavoured to recall the halcyon days of my Versailles life. And if I do study a leaf or a mountain, I accomplish this minor miracle through a timely interference of an Aeroflot magazine, for example; or a book on Hokusai. Recently I watched again Sakurov’s *Faust* in which, at some point, I was supposed to play Faust’s father. I am still not a father myself, although my age permits me to impersonate many a father of whom I have never heard as if my hearing or my brain were impaired. And the lecture I gave at the Ascona symposium might teach a few home (or heaven) truths to my virtual sons – when it comes out next April.

Well, my encounter of the second type with Sakurov’s *Faust* was a minor miracle in its own right. The first encounter thoroughly disappointed me, and I even said to myself I was delighted that in the end I hadn’t taken part in this boring, monotonous and pretentious production. Our second encounter was of an opposite kind, which might suggest I had recently gone through a number of metamorphoses. (And a lot of literary disappointments turn into triumphs when I open the books I have not read for more than thirty years: minor and major miracles.) The happy ending I admire so much in Goethe’s masterpiece – the epitome of our existence, of its fruitlessness and pathetic symphonies – found its visual unhappiness emphasised by the word ‘*Weiter*’. I recalled all the *weilers* and their waiters I had encountered in my life (the zero type encounters) and blissfully returned to my bed, to its canopy that restores my playful spirit and light-heartedness in no time at all. And once again I utter my Kojève-inspired idea, ‘Life is a tragedy that should be played light-heartedly.’

Life is a huge memory and recently I learnt that my body’s memory is far more reliable than whatever my brain seems to treasure, for it suffers neither from memory lapses or any other lapses which frequently mar the performances I associate with my brain-lodged reminiscence-device. Whenever I see mountains, for instance, I vaguely feel their counterparts I read about or saw in Dante’s *Commedia*, in Hokusai’s prints. But I never recall real mountains I came across in my youth

and even 30 years ago when I was still able to climb or travel to the sites where sky-scraper-like landscapes are put on display for the sake of tourists. Perhaps their presence still lurks somewhere, in some nooks and crannies of my unconscious, otherwise I would not be able to enjoy their images which I find during my flights to Russia or China in the pockets of my neighbours' seats. I had better use this material and reflections in the essay I intend to write in the near future, the essay devoted to the notion of distance. But let it stand right here – another item in my computer's memory.

As for my body's recollections, they are mainly related to the traumas I felt victim to in my youth and even later, in my forties and fifties. To tell the truth, I have no idea what memories my body relies upon during the periods when I cannot reach a lavatory, let alone take a two-hour walk in our leafy suburb. My kine-masseur persists in asking awkward questions, but for the life of me I cannot recall at which period in my life I was deprived of lavatories, bathrooms and their soothing, generous flushes and taps. Perhaps my body recalls what has never had happened, considering that one's mind (not only one's body) is in a position to recall the future; at least in accordance with some films I saw in my native land a long time ago, in the irrevocable past. So my body recalls the lives I might have lived in the course of the 18th century, and other centuries, times and days are not excluded from the scope of its feelings either. Nor do I reject the hypothesis that insists on the importance of my dreams I cannot find within my wakeful hours, for all my efforts. I know I had a dream last night or many nights before, but it is not within my power to reconstruct it, if only through a series of fragments. But my body is aware of the discomfiture my destiny was subjected to while I was smiling as if to satisfy all those who used to wish me good night and sweet dreams. My body seems to punish me for my forgetfulness by making me experience what I might have dreamt about while enjoying the comfort of my two faithful pillows. Isn't it another miracle – a minus miracle, as it were?

On the plane I took in Moscow, hoping to come back home at the end of a four-hour journey, I chanced upon a magazine where they talk about the Kuiguk lakes and the Multa River basin located at an altitude of 2,030 metres above sea level; above my level as well, I might add, given that I no longer belong to the advanced[level humans – as far as my health (or rather both my legs) go. But even if my legs were in good walking order, I would not undertake such a journey, for these marvels, these miracles of nature can be reached either by foot or on horseback. Judging from my numerous encounters with reality, I am unlikely to throw my head back as if in ecstasy while standing or sitting on a stone or a tuft of grass from which one is sure to benefit from the panorama compactly shown on two pages of the Russian magazine. Compact is probably the key-word of my age (not only of my personal age, mind you), and I fully understand its importance. Of course I am not supposed to limit any contemplation of the sky to one cloud, one constellation: I can turn my head this way and that as long as I please, although, at this stage of my journey through life, I prefer the canopy I attempted to describe at the beginning of this text. When taking advantage of its beauty, I do not even have to turn my head, let alone my aching body; I just move my eyes and probably entertain one or two thoughts.

Nine years ago I did stand on a stone or lay on a tuft of grass in front of Lake Ritza which is in Georgia and also in my childhood when I had seen it for the first time. Then I left the country of my youth and birth, and only in 2009 did I pay another visit to this beauty I am vainly looking for in my library: I do not think I have a book on Georgia. Nine years ago I reached the lake on a bus crammed with Russian tourists and second-rate language, which somehow interfered with my contemplation of the beauty I still associate with my halcyon days when almost everything seemed beautiful, even Stalin's architecture. Then I experienced a shock that I am used to calling 'a turning point' as if to acknowledge the importance of twists and turns in my life. From our windows I could see the Kremlin at which I looked every morning, after leaving my bed and bathroom. Then I turned and began looking at Western Europe where I have lived for 44 years. For many years I was twisting and turning in between Brussels and Versailles, and now I live near the former. In short, Lake Ritza, its proximity and reality, was far inferior to the emotion I feel as I peruse the Aeroflot magazines where, along with the Kuiguk lakes and the Chuisky Trakt, I admire the Kyzyl-Chin River situated in the Kosh-Agach region.

Walter Benjamin enlarged upon the presence of an aura that we might lose when looking at mechanical, technological, almost automatic reproductions of the works of art and also of landscapes and suchlike – in a Russian magazine, for instance. The point is we lose this proverbial aura anyway – tourists and the texts they listen to obliterate it in the twinkling of an eye. What you remain with is a mixture of tourists and exhibits, and after a while you realise you do not know what you are looking at. If, in those moments of perplexity, I could analyse my reflection in a mirror, I might say to myself, 'There's an aura of sadness about him.'

There is no denying that space structures and puts on display not only churches, but also towns and sculptures, and many specialists frown upon the photographs you enjoy in a picture book (a childish appellation) on account of their compactness, their disregard for space. Don't we continually create both space and time in our mind or representation? But for them, we would be unable to bear any imprisonment, however short and merciful. Even those who ignore Immanuel Kant and Schopenhauer do not always die of loneliness either in prisons or on desert islands. The space I create when leafing through the Aeroflot magazine encompasses everything from my youth and Russian literature to nostalgia and Beethoven's quartets. No one talks and walks by my side, and for once a number of children do not giggle and nudge each other within my field of vision. 'The pearly-green water, the dazzling whiteness of the glaciers, and the barren shores amaze with their contrasts of colours and brutal beauty.' I *am* amazed. And I am not sure I would be amazed if this piece of information were conveyed to my brain through a pair of headphones: today, tourists listen to texts in front of Van Eyck's masterpieces and look at pianists and other performers, instead of listening to their instruments, voices and batons.

I should not forget that this essay is devoted to miracles and their impacts on our *Weltanschauung* and daily routine. Of course there are individuals who affirm that whatever happens

belongs in the domain of miracle, marvels, wonders and gifts incessantly, magnificently showered upon us by God. They open their eyes and even if their beds are unable to offer them either canopies or at least a few appropriate parts of their ceilings, those individuals think and often say, ‘What a miracle! Another day!’ or even ‘Another life’. Some of them believe that every dawn is a miracle and the beginning of a new life, whether you are still asleep or not. And if you wake out of a midwinter dream and see nothing but a sort of blackout you are mainly used to in theatres, you switch on the lights and call it ‘my new resurrection’. I know a man who goes so far as to say, when asked about his age by a doctor or a policeman, ‘I’ve resurrected more than 11,000 times.’

If you go far enough in the domain of miracles, you may even discard the sun and a number of daring acts it has carried out from time immemorial because everything becomes miracles and your teeth’s loyalty to your wellbeing – they are neither false nor rotten – is as prodigious as the sun’s stops or rotations. Apparently it did rotate (around an axis?) on October 13th, 1917, and more than 70,000 unbiased witnesses testified to this phenomenon. Nor did it only rotate in the sky for everyone to see – it got so close to the Earth that one still wonders why no world conflagration took place in the course of this major miracle. However spiritual and devout, even miracle advocates doff their hats to the event described in many books dedicated to saints and their patronage.

Sometimes they call this event ‘Fatima’ for the simple reason that, as soon as one hears this name, one understands what they are talking about. This Portuguese village sprang to life in the year closely linked with two Russian Revolutions of which very few foreigners are aware nowadays, given the metamorphosis underwent by the Soviet Union in the early Nineties. And even before this turn-of-the-century bloodless revolution, many foreigners singled the year 1917 out from years and centuries only because of the Fatima apparitions. No point in making clear what apparitions I am writing about, and for many unbiased and biased observers they are more than crystal clear. And even those whose knowledge of Fatima is confined to the Holy Virgin and three children nod their heads as the name of the village crops up in conversation. Some of them look sceptical, others make the sign of the cross. And one of my friends gave me *The Book of Miracles* (Till-Holger Borchert / Joshua P. Waterman) pointing out, ‘David Hume was right – the sun’s behaviour isn’t always predictable.’

Indeed Hume would have rejoiced upon seeing *Nebensonnen über Wien* and reading the following caption: ‘In the year 1520, on the seventh day of the month of January, three suns, which are called “Parahelios”, were seen in Vienna in Austria from sunrise until ten or a little later.’ Didn’t he say that if the sun rises today, it may not rise tomorrow because A is not always followed by B, although we are used to causes and effects, to our alphabet, expectations and associations? If we go to sleep and our mother or wife tucks us in, we expect to open our eyes eight hours later, otherwise our A would not be followed by B – by our destiny’s (or God’s) B. But someone writes or utters ‘B’ and we open our eyes riveted on a canopy or just on a group of trees. Hume did not believe that our ABC was the only pattern of the world and he was right, judging from the three suns depicted in *The Book of Miracles* I received as a present from my colleague.

On the other hand, Hume did not seem to take miracles at their face value and recently, without leaving my humble abode where I find whatever books and lives I need, I reread his essay *Of Miracles*. As I opened his *Enquiries*, I lighted upon the notes I had scribbled in the margins, anxious to preserve for my own posterity the thoughts on which I cannot count, given their volatility, fragility and addiction to uncertainty. For instance, I singled out the following reflection:

...and that where there is an opposition of arguments, we ought to give the preference to such as are founded on the greatest number of past observations. But though, in proceeding by this rule, we readily reject any fact which is unusual and incredible in an ordinary degree; yet in advancing farther, the mind observes not always the same rule, but when anything is affirmed utterly absurd and miraculous, it rather the more readily admits of such a fact, upon account of that very circumstance, which ought to destroy all its authority. The passion of surprise and wonder, arising from miracles, being an agreeable emotion, gives a sensible tendency towards the belief of those events, from which it is derived.

There is no denying that a visit from Madonna gives rise to a pleasant emotion, even if you are a Buddhist monk withdrawn from the world for the sake of nirvana or what they call ‘the retreat of senses’. And if you happen to live and talk to your neighbours in a Christian country, you know that, for many years to come, you will be able to entertain them with your account of her visit, arousing their curiosity, wonder, suspicions and admiration. And if, in the course of the event, you remained in the background, your participation being limited to shapes and lights, you are tempted to contradict the recipient of truth and even mock him or her viciously, saying that neither the Holy Virgin nor her Son are likely to take the trouble of coming down to Earth for the sake of talking to children, to the simple and the humble. But if you are politically, socially and religiously correct, you might on the contrary back up the recipient’s testimony and remind your fellow countrymen and the whole world that only the humiliated (the last) are in a position to welcome the ultimate truth. Your compassion for the humble and love for children belong no doubt to the set of agreeable emotions; at least it is pleasant to talk about them to everybody, not only to your relatives and colleagues. But the pleasure you may derive from your discourses reaches fever pitch, if you eventually realise you took part in a supernatural, unparalleled event. Almost automatically you joined the club of the elect whose praises St Augustine sang in his numerous works.

The more supernatural elements you look at either alone or as a member of the crowd, the better you feel upon recalling this event and talking about it to those who did not deserve to attend it. We know that, in the Bible, the sun did not always conform to a strict astronomical code, coming to a standstill almost at will and sending its rays in abundance, when all we required for our crops was a drop of rain. But at the beginning of the 20th century, there was no call for the sun’s perverse (or atypical) behaviour except that we wanted it to burn Lenin and Hitler alive, coming as close to the

Earth as necessary to perform this task efficaciously and with great panache. But Lenin, Hitler and Stalin carried on their bad work and the sun reacted neither to the growth of concentration camps nor to the spread of pernicious, bloody ideologies. All of a sudden, however, the sun deviated from the norm and more than 70,000 people watched it spin around. Why? According to Christians, the sun's theatrical gesture was geared towards those who stubbornly refused to believe in Jesus and His Holy Mother. As Hume puts it, 'It has been frequently observed that the frequently observed conjunction of two objects A and B has been frequently followed by occasions on which the impression of A was followed by the idea of B.' In other words – if you see the sun spin in the sky, you jump to the conclusion it is the Holy Virgin's hand that spins it.

But the event described in any book where the Holy Trinity and Jean Paul II come to the fore goes far beyond the sun's rotation and journey through the sky: at least 20,000 participants knelt down of their own accord and their cries could be heard 'all over Portugal', as a famous journalist wrote in his notebook. 'I thought,' he added, 'that such cries could be heard only during football matches, but I was stupid and regret not having turned to Christianity much earlier, in my youth, in my childhood. I sincerely hope it is not too late.' One wonders if in those days – in 1917 – the soccer fans indulged their patriotism as much as we do a century later, waving flags, singing songs and screaming abuse.

I know at least two devout Catholics who can bear neither Mother Teresa nor John Paul II; and they do not feel like speaking more openly about their hostile attitude towards these icons of the spiritual world whom we are supposed to draw our energy from. When I endeavour to probe into their motives and reasons, I invariably come across the notions known to many devotees of the above-mentioned icons: unfathomable, *ignorantia*, *absurdio*. We can talk about absurdity in the domain of religion – and, according to some, there are no other domains in our existence – only if no tangible proof (such as the rotation of the sun) comes to our rescue in the wilderness where we open and close our eyes, forsaken not only by God but also by our intimate friends. (They all left me stranded in town with no car and no money for a bus.) To some extent this rotation is also absurd – at least it seems absurd when you do your best to visualise it from where you are sitting in your study; but if you know for sure that the Holy Virgin resorts to this physical exercise in the hope of convincing mere mortals of her existence and virtual help, the notion of absurdity recedes in your mind to be instantaneously replaced by confidence bordering on self-assuredness. The same goes for credo, *ignorantia* and God's unfathomable ways that you are in a position to fathom and even receive by email in no time at all.

In May 1991, John Paul II went to Fatima – for the tenth anniversary of the assassination attempt – and on that occasion gave public thanks to the Blessed Mother for the liberation of eastern central Europe from communism. Once again 'the impression of A was followed by the idea of B', although no one knows what to do with Gorbachev, Reagan, economics and other components we touch upon whenever analysing the causes of the spectacular collapse of the visceral attachment to Marx. Indeed both Gorbachev and Reagan are frequently resorted to in the books devoted to the

subject widely known as the End of History. It is little wonder that, in those writings, neither John Paul II nor the Holy Virgin got credit for solving the problem of the decline and fall of the USSR.

On the other hand, if John Paul II does get credit for solving both the latter and former problems (the end of the USSR and the assassination attempt) we are bound to admit that once again the Virgin Mary came into the open to show us her merciful disposition and readiness to fly to our rescue at all costs. A number of sceptics continue to question this humanist verve, saying that neither She nor Her Son, let alone the Almighty, saved us from the Second World War, among other calamities. (On no account should we omit from the list the Lisbon earthquake.) In other words, John Paul II's analysis of Mehmet Ali Agca's world-renowned failure – 'One hand fired, and another guided the bullet' – does not seem to hold water in the context of any war we meditate upon. Many hands fire and if any additional hand gets involved in the conflict, however local and of no universal significance, it pushes the bullets towards the same target. (Everything is universal except the universals, as some philosophers maintain.)

It is true that the Holy Virgin let us glimpse not only our past tribulations, but also our descendants' bomb-disfigured bodies. The secret she disclosed in Fatima puts on display a vast number of 20th-century martyrdoms among which we stumble upon a 'bishop dressed in white', alias John Paul II. I have no idea whether the Gulag and its little brothers (a Soviet joke) also come to light in the Fatima message, but any idle train of thought is sure to come to a standstill as soon as one takes the trouble to ask oneself one crucial question, 'Isn't the Holy Virgin aware of our utter hopelessness and impotence?' Indeed there is no point in revealing anything to us: montanists and their acolytes have never ceased to embroider upon the end of the world. Why not instead avert the disasters linked to wars and, generally speaking, to our innate incompetence and cruelty? Why not give us a helping hand destined to guide our instincts? (Let us not talk about free will for once. Once and for all.) Why not nip all our bullets in the bud? With the exception of bullet trains.

There are no bullets within my reach, and even the bullet trains I used to take advantage of in France and Japan are more or less a thing of the past. Of course I do not stay in bed all the time, as might have been expected, given my lack of interest for tourism and pragmatism habitually associated with offices, appointments and business trips. But even the shelves above my computer in front of which I am sitting now are somewhat akin to the canopy I shall not describe in detail because it is indescribable. The books I can pick and choose without getting up provide me with images and ideas that make up the world where I am likely to live to the bitter end: the bed I have just left in peace for the sake of this essay is my deathbed too; until further notice.

Three days ago I picked up a book devoted to a painter whose exhibition I missed in the early Seventies; my studies at the Moscow Conservatoire had not yet drawn to a close, and I still wonder why I heard about this cultural breakthrough too late. Along with Kandinsky, Malevich and Goncharova, the artist in question (Pavel Filonov) had been banished from Soviet museums and galleries for 40 years, and I have no idea why, all of a sudden, he was unearthed and exhibited in a

building where my brain-and-heart-washed compatriots could see him to the detriment of socialist policies and their consequences. Be that as it may, I missed the exhibition and my closest friend said in front of the monument dedicated to Tchaikovsky and the Conservatoire founded by Nicolas Rubinstein: ‘This was a miracle and miracles never happen twice.’ In 1990 I saw Filonov’s masterpieces in Paris, at the Pompidou Centre.

As I leaf through the book I purchased in Paris, I cannot help wondering why so many paintings – if not all of them – resemble my bed with its canopy, my trains of thought, my garden and all the rest of what I am used to calling ‘my present existence’. It is true that some of them may have a lot in common with anyone’s existence – by virtue of their cosmic tendencies and characteristics. When focusing on the cosmos, if only within the space of a few seconds, you do not always picture to yourself a starry night (*tout n’est qu’ordre et beauté*). What you do see in those moments of instantaneous, unprepared contemplation is a sort of mess which looks like any mess you create or come across in the course of your daily routine. One gets the feeling that whatever Filonov’s subject matter, if any, he does his best to produce a mess that corresponds somehow to our mental and physical lives: that is what they look like, whenever deprived of geometry, of any rigorous, artificial, disciplinarian structure. If compared with Filonov’s style and way of thinking, Mondrian’s pictures are nothing but spick-and-span penal colonies. And yet Filonov spent the greater part of his creative life in the Soviet Union, undergoing all the trials and tribulations associated with totalitarian regimes. Actually, after a closer study of his works, one might come to the conclusion that they do have something in common with Mondrian’s: they are *disorganised* prisons swarming with inmates.

The Formula of the Universe, Man in the Universe. Whatever I light upon in this book evokes Martin Heidegger’s term ‘*Geworfenheit*’. I was thrown into the world – dressed anyhow with hair sticking up on end, when depicted by Filonov. So was the cosmos at some point or other. And it does not really matter whether we call that point the big bang, the small bang or the no-bang; not necessarily a whimper, though. My canopy, for all its pseudo-geometrical design, also reminds me of this state of affairs except that neither dumping grounds nor *Nichts* with their horrors punctuate my dream-like meditation. One of Filonov’s pictures is entitled *The Bourgeois in a Barouche*. I am not particularly attuned to the bourgeoisie and its values, as viewed by Roland Barthes and many other French thinkers, but once again I see my canopy and feel its soothing presence. And I realise that my bed is not utterly motionless: to some extent, it is a barouche in its own right; not only on account of our Earth’s indefatigable rotation.

As for Fatima and its apparitions, I do not think any miracle is miraculous enough to measure up to the importance of being earnest in the sphere of faith on which depends every movement, thought, their spaces, colours and music. Absurdity and the impossibility of reaching the ultimate explanation and proof is the main source of movement, be it the rotation of the earth or our tossing and turning in beds and baths. And the tranquillity of the sun means the Holy Virgin does not even have to look at humans because the highest form of presence is immobility, silence and even invisibility. Any smoke

– even if there is no fire to support it – is the column of smoke that rose from our three children into the air and then disappeared, having accomplished its duty. And then the same column rose again, on the same spot, as if to imitate a Russian sergeant, ‘I’ll say it once again for nincompoops, for idiots.’

They say the Blessed Virgin appears only to the humble, to simpletons, to the humiliated, to Dostoevsky’s prostitutes. But then she flies to John Paul II’s rescue, plucking Agca’s bullet in midair and putting it in her own crown where pilgrims can see it today, until 7 p.m.

Either in a barouche or in a bed, I go towards no-goal, no-knowledge, no-touch, no-word. Space opens up its no-arms and I proceed along the Avenue des Champs Élysées towards the Arc of No-Triumph, towards the Arc of Yes-Triumph, towards, towards, towards, towards.

If it did not exceed the capacity of human nature to foretell future events, it would be absurd to employ any prophecy as an argument for a divine mission or authority from heaven. So that, upon the whole, we may conclude, that the Christian Religion not only was at first attended with miracles, but even at this day cannot be believed by any reasonable person without one. Mere reason is insufficient to convince us of its veracity: And whoever is moved by Faith to assent to it, is conscious of a continued miracle in his own person, which subverts all the principles of his understanding, and gives him a determination to believe what is most contrary to custom and experience.

David Hume, *Enquires concerning Human Understanding*

DISTANCE

‘Face to face you cannot see a face. Whatever is great can be seen only from a distance.’ A Russian poet made this observation at the beginning of the 20th century, and this distance-related, time-ridiculed search for greatness means that, in those golden days, not only such a notion was more or less current, but one was eager to search for it. According to St Paul, in the Hereafter you might see at close range either the Almighty Himself or at least the whole truth. What can one see in this day or age? A face, a truth? Many faces, many truths can you see without leaving an armchair rooted to the spot in front of your computer. How many faces? How many truths? Whose faces and truths? Who, what, why? Of course you are in a position to answer the first and the second questions. But *why*? Why should you *bother*? Let all of them recede into the distance, hoping they might become great at some point or other. They do not even have to grow smaller and smaller to confirm the laws of perspective; what is more, they violate them, being miniscule throughout their journeys. Unfortunately I do see faces, from time to time. Face to face, body to body, brain to brain, mind to mind.

I used to be short-sighted to such a point I had to study every painting – whenever I took the trouble to go to a museum – inch by inch, almost touching the canvas, which would trigger a commotion amidst both visitors and attendants whose zeal would have been hardly understandable, given that I had no knife in my hands; no knife, no weapon of any kind. I still recall a few terrorist

attacks the victims of which were disappointingly bloodless, being paintings, tangible illusions, specimens of unreality. Repin's monstrous representation of Ivan the Terrible doing his best to cope with the relentless flow of his son's blood originated in his father's unsound fury could not be left in peace for decades: someone was to avenge the son's assassination. I have no idea whether the result of this vengeful act – the size of the wound – was in keeping with the rules of vendetta, but I do know that the painting spent almost a year in some workshop or other, undergoing a revival of its poetical, psychological and physical energy.

Whenever Jack the Ripper is touched upon in a conversation or a film, we picture to ourselves his figure – all the more readily if the book we are holding and reading shows us the following sentence, 'She could make out a figure in the fog.' In our eagerness to protect ourselves from Jack's blows, we drop the book and stretch out our hands as if prepared to sacrifice their delicacy for the sake of our neck or intestines. We had better not link this gesture of ours to the notion of space which is too spacious to enable us to keep at bay one individual, his hand and knife. In other words, our protective impulse should be *targeted* instead of encompassing the entire universe alongside a number of virtual worlds.

I am told you should contemplate a picture from a distance, taking in not only its nuances but also the overall harmony that supposedly presides over every masterpiece; unless it is dedicated to disharmony, chaos and ruin. In my youth and even later on, in my thirties and forties, I was unable to carry out this synthesis, impeded in my efforts by the frailty of my eyesight. At best I saw something akin to the canopy of my bed on which I touched in my essay on miracles, and even if from now on I resolve to remain silent about this aspect of my visual world, it is no less than a leitmotif of my life I can both see and hear as if my bed were a Wagner opera in its own right.

I would fill up the gaps, though, and somehow complete all the pictures I came across through my imagination, my inner space on which I also counted whenever facing Soviet officials and their numerous cronies. And my inner space did have something in common with the notion of distance that I propose to analyse in this essay, after submitting to it my attitude towards our society. Of course I see neither Rippers nor their knives in my entourage and even outside it – I am not as paranoiac as Putin who seems to keep any rival, however harmless and innocent, at a distance, now and then putting him or her in prison. But I do follow Schopenhauer's advice not to get too close to porcupines whose human warmth I am supposed to need, if only on an irregular basis.

I disagree with the widespread opinion that psychological wounds are even more fatal than the ones depicted by Repin and other Russian painters who had a lot of blood-soaked models within their reach. But if you have a mistress who wounds you every day, intentionally or unintentionally, as the case may be, you accumulate so many negative vibes and traumas that, sooner or later, you might end your life on a carpet – as Ivan's son did as he went on shedding his blood. Her remarks and daggers are all the more merciless since you habitually rely on her understanding, kindness and tender-hearted words that, according to your rosy expectations, are meant to boost your self-esteem and morale.

Curiously enough, the more trivial her remarks, the sharper the pain you experience – contrary to the action of a kitchen knife that does not really harm you by gently touching your skin.

Any reflection, however abstruse, theoretical and esoteric, thrives on concrete, down-to-earth examples: they demonstrate how the most enigmatic topics – quantum mechanics, for instance – can be explained in a few words to neophytes and even nincompoops. What is more, one isolated example may reveal so many secrets related to your wife, mistress, lover or intimate friend that, without further ado, you walk out on whoever happens to be under your scrutiny, swearing to God that you will never try to see this person again.

The example I have in mind features a young man whose obstinacy and its effects I was unlucky to experience during his long-drawn-out visit to my abode. I think his mother brought him to my place in springtime, probably seven or eight months ago, considering that a part of our conversation was devoted to the beauty of my garden. My mistress put a cake on the tablecloth and dutifully I took care of the teapot I had filled a few minutes before: I am still extremely fond of tea; not to the detriment of coffee, though.

During the tea-ceremony – ‘It’s a real tea-ceremony we’re taking part in,’ said his mother – he talked about his father whose piano gift I am still not acquainted with, for all my knowledge of the great pianists of the past. He died a dozen years ago – in his prime, according to his relatives who do all they can to keep his images and sounds alive, not allowing their daily routine to blot them out. His son is a surgeon, but last year he had a piano installed in the hospital where he sheds his blood, sweat and tears, so that, after every operation, he indulges in a little nostalgia, playing Mozart, Beethoven and Schubert to his heart’s content. I asked him if his colleagues did not mind his nostalgia or rather its manifestation. ‘Not at all,’ he answered. ‘Sometimes they even ask me to play during my operations. You know, they never relax by going to the nearest pub, as all their pals traditionally do after work and even in the middle of it.’

He said his father played 20 Beethoven sonatas and ‘it was his intention to learn the rest of them. “Otherwise,” he said, “I would never enjoy any inner peace.” As a homage to my father, I resolved to learn the cycle myself. I’ll play three sonatas for you, when you pay us a visit. If you don’t mind.’ His mother lost no time in assuring me her son was dead serious, and I smiled, saying, ‘Oh, with pleasure. Of course I don’t mind.’ At that point I just thought I would never visit his hospital (let alone their dwelling), if only for an innocuous check-up. Frankly speaking, I underestimated the danger, being convinced that no amateur, however nostalgic and assiduous, could learn all Beethoven sonatas by heart. ‘It’s easier to memorise The New Testament,’ I concluded as I recalled Hans von Bulow’s meaningful remark: ‘Bach’s *Wohltemperierte Klavier* is The Old Testament; Beethoven’s sonatas are the New Testament.’

Recently I met his mother at the French Ambassador’s official residence where she demonstrated a renewed interest in my persona, saying, ‘We’re waiting for your visit. Do come before New Year’s Eve. My son has already learnt four sonatas. He hopes you’ll be indulgent and

understanding.’ After the reception, I said to my mistress who has been engaged in the project from the very beginning, that I was not eager to accept the invitation. ‘Not for all the tea in China,’ I added, as I often do under such circumstances.

‘Why not?’ she asked.

‘Because my time is more precious than you think.’

‘Everybody’s time is precious.’

‘Perhaps. But, to my knowledge, not everybody plays recitals in huge concert halls. As for my literary work –’

‘He’d be in seventh heaven.’

‘What about *my* heaven?’ I asked.

‘As usual, you think only about yourself.’

I have never been on the same wavelength as misogynists: a great many women are so superior to my own self that it would be self-destructive to suppose I am also inferior to a number of men. Nevertheless I must admit that the sentence I abhor to the point of ceasing to talk after hearing it is more popular with women than with men. ‘You’re convinced you’re always right.’ ‘Of course you’re always right – it goes without saying.’ ‘You’re always right, aren’t you?’ You might hope that any discussion comes to a close whenever you hear one of the above versions of the same idea. Nor would I complain about such a conclusion, which is usually reached after a fruitless discussion, if I could thereby be spared any additional intellectual effort: I reserve these efforts for worthier enterprises. But the discussion in question often goes on, and you realise the person you are talking to has far more aces up his or her sleeve. The discussion I partly quoted went on too, although I still have no idea why we had begun it in the first place: my mistress left shortly afterwards. Yet her arguments, if any (words, words, words), helped me to measure up with accuracy the discrepancy between her way of thinking or living and mine.

You often forget your lovers’ presence as if they had a natural propensity for melting in your mouth – like ice-cream, for instance. Melting in your mouth, in your body; becoming you in no time at all. And then a metamorphosis comes and you realise you cannot stay united for a considerable stretch of time; otherwise they (unfortunate lovers, miserable people) would never have coined the following expression (or idiom – a downright idiocy) – the parting of the ways. For a while you thought there was only one way, one road taken by two persons, two individual selves who merged into one; and that happened so organically, so divinely you do not even know whether there was a point at which this one emerged as an indivisible whole.

Leibniz seems to have described the process; at least he hinted at the possibility of the union when he said that, after looking at the world from a multitude of angles and sites, we eventually see only one thing or being – the meeting place of the universe’s components. There is no denying that such a place exists – not only in one’s fertile imagination or in Borges’ *Aleph*. Actually, to see it (this

particular one), one had better not resort to the fireworks of one's fantasy which often leads one astray unless it is as poor as St Francis: he saw only God, even when he addressed the sun or birds and fishes.

Many years ago, in Brussels, I saw an excerpt from B  jart's *Romeo and Juliet*, and I did not get the feeling our lovers were not alone, on their own. This afternoon I watched the same excerpt on my television and was greatly surprised to find there were other couples on the stage as if our lovers were part of a huge archetype (they were, they were) in which almost every facet of their relationship was reflected, multiplied and distorted. As if all other dancers were saying, 'Your movements are erroneous. You don't follow the pattern. You deviate from our archetype and mythology. You're *not* alone in the world.' What archetype do I participate in when looking at the canopy of my bed? I am not hanging at the end of the parachute, am I? At the end of the world, rather.

Let us go back – I can go neither back nor forward, my legs being almost paralysed – and recall what I said about the discussion I had with my mistress; on condition that one can call it a discussion, otherwise it is pointless to recall: I have no wish to belong to the nonsense archetype. For a while (every discussion worthy of its name should last for a while, for two minutes at least) we talked about an amateur pianist who was working on Beethoven's sonatas for my sake – to play them during my visit to his mother's abode. Reluctant to waste my time on amateur theatrics (a few grimaces, the eyes fixed on the ceiling) I said I would stay at home: as usual I had a lot of work to do, a few important, archetypal tasks to accomplish. (My personal archetype – no other Hamlets.) Besides, I was at a loss to understand why I should undertake such a journey and listen to the sonatas I have known by heart for 55 years. (I could play all of them at the age of 16.) 'To please this young man,' she answered. 'He was always a good boy, very friendly and eager to please,' I answered. 'At the age of 17 I read Dante's *Commedia* in Russian. And I became a bad boy.'

For a while (no discussion this time) I talked to her about Peggy Guggenheim. My mistress knows neither Leibniz nor Chekhov, but the name of this remarkable woman did ring a bell with her. Once, during her (Peggy Guggenheim's) stay in Venice, in her palace, she received a letter from a young man who, after describing in detail his love for music and pianos, asked her if he could use her piano to prepare a recital he was to give a few weeks later. 'I'd be perfectly happy to help out,' she answered, 'but there's no piano at my place.' As a matter of fact, she was perfectly happy she had no piano either in Venice or in any other Italian city. 'He has no manners,' she said to herself. Apparently she talked to herself rather often, saying most of the time, 'He has no manners. She has no manners. They have no manners.' She would grow furious upon receiving a missive from someone she knew neither personally nor by hearsay, 'You don't know me, but once I met your sister Joanna in California,' or 'Your friend, Paul Bowles, said I could call you –' Needless to say, she was not pleased with the times she lived in and thought we should thank God for Kandinsky, Matisse, de Chirico, Picasso and Pollock and scold some archangel or other for letting her contemporaries exhibit their trash all over the world.

My former mistress rounded off our discussion – the one I enlarged upon for a while – by pointing out that I did not have to go anywhere. I said, ‘Indeed I’m under no obligation to listen to this pianist’s recital – he and his mother have no manners. What I’m interested in is your *Weltanschauung*.’

‘I respect everyone,’ she said.

‘And I don’t respect liars, bullies and cheeky little tykes.’

‘When did it start?’ we ask ourselves unless we never feel like asking questions, afraid as we are of lies told by others and ourselves; to ourselves. At first we were attracted to each other, my former mistress and I, but then I drifted with the tide, being weary of domestic quarrels and pragmatic decision-making; and then I grew weary of our relationship and so did she, I suppose, otherwise we might have lived side by side for another year. This situation reminds me of a film I saw many years ago – everything happened many years ago with the exception of our parting. A man danced on a floe as if he had been happy and intended to spend the rest of his life on the river, drifting with the tide, as it were. Incidentally, sometimes I wonder if I too have been drifting with the tide for at least five years, setting off on this inward journey right after my departure from France. And my outward journey (the one I make in the Earth’s company) goes on whether I am conscious of Belgium where I live and enjoy food and wine or not. Anyway, I am not sure the dancer I am talking about was conscious of the floe where he spent a few hours, unmindful of whatever was lying in wait for him. All of a sudden he saw a hole – a black hole perhaps – right under his feet so that he was to master his fear of flying and beat the world record for the long jump. (Buster Keaton would have accomplished the task with elegance and coolness.) Alas, I am not interested in sport and so I did nothing to bridge the gap between my mistress’ body and my libido.

I keep jumping from one subject to another because, in my opinion, there are no subjects as such – only objects that I can touch or think about. Does this statement have anything to do with quantum mechanics that deprives us either of objects or of subjects or of laws? I think it is rather objects that we eliminate through our pernicious attachment to this theory leaving at our disposal only energies or forces or whatever they call our surroundings. After all, it is not for nothing that Einstein feared and despised it to such an extent that he spread his hatred all around Princeton, affecting and leading astray Kurt Gödel, among other scientists of note. Well, be that as it may, tonight I am thinking about Shostakovich whose personality and works have always been a far cry from my tastes in the domain of music; in the domain of the arts, in general. But there are other domains, and with the passing of time I have taken them into consideration, becoming a mixture of everything – of all the events I treasure somewhere in what they call the ‘self’, ‘being’ or merely ‘personality’. As some theologian put it, ‘Every human being is a city of God, but beneath every city there lies a labyrinthine network of tunnels.’ One of these tunnels is Shostakovich, and if we regard him as a city of God, we must admit that the theologian’s remark is related to him too. In other words, he can also boast of a labyrinthine network of tunnels where Stalin and his purges continue to prosper. It is enough to listen

to this symbolic composer's opuses to realise to what extent the dictator's immortality and vitality are on the agenda.

For years and years I lived within striking distance of Soviet butchers who did not have to cut your head off to mar your existence and incite you to end it either by hanging yourself or by throwing your body out of some window or other. The point is the window you select for this purpose should be situated *outside* striking distance: you should not aim at a compromise, as a result of which you might sustain a head/back/knee injury. It does not really matter if one says, 'I should opt for murdering distance,' for, at some point, words are bound to die anyway, even if you continue to live, limiting your despair to the search for striking distances.

For years and years my suicidal urge and nervous breakdowns tried being friendly but I kept my distance. Of course Stalin's death made things easier for me, and I wonder what I would have done in Shostakovich's shoes in the late Forties, when he was branded – along with Prokofiev and Khachaturian – as a representative of the formalist movement, writing a lot of 'crude, graceless and vulgar pieces of music'. According to Stalin's spokesman, Andrei Zhdanov, these pieces were as horrible as 'a dentist's drill or a gas chamber'. Apparently the composer – and he was not alone in this gas chamber – was on the brink of a nervous breakdown into which, after a while, he plunged headlong. In a letter he admitted that Zhdanov's verdict had aged him greatly: Schopenhauer's porcupine must have usurped his body and soul; at least for a few days. But he continued to work; so do I in spite of the pain I constantly feel in my legs and in my back, if not all over my body. My soul remains intact – perhaps because of Stalin's iron-fist verdicts.

In the course of my Soviet life I gathered a momentum that enables me to keep at a distance the greater part of negative emotions, as my former mistress might put it. My tendency to equate whatever is negative with present-day attitudes is well known and it is no wonder that for several years I have been excluded from any society one can think of; unless one thinks exclusively in terms of animals and plants. Disaster *sive* today's world. And I should point out that the negative emotions I am about to enlarge upon do not stem from any lack of inspiration: for all my infirmities and disappointments, I can still count on its figments' reliability.

For several years I thought that no one cared any longer for the Soviet regime and its symbols such as the hammer and sickle, the sick and the proletarian dictatorship. And even if I talk at length about mental sicknesses, I do not expect an intellectual to point out, 'In your motherland they used to lock both dissidents and poets up in lunatic asylums.' But at the Ascona Symposium (Eranos) I rounded off my speech by telling the story of my visit to the Soviet Ministry of Culture or rather to one of its rooms occupied by an important KGB official. For more than a year, I had been on the so-called black list and they thought they could again entrust me with the mission internationally known as 'cultural propaganda'. In the course of their tours abroad, the representatives of the Soviet arts were supposed to demonstrate their superiority over their Western counterparts – wholly due to the regime and the attention it paid to symphonies, pianos and sleeping beauties.

Needless to say that the Symposium continues to attract the crème de la crème of the philosophical, scientific and artistic worlds despite Carl Gustav Jung's and Henry Corbin's deaths. The story I told is not spectacular, probably because no one died as a result of my meeting with the representative of rocket power – just the opposite of flower power. Yet the audience applauded and laughed, which proves that the Soviet Union and its idiosyncrasies have not been utterly obliterated.

So I was summoned to this KGB office where, logically enough, I talked to an officer whose rank remains unknown, which does not mar the gracefulness of the anecdote. He shook my hand warmly and I sat down near his table beyond which he kept shaking his head as if doing his utmost to cancel my guilt through a tiny movement of his neck. He asked me who my favourite composer was and what concertos I played, when invited by conductors or their managers. I answered his questions frankly, given that in this domain I had nothing to hide except my attachment to contemporary music. But we discussed neither Ligeti's *Requiem* nor Stockhausen's *Stimmung*, and so my removal from the blackest list I have ever blackened went on rather smoothly. Incidentally, my spellchecker knows neither of these composers whose music no longer appeals to my senses and mind.

During this benign, almost paternal cross-examination I kept asking myself what he was driving at: I was not supposed to put this officer in the picture about my likes and dislikes in the domain of the arts and philosophy: even Marx's contribution to the Russian coup d'état seemed to lie beyond the scope of our friendly talk. He also evinced a strong desire to get acquainted – if only theoretically – with my parents and their customs. I said my father had died three years before and heard a sigh that did not sound inadequate under the circumstances: KGB agents too are aware of their future, cemetery-incarcerated lives. In Russia men and women often volunteer to replace your parents in your life as if you could not shift for yourself, as if your legs were as weak and unreliable as mine. Yet I did not expect the KGB officer to volunteer for this job because we were unlikely to meet in any future, be it near or distant or non-existent.

He did not. Our talk lasted around 40 minutes, according to my intuition: there was only a portrait of Lenin on the wall I was staring at and I had forgotten my wristwatch; anyway I did not need it, not during this appointment at the end of which we both stood up. 'Let me give you some good advice,' he said at last; after all, I had not come to his office to voice my objections to Shostakovich's intervals and convolutions. 'You lost your father and I feel like taking care of your conduct. Even I and my colleagues need a guide because human beings can't exist on their own. Don't tell political jokes – they don't suit you. You know, my daughter said to me last night, "Short skirts don't really suit me – I haven't got the legs for them" – if you take my meaning.'

He behaved like Schopenhauer's porcupines, although I am not sure the philosopher took *them* into account when dropping his remark about the space where animals and humans meet and part after exchanging a few signs about which even Saussure knew next to nothing. You had better not get too close to a man or a woman unless you wish to enjoy an intimate relationship with one of them, a bout of sexual insanity. If, on the other hand, you can content yourself with a friendly talk, you should keep

your distance; in other words, you should remain *outside* shouting distance. You talk, eat a few pastries, drink a few cups of coffee, shake hands, kiss them and part, your smiles hanging for a while in midair. You should never overdo things, even if you have never suffered a heart attack so that if you eat too many chocolate cakes, you might learn what a diabetic coma means. The same goes for humans, for your neighbours, relatives and colleagues.

The officer kept his distance: he did not say, ‘You’ll end up in a lunatic asylum if you pay no heed to my judicious advice.’ There were a lot of foregone conclusions in the Soviet Union, and one got the feeling everything had been cut and dried in 1917 – not in 1937, as some historians maintain. I also kept my distance – throughout our talk and even before it, otherwise I would have had a nervous breakdown at home, not in the Ministry of Culture. I had it neither before the talk, nor during it, nor after it; and yet I was unaware of Schopenhauer’s advice. I was aware of porcupines, of tigers, of dinosaurs.

So was Shostakovich, *needless to say*. (Another Soviet key-expression.) He knew when to withdraw – his *Fourth Symphony* proves that rather eloquently – but his health seems to have suffered in the process. At the end of his life he had to marshal all his physical (quantum?) energy to write a letter, to make a phone call, to leave his room. I know what amount of self-persuasion I need to ring up a stranger; and even ringing up a friend requires a lot of energy on my part. Now I understand what Shostakovich felt at the end of his life, being hardly able to walk as far as the Moscow Conservatoire where his works were premièred, where in 1969 Karajan and the Berlin Philharmonic performed his *Tenth Symphony*. Is that why I resolved to listen once again to the recordings of his music in my collection?

We talk eagerly about nonlocal connections and often forget a composer walking by our side as we go to the same conservatoire, to a series of traumas and joys. I seldom walked by Shostakovich’s side and whenever the rhythms and tempi of our walks coincided – I had to walk rather slowly to achieve this spectacular result – I thought I would never attend his works’ premières. In those days – throughout the Sixties and Seventies – I regarded him as a Soviet composer, and consequently his music sounded too bombastic, too slogan-like; it also whined too much, especially when performed by a solo instrument. In those moments, almost automatically, I visualised a lonely woman crying on the top of a hill, saying under her breath (or screaming), ‘My son, my son.’ I thought the association was too obvious, too direct, too tear-jerking, and such means – their ends are well-known and easily recognisable – seemed improper within the framework of a serious, professional composition which looked all the more ridiculous in the light of Schoenberg’s, Webern’s and even Stravinsky’s exploits. Like the French structuralists of whom I knew next to nothing I thought that biographies did not interfere with our perception of a work of art. Only texts and notes count – the slogan that might have impaired the inefficiency of socialist realism whose partisans stubbornly searched for an appropriate, Politburo-cherished idea – to the detriment of style and taste. As a war-time song puts it: ‘First of all,

first of all, the aviation / And the maidens, and the maidens have to wait.' More often than not, Soviet creators did not even wait for style, and no wonder it seldom, if ever, made its appearance.

When walking in proximity to Shostakovich's body, I could not help noticing that neither his legs nor arms obeyed his brain's elementary orders. At some point I even asked myself if his brain issued any kinetic orders, being wholly taken by a new quartet or a cello concerto. What is more, I got the feeling that even if the composer had no masterpieces on the go, he would walk in the same manner, like an old automaton. In my house there are only two big mirrors, and whenever walking past them I make sure I do not see my reflection that, considering the size of the mirrors, would also include my gate. Let us declare that I have lost my reflection – as many literary heroes of German origin did: I would not mind singing in Offenbach's *Les contes d'Hoffmann*.

In those days that I remember chiefly on account of my absence from the premières of Shostakovich's works, I listened almost daily to Boulez's *Marteau sans maître*, Ligeti's *Adventures* and Stockhausen's *Momente*. Their quantum energy is so intricate, so nonlocal that the revolutionary songs one hears (even if one takes the trouble to block one's ears) in Shostakovich's *Eleventh Symphony* remind one too naturalistically of bullies, obstinate ideologies, dimwits and Lenin's right arm. In those days, I did not manage to enjoy this nightmare on its own terms: I was too close to this particular kind of nightmares and needed no last straws, no straws at all.

Nor did Akhmatova need any straw – her life was an undying nightmare – but she attended the première of the *Eleventh Symphony* and commented upon it as follows, 'The songs fly through the terrible black sky like angels, like birds, like white clouds!' Of course it is easy to interpret any affirmation as a sophisticated, even graceful negation of what is habitually affirmed either with the aid of machine guns or by brandishing saucepans or fists. You say to your opponents, 'Do you really believe that such a great composer needed to consolidate the Soviet regime by refreshing our memories? Don't you realise he firmly and unequivocally opposed Vladimir Lenin and his cronies? He all but wiped our bloody communism off the map. At least our Politburo was held up to ridicule.' Even the finale of Mahler's *Seventh* underwent the same treatment, although, on that occasion, no one spoke of communism and its ruins. In other words, a composer in whose works one hears not only destiny but also its blows (Mahler's *Sixth*) cannot sound affirmative without betraying his credo. These musicologists seem to forget Beethoven. And Schubert.

In the late Sixties, Shostakovich was taking a stroll in the district where the greater part of composers and their works' performers lived and prospered to some extent, being authorised to shop in exclusive governmental 'buffets' unambiguously inaccessible to ordinary musicians. I suffered from the lack of smoked sturgeon too, but I am not sure D. D. Shostakovich was fond of it and other delicacies offered to our luminaries at reasonable prices. Anyway, on that afternoon he was preoccupied with water and pipes; among other things. At the end of his stroll – he was already standing before the front door of the building he lived in – he met one of his neighbours, an elderly lady whose name I have never known. Anyway, she must have died a long time ago.

He greeted her ceremoniously and asked her only one question, 'Do you have hot water?'

'Do you wish to know if it runs from the taps?'

'Yes, when you open them.'

'Yes. It runs.'

'When I open my taps,' said Shostakovich, 'it does *not* run.'

'Doesn't it?'

'It *doesn't*. I see, I see, I understand.'

He thought they had sought to humiliate him once again, making him feel their power and his chronic frailty. (Just because I'm paranoid doesn't mean they're not out to get me.) Incidentally, he wrote some powerful music for the Soviet version of *Hamlet* and consequently knew the play almost by heart – in Pasternak's translation. '*Zhenshini – vam imia verolomstvo.*' (Perfidy, thy name is woman.) Yet in no way could Shostakovich be accused of perfidy. And judging from his resistance to Stalin – he did survive the dictator after all – he was not pathologically frail. Let us not forget that, in Stalin's presence, Tikhon Khrennikov pathetically failed to control his bowels and other parts of his body which, until his timely death, were in charge of the release of excrement.

In my youth, I underrated the role our body plays in the so-called creative process as a result of which our life will never bore us to death. (Unfortunately the latter has other means at his disposal.) Now I probably overrate it, due to my infatuation with Nietzsche's poetic and judicious outbursts that speak volumes about his numerous pains and sores. At the age of 71 I finally realised to what extent my morbid (or truant) disposition originates in my inability to descend a staircase perfidiously deprived of a banister. On the other hand, I am sick and tired of the fake humanists whose eagerness to help exclusively the young and those who have suffered a lot makes me sick to my stomach so that, in the near future, I might take advantage of their Dostoevskian generosity. Likewise I am not prepared to concede Shostakovich's unquestionable greatness only on account of his poor health and morose fear of death.

My only physical connection to Stalin is limited to the crowd I saw from the window of my room, and I am not likely to forget its density and utter devotion to the tyrant. Had I known John Donne at the time, I would have quoted him in English, 'Death, thou shalt be dead,' or something along these lines. Anyway, I had a better memory at the age of six. For all the limits imposed by my birth, I can understand the fear one might experience in the course of Stalin's life: no distance, however cosmic, was in a position to save you from the Gulag, if you deserved it, in his opinion. But, according to Solomon Volkov and other biographers and mere witnesses, Shostakovich spent a large proportion of his life playing cat and mouse with Stalin, his cronies and the Soviet press. (He *was* a master of distance.) Volkov thinks, however, that the dark object of his interest overplayed his hand, counting on the quality and psychological awareness of his audience. For instance, he dedicated his 'most confessional work' (the *Eighth Quartet*) "'To the memory of the victims of fascism'". The quartet was composed in 1960 and by that time music lovers were weary and wary of such

dedications, of Lenin and his name (the *Twelfth Symphony*), of games that seemed to have nothing in common with music. Besides, neither composers nor writers were expected to air their grievances in public – with the exception of Akhmatova whose *Requiem* was to become a symbol, a supreme ‘*act de résistance*’, to quote Giles Deleuze. After all, her grief and despair did not stem from paranoia.

In one of his television programmes, Glenn Gould spoke of Shostakovich rather warmly, saying he was ‘a potentially great composer’ (in 1962) but, at the same time, when listening to his *Piano Quintet* we cannot help feeling that ‘the limitations externally imposed on it made it sound very heartrending’. Once again we come across ‘he-has-suffered’ formula I have no fondness for because it neither justifies anything – at least not in the domain of art – nor explains any shortcoming, given that a sufferer must know his or her limits and stop working whenever life stops within his mind and body, all along, up and down his Tower of Babel. (Suffering does not constitute a merit, as someone put it.) What is heartrending is the obsession, an *idée fixe* that sets aside a lovely exchange of *maiore* and *minore*, of irresolution and resolution.

I am deeply touched as I listen to Shostakovich’s last symphony, for instance; and there are many instances of this kind: even a mere look at those LPs is enough to trigger an emotion that would hardly subside without my vigorous intervention. Death is no doubt on the same wavelength with everybody, but the length of his wave depends on people’s response to his threat or armistice – it wholly depends on your point of view or *Weltanschauung*. By the way, another wave I seem to share with Shostakovich concerns our leitmotifs that differ radically from Wagner’s landmarks: they mark the spots where our own treasures are buried. The same goes for the quotations from Wagner and Rossini – in Shostakovich’s last symphony: they mark the highlights of his (and my) childhood itinerary.

I resort to my points of reference and landmarks as often as I need to find my whereabouts inexorably linked to my past that I am not likely to call irrevocable. Even when I hear a Shostakovich piece I have never heard, I recall my past, our meetings and my allergy to his works that I could not appreciate at close range. I might have fallen in love with his music from another conjunction of circumstances that they often call either the Twilight Zone or the Fourth Dimension. In those days I needed *another* dimension or even half-dimension to appreciate his music fully, uncompromisingly. But I had only *my* dimension to work on and Shostakovich remained a Soviet composer coping with all sorts of complexes listed in the books devoted to psychoanalysis, if I am not mistaken. Or is it metaanalysis we should deal with on the occasion?

At least the word (is it a word?) meta should be taken into consideration in every serious text on Shostakovich and his *Musikanschauung*. He seems to have paid a spectacular homage to Bakhtin’s preoccupations with carnival in regard to Rabelais’ epics; otherwise he would not have quoted so many folk songs in his more than ‘serious’ works, lying outside his cinematographic preoccupations and worries: at some points the music he composed for films was his only reliable livelihood. My carnival-incited approach to the world was unconscious at the time when I finally realised in what

country I lived and what others were and would always be, in spite of everything: I just got outside our family and acquaintances, going to school, meeting strangers, half-strangers, reading slogans, listening to the radio and even watching TV that looked like a pregnant woman. All these encounters and pieces of information did not fit into my life that was maturing somewhere, partly isolated from what was going on, backwards and forwards, from socialism and communism, from the cosmos where a few sputniks disported themselves and tortured their passengers: two adorable dogs. It is perhaps because of this flight that I realised once and for all that animals were the species for whom the world had been created. No woman, no Tibetan sage had such eyes, looks, glances and attitudes. Paul Valéry speaks of a cat who sits down and demonstrates the beauty of inner imperturbable peace unless we start inopportunely playing with him, tickling his face with a straw and throwing balls all over the place.

Bakhtin's carnival is rooted in folk's games, reactions and gimmicks that I value as much as I can, being exposed to the Conservatoire's carnivalesque atmosphere: all sorts of stories and jokes kept us company during our dull, unbearable lectures on dialectics and economics which had the knack of turning everything upside down; that is what I call 'carnival'. Many years later, probably on the verge of a breakdown or death, I see either a funfair, its swings and roundabouts, or a carnival worthy of its Venetian counterpart; except that all this happens in Brussels, at the European parliament, and well beyond it, beyond Europe and our globe. (Let us hope we have no *semblables*, no brothers and sisters in any nook or cranny of the cosmos: something must be wrong with the genetic structure of our brain.) My carnival pays homage to mini structures, to acts of resistance, to the days of mini-switches, mini-swerves, of delicacy and gracefulness that are a thing of the past.

There is no denying that Shostakovich knew a lot about mini-structures, mini-switches, mini-nuances, for death does not always look like a hammer and sickle. Nietzsche used hammers very often, but his use of them justifies – at least I hope so – my harsh condemnation of today's unbridled, disrespectful, anodyne world. Apparently the famous motif from the *Leningrad Symphony* was instigated by Stalin's purges, not by the Nazis. If spared by death and his own incurable gloominess, Shostakovich might bring it to life at the beginning of our century, using it as it stands. And Joyce would have said to Beckett, 'Let it stand.'

So what am I attracted to in Shostakovich and his music? His respect for his childhood and his past in general, as demonstrated by the frequent use of his own themes, tempers and even arguments. Akhmatova said she would be unhappy, had she lived another life, elsewhere – in her beloved Paris, for instance. I lived in Paris (in Versailles, rather) and was happy in spite of the loss I did not really suffer from, odd as it may appear. The loss of my motherland was no loss at all because I had all my mothers and fathers around me – not only when I wished to read the books meticulously stocked and treasured in my library. I heard voices and gave bear hugs to my friends and relatives whom I could not meet in the course of my exile. The distance I created – not on the spur of the moment, as some might think – was the space I needed to exchange a lot of maxi-structures for one mini-structure that has a lot in common with Leibniz's monad which I discovered in my adolescence. Now, when re-

reading his work, I think mostly about the words I shall utter on my deathbed, right before the ‘crossing’, as Dante might have put it.

I have always felt attuned to Shostakovich’s adagios, lentos – to his slow movements punctuated and pierced by solos, by solitary souls airing something, not necessarily their grievances. I am probably one of these instruments, which might allow me to live in my motherland until the end of my life. True, I was hindered by my musical purity: I wished to enjoy pure music supplied by Schoenberg, Webern and even Boulez whose concert I attended in Moscow, doing my utmost to injure my hands by a tsunami-like applause. I do think that my applause could have given rise to a tsunami, if such a phenomenon had been conceivable in our latitudes.

I never attended his works’ premières: I thought he was a Soviet composer, a mere component of our Soviet life; and I was up to my neck in problems related to Soviet life. I did not realise – and I am not sure I realise it now – that anyone is much more than anyone, anything, man or woman. ‘Nexus’ might be the right word, but no right word will explain what one can feel in relation to a dead person – even if one is acquainted with Jim Jarmusch’s movie. You learn a lot about yourself in books and elsewhere, but the ultimate core of your being is not really ultimate; and that is what helps you persist in your being (another leitmotif of mine). You are another manifestation of energy, a connection – not an aching body I shall have to put up with till doomsday, according to some of my healers; the same doomsday. Not a *roseau pensant* either.

I am left with one instrument, and I am not even sure it is within my reach. One instrument. I.

WANDERING

A thought comes and thinks it should go somewhere as if there were some and where, and that is why everything is alive, otherwise we would be stones and monuments to our own unwillingness. To do instead of not and that is how it gets under way, and the way is gravelled because a group of angels gravelled this path, this math, the multiplication table of life. Why? To make our bare feet feel the gravel because there is nothing else to feel: no beauty, no ugly deeds, no future calamities. I can say that I am a tabula rasa, but I don’t feel like saying anything and these words, whatever they express and allude to, continue to grow, and this happens every morning as if I were born anew, anew, instead of saying adieu, once and for all. I say adieu and I say it once, hoping it is once and for all I said it, but ‘all’ is not complete today and no one knows when it will be complete at last. Someone fills it all the time and I realise that time is not all either, and so all of them are just one-thirds, one-fourths, and whenever I walk on all fours I do not always walk on all of them. Now and then I walk on all threes and even these threes are not all: something is missing. Something is always missing,

and sometimes I have no idea what I am missing so that I cannot pick up a piece I am missing and put it back again, gluing it on. On what, on whom? On myself, I suppose, but this problem takes all of us – not all, some do not care – to the problem of substance, nonsense, identity and the crises (and curses) related to it. Whenever the problem of identity raises its ugly head again, I realise I am ugly and I roar with laughter if, at the moment of this revelation, I am unable to rise either from my fours or even from my threes. Nor can I raise my head, which means my resurrection (I *was* raised from the dead) does not mean anything, not even erection, action.

Then I rise and go as far as the eye can see, the ear can hear: it hears a lot of sounds coming out of the blue or from nowhere. First I direct my steps to the blue, eager as I am to hear its sounds more distinctly, hoping the concert will at last be broadcast in stereo. The blue I am heading for is not really blue for the moment, but I am aware that its palette typically consists of bright blues, greens and oranges. And for the moment I confine my pleasures and discoveries to the route marked with a line of orange traffic cones. The path I followed yesterday or the day before disappeared and so did the gravel which reminded me of days of yore when all sorts of saints always chose gravelled paths on their way to deserts and sanctity. On the way they would suck the gravel and also their thumbs, for they had nothing else to suck: they were not fond of other fingers. Am I fond of my fingers? Not to the point of sucking them or anything else and for some reason I recall ‘country pleasures’ and I wonder if I am supposed to suck them or on them. What am I supposed to do on my way to the blue? Listen to blues? Is that what they call ‘universal harmony’? Or just nonlocal connections?

I am walking through an orange grove and I know that orange groves are traditionally situated near villages, but I do not remember any and only my memory is apt to guide me through colours, seasons, meanings and dealings. What is the meaning of this orange? It is a sign, as they say, according to my memory. And this sign is probably mine, given that I am going past it, almost brushing against it. This sign is probably insane. Never mind, I am brushing against it now, and I wonder if it grows bigger and bigger; and more personal as I get in touch with it. Is it really my sign now or do I have to eat it? I cannot have this sign and eat it, can I? Well, let it become my flesh and blood. Let his flesh and blood (it is a blood orange) penetrate my nonsense, turning it into some sense or other. Into what sense, into what other? ‘You should remember there are no rules, and this is the only rule you should follow.’ At the beginning of every birth, be it a hundredth’ birth or millions, millions, I learn a rule I am supposed to follow so as not to die before really coming to my senses, which would make

no sense at all. If I have no senses, at least I can enjoy what I call utter nonsense: I am born, I am in the middle of the Creation, but I am not allowed to feel its beauty because being in between murder and resurrection, oblivion and revelation, means I am just half-a-word that goes in all directions as soon as I try to understand it. There are no rules and I have no idea into what sentence I could insert this ruin: I have become a ruin after crossing so many births and deaths, joys and disappointments. But I must live many lives, otherwise I shall not be able to fall back on anything, and I know it is no use falling forward; there is nothing in front of time, not even a stretch of muddy road leading to Hell. But if I fall back, I recall Ancient Rome, its fall and rise from Troy, from a legend on which I fall back, even though I need neither Rome nor any Redeemer.

Anyway, I embarked upon my journey once upon a time, and time and again I have to bark like a dog, otherwise no one will ever give me a bone. As they say, I must be prepared for any metamorphosis so I do not take root; and if in my next incarnation God stuffs my eternal soul into a dog's body, I shall lead a dog's life and tell shaggy dog stories. The story I am telling right now is one of them, I suppose, otherwise it would never have got under way. God needs a dog for such a story because God can only tell a shaggy God story and, thanks to our books (they are all called *the* books) I know a lot of them by heart, by body. I drowned in the course of the Flood and so I am not Noah; what is more, I am not one of the passengers of his Ark, given that I am lying at the bottom of the world instead of sailing towards a new chapter of the Bible. I do not even know if there is any chapter in front of me. I am no prophet, no seer, and consequently cannot say to anybody: 'Your city will fall, there will be ruins everywhere, your children will suffocate in the fumes and so will you, whoever you are: dogs, cats, Titans, Redeemers, Unredeemers.'

There are no rules and my death does not predict any resurrection, any bodily form into which my soul, if any, could squeeze on its way to Eternity. Of course my ability to communicate my sorry plight or any plight at all, be it sorry or gory or Tory or just glory (glorified body), may allude to some presence, however tenuous. Indeed, I am only able to make a tenuous connection between my personal flood and any presence I could display somewhere, even underwater; on condition I am reborn as a fish. But am I reborn, or born, or bone? I might be a bone waiting for a dog or a dogo. As a rule, a dog comes whenever there is a bone in the neighbourhood – near his or her kennel or palace unless there is a food-crammed fridge in her or his abode, which allows this dog of mine to eat day and night without giving any thought to hunger. But if no dog, no animal comes to my rescue, I shall never know

anything about my identity, integrity, destitution, evolution. I shall always know only one rule: there are no rules. There are only pools of blood, almost everywhere, so that I wonder if the flood at the bottom of which I am still lying as if drowned to the spot is not a huge pool of blood. It is not a swimming pool, is it?

I wonder where the sentences I stockpile in my reason – the same goes for rhymes – come from; and I might add (as if life depended on the quantity of additions I keep in my mind or elsewhere) in my toes, for instance. If I did not keep anything in my toes, I would not be able to stand on tiptoe in order to pick the apples from all the trees I see on all sides. I think of Hesperides and as my thought and its apples circle around my skull I realise I must have spent some time in Ancient Greece, which might be everybody's fate, for we do go through all the stages of life and death to reach our present state of mind and body. We find both the mind and body and then embark on yet another journey that leads us from stones to animals and finally to humans as if the latter were the pinnacle of Creation. They are not and the appellation 'the lowest depths' is perhaps far more suited for humans and their offspring. But I do not feel yet up or down to human standards, and waiting for a bone is more attuned to my sadness or madness because all the differences we erect as we go through mothers and fathers seem to have been abolished once and for all by the death of God. It is He who said we are little gods or little children or little flowers; we are none, no one, no thing. We are not even the apples we pluck from trees or mythologies, and Heracles often laughs at us, brandishing his walking stick or whatever they call it in their myths, on their leaves of grass.

All these words, apples and sentences might have accompanied me through the agony I spent on my last (and not least) bed, which explains why I recall them so vividly. I cannot recall and reproduce every word I have said ever since the bang I heard when staying with one of my mothers, *inside* her (needless to say or think), near her root that coincided with the root of Creation – another myth I might find in one of the books, if I ever took the trouble of going to libraries instead of staying in my kennel, in the kernel of truth. What is truth? This kennel, my last words; and even my first words are not a far cry from the truth, contrary to what might be expected and guessed. Everything (up to the truth) is in my kennel, as human philosophers say, even if they do not imitate a dog's life in the streets of their native cities. They go to lavatories and whenever they feel like discharging their libidos, they do it in their beds, not in the marketplace. But whatever their ways of life, they do look like dogs or cats or cabbages, and one of them says, 'There's only One,' whereas another says, 'There's only Another.' 'Another One is out of the question,' shouts the first one. 'It is not,' shouts the

second one. ‘Do you mean to say it is *within* the question?’ ‘That’s right.’ ‘That’s wrong.’ ‘That’s right.’ That is what human life sounds like, while dogs continue to bark and God recognises His own dogs’ barks. And I recognise this tree’s bark and leaves: I must have seen it in one of my former lives.

On my last deathbed I might have had a dream which bifurcated and left me to my own devices, and these devices build forests, castles, towers and whatever where I represent on my way to the blue, the orange, the orange grove I left behind many years ago. And the years I used to count so as to boast about my old age – I wished to grow older than Democritus who died at the age of 101 – do not count any more because another question seems to raise its ugly head again: am I damned or not? If I am, whatever I touch or fly through, falls in with my ideas that say I cannot move without taking stock of my life, its direction, destination and contents. What are my contents? Do they coincide with the books I come across and leaf through? These books leaf through themselves and their pages turn and turn as if turning new leaves which, upon careful study, I recognise (I cannot fail to recognize everything) because eternity teaches you everything down to nursery rhymes, limericks and utter nonsense that unsettles your senses and upsets you no end. Now you count on your senses and trust them fully, for all their shortcomings listed in philosophical works you read as you fly to another library or museum. What do you feel as you touch an apple? Your sense of touch informs you it is a female breast you excite with your fingers to the point of getting a few kisses that your lips mistake for bites. You are afraid of being eaten alive and you escape from the bear hug your senses submitted you to and realise you have an apple in your pocket where you put it inadvertently so as not to starve to death on your way to the stars. The world is out of joint, and you go on looking for this joint, eager as you are to put it back again, allowing the world apparatus to get under way once more. Does its way coincide with yours? Do you walk hand in hand, leg in leg, shoulder in shoulder, head in head? Do you have one head or two? Two heads are better than one, I said on one of my deathbeds as I watched two doctors putting their fingers and instruments into my body. Those heads were the immediate cause of my demise: according to my last recollection I died on the spot, on the bed, right after their pernicious intervention into my internal organs; without saying the word I had carefully prepared for this occasion. Duty was the word. It is no longer either the word or duty. I wished to make them realise to what extent I had fulfilled my obligations in the world that deserves neither obligations nor any fulfilment whatsoever, with the exception of the fulfilment that enables us drink wine, beer, vodka, whisky and zoom down a ski slope. So now I think one head is better

than two, and half-a-head is better than one, and one-fourth is better than one-third. If it is my last word (Is it your last word? Yes, it is) in my next incarnation I shall be one-fifth of the letter A. -, nothing more. How could I live such a life, with such a body, with such a mind, with such will-o'-the-wisp mindful(less)ness? ----- And once again I shall call it my way. And inevitably orange groves will grow on both sides of the road I shall take without knowing what I am taking, what I am leaving behind and up there. Blissful ignorance is better than damnable knowledge, as far as I know. So, if asked what is orange, I shall say, 'It is an apple.'

'The apple of discord?'

'The apple of accord.'

'Of your own accord?'

'Of my own *chord*.'

'What kind of chord?'

'A C Major chord.'

'Why are you speaking at length about this particular chord?'

'Because Schoenberg said a lot of opuses could be written in this key – for all his elaborate series of twelve tones. I'm just one of these opuses. Opus one no doubt.'

Usually humans prefer domestic animals to classical music that seems to get on their nerves (their nerves vibrate, jump and even go so far as to fly off) and its effect on uneducated humans is all the more powerful when Schoenberg's music happens to come to the fore. This time, however, I came across a human whose interest in modern music elicited a few exclamations on my part, although I am not quite sure these exclamations sounded like the letter 'O' or the word 'really'. Perhaps they did not sound like anything at all: you might be surprised without giving vent, however modest and unobtrusive, to your feelings. Not even M might issue from your mouth and your lungs on these occasions, and that what must have taken place that morning which sticks to its guns in my memory as if reluctant to part with its meanings, signals, signs and astonishments. What is more, that human was not alone: some of his colleagues joined him at once so that I thought immediately about orchestras or choirs whose members are momentarily or permanently out of a job in spite of their love for music. They might content themselves with executing songs and oratorios in their bathrooms, and playing cello in an attic is not out of the question either: most of the attics I visit during my wanderings are renowned for their acoustics among musicians who live in the houses supplied with attics and cellars. Forbidden from displaying their gifts in the presence of their family

members, they play either upstairs or downstairs, either in the immediate vicinity of heaven or under the crust of the Earth as if in expectation of deaths, burials and their relatives' tears. I have no recollection of the hall or room where I chanced upon the musicians whose willingness to perform me was nothing short of miraculous. They looked at me so attentively, with such concentration, I got the feeling they wished to decipher me in earnest – as if I was really a piece of music, a score one might find on one's music stand. That is what my pre-natal or post-mortem wanderings amount to: I find myself either in a kennel or on a music stand or music rest, leaning against some pieces of wood.

And then I heard a lot of questions coming from all the heads I saw around me: 'Is it an F sharp or a G flat?'

'What is it followed by?'

'It's not followed at all,' I answer as best I can by opening my mouth, lungs and the part of my brain related to notes and music in general.

'Are you the original edition?'

'Are you the Urtext?'

'I'm just Ur,' I answer, doing my utmost to pass myself off as a cat or a dog.

'And what about the text? Can we trust it? Can we trust *you*?'

'You can, on condition that you relinquish your longing to perform me.'

'You speak like our crown prince who said last week, "I've already relinquished my claim to the throne."'

'I'm not a crown prince. Nor am I your subject.'

'What are you?'

'A piece of music that will never be performed.'

I would not mind living the rest of this existence, of this life deprived of any comfort, in a drawer that only God can open at the right moment, for all those He might have created in His image rummage through many drawers, taking out whatever they lay their hands on. And they treat whatever they find as objects, putting them either on their furniture or hanging them on their walls so that their extra-terrestrial visitors wonder if all earthlings had not been sent to the gallows for some reason or other. At least they acknowledge that the creatures they decided to study at close range are endowed with reason of which both animals and plants seem to be devoid. Nor do human embryos have any reason, being rather akin to their inferiors, to the representatives of fauna and flora whose actions and non-actions wholly depend on instincts, hunger and other primitive, basic needs. God pulls a drawer, finds an

embryo, decides on the spur of the moment (or spurred by eternity) that the object He is holding in both hands will, sooner or later, belong to the human species, and slips an envelope into what looks like a mouth or buttocks. The letter thus conveyed to the embryo says: 'You are a subject and here is your future reason, your *raison d'être*.'

This version (the birth of an individual) deserves my attention because I still wonder if my reason, if any, plays any part in what others might call 'his existence'. Or was I born out of the notes magnanimously scattered around the world – in expectation of yet another piece of music? The point is a piece of music can seldom if ever rest in peace, being solicited by the beings euphemistically called 'musicians' or 'entertainers'. They are just bullies determined to curb any note's freedom to satisfy their murderous urge that more often than not displays its force in public. The performers I was surrounded with would never quench their thirst for glory in an attic or cellar: walls are not responsive enough and cannot propel anyone to international stardom.

So at first they sought to correct my contents, my substance and structure to suit their needs, making me sound brilliant and appealing, making things easier for ordinary audiences on whose applause 'depends not only our careers but also your very life that might end in an incinerator,' as they put it. For a while they went on striking out my flats, sharps and diminuendos as they strove to exclude all naturalness from the intricate pattern of my nerves. In the long run I grew bombastic to such an extent that, in my opinion, there was no longer any difference between my chords and the bombs exploding at railway stations all over Europe. They called my new incarnation 'The Hymn to Life,' as if life itself were reduced to a number of vodka-fabricated ecstasies one is likely to witness in the heart of suburbia. 'How dare you?' I shouted. 'Didn't you say "There are no rules"? On your last deathbed?'

They began to rehearse me: they thought they could not play my body and soul straightaway in a concert hall, in the presence of their admirers. Their fingers were running all over my skin, but I bore the ordeal for the sake of music that had to be performed professionally, and the last thing I wanted was to compromise the performance of their masterpiece. I was surprised, however, when they opened a lot of cases and removed from them their bows that, for two hours at least, massaged my body up and down, down and up.

All of a sudden, I realised my body was covered with drawers, like a painting or a sculpture I saw in the last century. Out of curiosity, I put my hand into one of them and found an envelope. I opened it and read: 'Love is your only *raison d'être*.'

SYMBOLS II

Correct theories nearly always triumph quickly. But string theory, in one form or another, has been hanging on inconclusively for almost half a century now. Einstein's own pursuit of a unified theory of physics in the last three decades of his life is often cited as a case study in futility. Have a thousand string theorists done any better?

Jim Holt, *When Einstein Walked with Gödel*

I used to walk in the woods twice a day, and I often spent many hours under the trees that, in the long run, began to look familiar. The familiarity you might have with symbols far outstrips any other piece of knowledge on account of its vastness, unpredictability and persistency. You have neither to look at the same tree for hours and hours nor walk in the same woods, day after day – till doomsday, as I say so often as if I were acquainted with it from both inside and outside. Doomsday is a symbol, a deadline we are likely to encounter every day, if *'memento mori'* is a Wagner-like leitmotif of our life. And once again we might succumb to the well-known temptation that enables us to get rid of important subject-matter, of its almost mystical harassment, by saying, 'There are only symbols in this world of ours,' or 'There's only death, nothing else. I've looked for life ever since my birthday and now I know that, try as I may, I'll never find it.' Incidentally, *memento mori* and its proverbial efficiency are based on the principle conveyed by the following God's truth: Familiarity breeds contempt.

The Soviet Union was a Baudelairian forest of symbols. Their omnipresence and familiarity ended up getting under my skin so that the only way of staying alive, of not going incurably crazy, was to leave them behind with all their hammers, sickles, fathers, mothers and *patrias*. I no longer encounter sickles on a regular basis, but there are other symbols in the West and in the East as if we were organically unable to look at the world from the phenomenological point of view, saying to our friend, 'I could enlarge upon this glass of wine for hours until it grows as large as life or the universe. Amazing, isn't it? No symbols, no platonic ideas – just this glass of wine, the centrepiece of the world.'

I wish I could concentrate on my bed's canopy and other objects – some of them are dark objects of my desires – forsaking (once and for all?) platonic ideas that are identical to symbols; not quite. For instance, you can say that Helen of Troy is a symbol of beauty, otherwise Mephistopheles would not have moved heaven and earth to get her for Faust whose other requirements were fulfilled on the spot – at the push of a button, as it were. (Some commentators liken Mephisto's omnipotence to

that of the Supercomputer, being reluctant to utter the name of God in this connection.) But to reach Plato's idea of beauty you have to discard all individual and particular examples of it for the sake of Absolute Beauty which is not dissimilar to Absolute Truth.

How could you enjoy a Smartphone and its mini-omniscience if you kept on saying to yourself it is one of the most tangible symbols of our times? And you might have a similar problem with Helen of Troy who, when turning up in your room, would not expect you to behave in accordance with Plato's *Symposium*, with Socrates' speech. I am not trying to suggest that Helen is just an object (of your desire) you must use as an object to squeeze her dry, as brutal womanisers say now and then. But if you hold the opposite view and act as if you were facing a ghost, not a woman in the flesh – and far larger than life at that, given her superiority over other women (with the exception of Aphrodite) – you would fail completely, for I am not sure she was familiar with Plato's doctrines. On the other hand, she was more than familiar with Menelaus' and Paris' vigour, verve and industriousness.

If you strip Helen (or Marina, for that matter) of all the attributes associated with Plato, ideals, symbols, generalisations and nutshells, sooner or later you reach the stage where everything or everybody becomes what it is (even 'who' becomes 'is'). And if you continue to shun the very word 'object' that seems to take humanity from human beings, you can always say, 'I'm a nominalist, you know. All my life I've struggled against realists and their dogma.' No point in evoking either Duns Scotus or Abelard; it is enough to remember your childhood when Santa Claus was more real than any neighbour, any crowd, even if you were used to barging through the crowds, in your parents' reassuring company; when walking up and down the Champs Élysées. 'Go to sleep quickly or Santa Claus won't come!' your relatives would say throughout Christmastide. But for all his unquestionable reality, Santa Claus never showed up to give you a lot of presents – either near the Christmas tree or in your room. It is true you habitually found gift-wrapped objects under the tree in question, but after a while you realised they had not been brought by Santa Claus, and so they often remained unwrapped, almost forsaken under the same tree, in the course of the same Christmas.

Your childhood and even youth are so distant, so inaccessible, for all the second childhoods you go through in your old age, that they cannot be defined without the physical and moral support of the word 'symbol'. Your childhood is a symbol of hope and also home: in those days you still felt your mother's womb as if you had never departed from it. Your mother's womb is a symbol of security and warmth so that, whenever they use the word warmth either alluding to cat's fur or the T-shirts some of them put on under their sweaters for extra warmth, paying additional homage to the severity of the Russian winter, you still think about the months you spent inside your mother, away from the world.

Even at the age of five I still hoped I might return to my mother's *belly*: I am not sure I was already acquainted with the appropriate medical terms such as *vagina*. When I crossed the threshold of the primary school, I said to myself, 'My mother is far away. So are all my hopes.' Whenever I recall this day, I say to myself it was a turning point of my life because there was no longer anything I could hope for. What could you hope for in this world of mathematics, money, shouts and punches on the

nose? The other children used to taunt me in the playground because I was fat, wore glasses and used earplugs as often as I could.

I do not know if I should dedicate this essay to French poets and philosophers: after all, I thought about Baudelaire and Pascal as I set about composing it. Again I feel like quoting Baudelaire: '*J'ai plus de souvenirs que si j'avais mille ans*,' especially since I do have a lot of memories inside my body that I might spread over the complete edition of *The Arabian Nights*, if the night I am living through did not look far more like a French or a Russian night. And the greater part of these memories can be found under the heading of symbols. As they grow old my memories do turn into symbols after taking a lot of wear and tear. (*Je suis un vieux boudoir plein de roses fanées* –) Sometimes I recall no details, no nuances, no colours or sounds; what remains is a knot I cannot untie to find out why I attribute to it such notions as 'purity', 'loss', 'immortality'. 'She was a symbol of purity,' I say to myself; and yet I have no idea who I am thinking about. Perhaps I have always thought about purity as such. But there is no such thing as purity as such: it has its cause, its foundation stone, its roots out of which there grows the tree of purity or that of chastity and innocence. And let me point out that neither Fatima nor the Holy Virgin are usurping my thoughts as I write about purity, chastity, innocence and wholesomeness.

Frailty, thy name is woman. Perfidy, thy name is woman. Purity, thy name is woman: at least one woman must be pure, as a metaphysical poet might put it before realising he was wrong. Dirtiness, thy name is woman. Translations and poetry often lead us astray; we deviate from nominalism, from individuals and their idiosyncrasies, ending up in lifeless, more or less abstract symbols. Gertrude was frail and even perfidious to some extent, but Hamlet had no right to ascribe these qualities to *the* woman, for there is no such creature as the woman as such.

If you hang your clothes out in the bright sun, they will fade – a symbol of commonplaces. And you can speak of this phenomenon and of the weather over the cups of tea, of coffee or hot chocolate; or over several bottles of wine. The roses I buy every week for my living room, for my kitchen and room are hardly exposed to the sun that I endeavour to keep out, anxious to protect my furniture and numerous screens thanks to which I am still in touch with this day and age. I know that in Plato's days and nights they exchanged their points of view in spite of the appalling lack of computers, and many sociologists think that was the only way to come up fruitfully with new ideas instead of giving birth to commonplaces and other corpses. But today, in this day and at my age, I prefer my screens to the crowds through which many mothers and fathers continue to drag their children, hoping they might come to terms with our endangered species. And when all those idle observers begin to jostle and shove to get a better view of a star or a royal couple, they smile, laugh and say to their children, 'You should get used to the human touch.' It is true that we walk through a forest of symbols (once again, Baudelaire is right), but if we adopt the theory propounded by nominalists and democrats, we must admit that the forest in question is made up of human individuals; what is more, every individual I am talking about is a tree of life and also a tree of knowledge, otherwise they would never have voted for

universal suffrage. At my age, at this stage of my perception and knowledge, I am bound to point out that all representatives of the human species look familiar and boring. '*L'ennui, fruit de la morne incuriosité, / Prend les proportions de l'immortalité.*' In English words, I am no longer curious and one might even go so far (I will not go anywhere) that to some extent I am immortal. I wonder to what extent (short, long, infinite) I *am* immortal.

So I continue to buy and smell roses that fade like Mac Arthur's soldiers or any other human being, even if judged by a realist, by a ferocious opponent of nominalists. 'Fading' is an idea, a symbol, and we do our best to enjoy it; otherwise, without this ability of ours, we might commit suicide on a regular basis. It is one of the main symbols of life and no resurrection, no new world or birth will ever remove this word from our dictionary of symbols that often looks and sounds innocuous. The dictionary I can lay my hands on at a very short notice aims to educate and entertain at the same time. (Fading, on the other hand, may educate some of our brothers and sisters, but I am no longer entertained by it.) I leaf through this dictionary on a rainy or sunny day and light on words, words, words, words, notions, notions, notions, notions; and definitions. 'Gateways symbolise the scene of passing from one state to another, from one world to another, from the known to the unknown, from light to darkness.' I am still in my bed, looking not only at its canopy but also at my hands to find out if, some months ago, I did not contract arthritis or osteoarthritis. I may go so far as to build a gateway out of three pillows lying on the floor: before falling asleep, I transfer them to my sheets and pile them up to provide a luxurious rest for my feet and other parts of my legs. This mock gateway, however, does not allow me to pass from one state to another; unfortunately I seem to have got stuck in this state and world forever; yet another version of Baudelairian immortality. But '*ennui*' (boredom) is not perhaps the right word, given that I enjoy myself fully, taking from this world and state whatever silver linings they can offer: DVDs, Amazon, a bank account. My multimedia library spares me a lot of effort, a lot of time inexorably linked to cinemas, theatres, car parks, traffic jams and the necessity of saying, 'Excuse me, can I just get past?' It is much easier to switch a DVD player off than to leave a cinema, theatre or concert hall.

DVDs are dictionaries of symbols on which I can count, when short of perspectives and nutshells I use for all sorts of matters. Let us take 'belly' which, on this particular occasion, belongs to Peter Greenaway and an American architect obsessed by the pain that seems to originate in it, in his belly which he studies in mirrors, on photographs, in his worries. Up to now I have thought about bellies chiefly in terms of obesity and beauty, although I first saw this film 30 years ago. At the time I paid attention to Boulée's unfulfilled dreams so that the unfilled may be regarded, especially in the context of this essay, as a big symbol worthy of being honoured by any dictionary or encyclopaedia. This symbol is almost identical to the unfinished I came across upon seeing the title of Schubert's most famous symphony. And even Mozart's *Requiem* which *is* unfinished did not replace the *Unvollendete* in my private dictionary of symbols. This stubbornness is partly justified by the number of unfinished piano sonatas we are tempted to play when studying Schubert's works.

The distance (or space) reflected in Greenaway's *The Belly of an Architect* – I might have touched upon it in my previous essay – concerns our ideals, visions, platonic ideas and our everyday life, our betrayals and pains, our frustrations and ambitions. One might say the world is not only a forest of symbols but also a collection of wheels and spokes where the wheels that Schubert put to music in the first lied of *Die schöne Müllerin* are counterbalanced and counteracted by his *Winterreise*. Etienne-Louis Boulée left behind a lot of drawings on which his imagination disported itself to the detriment of reality where impossibility, baseness and libido outweigh platonic ideas and the beauty described in *The Symposium*. In Greenaway's film the heroes' and heroines' actions all but destroy the majesty of Rome, let alone Boulée's legacy. Oddly enough, in the long run (it took me 30 years) one may realise that our baseness and tumult only enhance humanity's old, almost silent dreams.

One wonders if the base and vulgar truth is vital for our perception (or representation) of the sweet dreams we come across in our multimedia libraries. Do we really have to feel disgusted at the way we go through this vale of tears (and laughs, and guffaws) to worship Plato, Dante, Etienne-Louis Boulée? Frankly speaking, I am weary of my own disgust, and any reproduction, any photograph is more precious to me than the reality of ancient monuments around which too many people walk and talk instead of enjoying the aura of masterpieces. I am quite aware of this aura and do my best to reconstruct it at home, making sure that no idle observers interfere with my sweet dream or my aura-orchestrated lullaby.

I am not particularly fond of status symbols, although the yacht I saw some years ago in *The Times of London* remained in my memory and even in my unconscious – on account of its symbolic character. I do not recall the status of this yacht (the most expensive, the most exotic), but I am still impressed by its capacity to hide the lives of those who take advantage of its generosity. Apparently there is a screen – or rather an envelope that keeps cocktail parties and champagne-animated glasses under wraps. And no opera glasses, no lasers can take the wraps off this yacht. Incidentally, these wraps do not look like gift wrapping: one gets the feeling the yacht was wrapped in plain brown paper. So pirates never feel like paying a visit to its owner to steal the contents of his wine cellars and his wife's jewellery. My life is also wrapped in plain brown paper, and no one is tempted to probe into its mysteries. A Taoist symbol, no less.

Instead of consulting a dictionary of symbols you might draw your wisdom from Neo-Taoist philosophers whose precepts sound like symbols of impossibility you should accept instead of overreaching yourself. 'Allow the foot to walk according to its capacity, and let the hand grasp according to its strength.' If I take into consideration my body's kinetic infirmity – and I cannot do otherwise – my walks will be confined to my house's interior, assuming I shall be able to use its staircases in a month's time, in January 2019. My right hand is strong enough to enable me to pick up and open various books among which there are heavy, illustration-stuffed volumes. I can even play the piano and give concerts in small and big halls, but before playing in those halls I have to reach them, and I would not achieve my objectives, if I were not prepared to overreach myself.

‘Listen to what the ear hears and see what the eye sees.’ I would not see much, if my eyes had not been operated on by a famous Parisian surgeon. One might say there is nothing to see or hear in this world of ours, and I would agree with this individual, if my hands did not pick up and open my books, my DVDs. And the door I open from time to time allows me to visit my garden and look at my flowers and trees without ascribing to them any symbols, however mighty and lofty.

‘In knowing, stop at what cannot be known.’ But to know what cannot be known, you should know *something* – at least a few pieces of information that make you realise you will not go any further; try as you may, another Neo-Taoist is likely to add. You may try and contradict him, saying that the French refuse to admit the relevance of this word: according to them, this word has no existence outside a number of linguistic and semiological combinations. Anyway, it has no intrinsic value in their sociological context, although it might be used by the Russians who, after the collapse of their messianic hopes, do not believe in any possibility, any achievement, however elementary, as Sherlock Holmes used to say.

In 1945, after leaving behind the border of their long-suffering, long-tortured motherland, Soviet soldiers and some of their generals (the survivors of the Stalin-directed purges) headed for Berlin. By that time, Stalin turned his attention from purges to the destruction of Fritzj, as the Russians called the Germans, and resolved to ‘enter Berlin before the allies’. Why? Because he wanted both historians and journalists to write, ‘On the top of the Reichstag, a Soviet flag kept on fluttering in the breeze.’ He did all he could – and he could do a lot in those days – to conquer the rest of the German army, ordering his battalions to march through Berlin before the arrival of the Americans, the British and General De Gaulle. The Americans might have forestalled the Soviet triumph, but their commanders did not want their troops to suffer heavy losses. Besides, they underestimated the value of symbols. Or they said to each other, ‘Do things that would be done by themselves. Be unrestrained within your lot but do not attempt the least outside it. This is the easiest way of taking no unnatural action.’

The Soviet marshals took unnatural action for the sake of the symbol that was utterly forgotten even before the advent of the 21st century: the Japanese along with the rest of the world population think the deed was done by the Americans. Many Russians think so too as they continue to repeat their favourite word, the ominous, undying symbol of their lives: ‘Impossible, impossible, impossible.’ It is true that symbols die less frequently than their creators; anyway, impossible is a diehard symbol. ‘There has never been a case where no unnatural action is taken and yet one’s nature and destiny have not been preserved, and I have never heard of such a principle according to which the preservation of nature and life is not a blessing.’

The point is you are attracted by symbols, by nexuses, by nutshells where one part of the universe can be found in its entirety. And on your way to these knots – they have nothing to do with whatnots – you sacrifice both human lives and nature that cannot bear bombardments, let alone nuclear weapons. Even a naive-looking bullet can destroy a leaf on which not only Leibniz but also his

admirers used to meditate (as was their wont), saying to each other, ‘There’s no other leaf like that in the whole world.’ A German character (he goes by the name of Momu) says something along these lines to human beings whose identities should not be compared to whatever we contemplate in our gardens, in Versailles and Peterhof. All leaves are different to each other, whereas humans must have embraced each other in days of yore so that what you see in the course of your strolls and musings may be likened to the One, whatever he, she or it has always been somewhere.

People buy whatever they can lay their hands and eyes on, even if they have no money; and I talk of status symbols, of life symbols, of a hand that does not reach for anything except an apple that helps me keep many doctors away. I talk of impossibility symbols among which Icarus has pride of place; otherwise he would not have ended his days in the nether part of Brueghel’s picture, his legs sticking out of territorial waters. Actually Icarus is the symbol of ‘deadened intellect and of perverted imagination. He is a mythic embodiment of psychic disorder characterised by self-centred emotional exaltation of the spirit. Icarus stands for the neurotic and his fate.’

For some time, for many years, I must have shared Icarus’ infatuation with neurosis and emotional exaltation of the spirit; otherwise I would not do my utmost to counterbalance that pernicious tendency by a relentless contemplation of the canopy I have touched upon on many occasions, in my essays and novels. This canopy is not within my arms’ reach: I would have to remove my blanket and a few books fastidiously lying on it to rise and put my hand on its geometrical or cosmic design, on its mandala; or Mandela, or Mandalay, according to my spellchecker’s ideas.

At the beginning (or probably even in the middle of nowhere) you are bent on achieving a goal linked to a symbol, to an item from the Dictionary of Human Mythology. Some of your flags are still fluttering in the breeze; and yet you no longer care either about the tops into which you stuck them nor even about the breeze that might refresh your face, if you were not so sceptical of symbols and their components.

‘Icarus is the symbol of the rash and uncontrolled, the twofold perversion of judgement and courage.’ When I open my eyes and look at the canopy, for want of anything better – and what could be better than this canopy of mine – I am delighted at my train of thought that discards the above-mentioned perversions; they seem intolerable, even if sometimes they are not exactly twofold. I am prepared to admit I long nourished a lot of threefold perversions too; at the end of the 20th century. At this stage of my life I do not seem to have enough nourishment for one perversion; or for a pair of legs.

Nietzsche seemed to believe there was another attitude towards human existence – in the midst of our species, not on Mars or Jupiter. This more or less objective attitude has a tendency to relinquish all teleological considerations in favour of what Nietzsche called a *mirror* – *après une lecture de Lacan*, as our postmodernists might say. (Not only a melting pot of cultures – New York is its symbol – but also that of times is permissible and even enjoyable.) Another mirror is in Kuo Hsiang’s writings: ‘If one lets what he has received from Nature take its own course, there will be no place for

joy or sorrow.’ Many disagree with this Taoist mirror, saying it all depends on what you receive from Mother Nature whose benevolence is open to dispute. We are more often than not on the receiving end of her fury, which ecologists put down to the pressure she has been under for almost a century. So if you decide to let our Mother take her own course, you must dismantle ‘your own nuclear plants’, as one of my Russian colleagues put it. Once again, however, you had better know exactly how far you can go, for even your altruistic thoughts may be regarded (by some Buddhists and yogis) as nuclear waste, a widely accepted symbol of evil.

Be that as it may, our Mother is seldom given carte blanche to construct her palace within our substance; or ‘our nonsense’, as the same colleague of mine put it. We know that Donald Trump’s devotees do their best to poison lakes, forests and valleys: their factories keep on releasing toxic gases into the atmosphere. Besides, many of those people and others besides protect their faces from the sun, insects, cats and dogs as if to exclude both flora and fauna – and the whole of Nature – from their daily routine and exceptional achievements. What they do receive from nature amounts to a small portion of light that they use either in front of cameras or at auction sales where they buy installations and toys they hang under their numerous ceilings. And their wives fritter so much money away on expensive make-up!

Nietzsche was weary or wary of asceticism, of nihilism which denies any value to anything, if I understand all these denials rightly. Actually I am not sure I am a nihilist: I am just dissatisfied with whatever I encounter outside my installation, alias my house and its interior, my garden and whatever grows or sings in it. What to do? is a ritual Russian question, you do not really have to add to it another ritual word: ‘next’. If you do ask yourself, ‘What to do?’ you may mean you have never done anything so far, which might be true, even if this homemade nothingness cannot be defined or even characterised as Absolute Truth. Of course you might be proud of such an achievement, if it were homologated, so to speak – creating Absolute Peace out of nothing. Every nothing worthy of notice seems to suggest it should be filled to the brim at the earliest opportunity. On the other hand, every respectable nothing continues to resist all temptations, and ‘nothing doing’ thrives and flourishes in your installation, in your tailor-made, homemade paradise.

I mirror my canopy and also one window beyond which there are birds and boughs I could take into consideration and even welcome into my mirror, into its Alice-venerated beyond. I am not likely to be afraid of any beyond insofar as it has been part and parcel of my being *from time immemorial*. (Another symbol of mine.) ‘Icons are unrelated to portrait painting; whatever resemblance there may be is ideal rather than real and depends upon the extent to which the image shares the divine reality it is intended to express.’ Of course I can find Van Eyck’s and Memling’s portraits in my heart of hearts, but I do not see them face to face, whereas icons have always kept me company and I do see them face to face, wrinkle to wrinkle.

When dealing with the question ‘What to do next?’ St Augustine used to open at random his copy of the Bible. I resort to the I Ching and the Dictionary of Symbols (Jean Chevalier and Alain

Cheerbrant, trans. from the French by John Buchanan-Brown) whenever faced with the identity problem. Who am I? What am I?

In Ancient Egypt, the cat-goddess, Bastet, was worshipped as the guardian and benefactress of mankind. Painters and sculptors often depict her, knife in paw, decapitating the serpent Apophis, the 'Dragon of Darkness' and personification of the enemies of the Sun who try to sink his sacred boat on its voyage through the Underworld. In this respect cats are symbols of their own natural strength and agility, which a tutelary deity places at the service of mankind to enable it to overcome its hidden enemies.

Cats are sometimes viewed as servants of the Underworld. The Nias in Sumatra believe that to reach Heaven, the dead cross a bridge below which is the abyss of Hell. A guard with shield and lance stands at the gates of Heaven with a cat to help him throw the souls of the guilty into the waters of Hell.

UNCERTAINTY

Of course you can say, as Pessoa does, that you do not know where you come from and what your destination is as if there were any destination either in your own life or elsewhere. Pessoa speaks of his own life, mostly, mostly, and he adds that he likes neither existence nor non-existence; and you can say to him or anyone else that you exist until further notice; unless this notice happens to be your forthcoming suicide. And you can add that even Pessoa knew what he was heading for because his nearest destination was the bottle he was to drink either at home or in a bar in the area he often mentions as he realises he is lost everywhere: in this world and also in all other worlds.

What bothers me is the duplicity of the world where I live and feel whatever deigns to reach my senses and my brain. My friend, Vladimir Martynov, proclaims a number of truths, which makes me think of Prigogine and his assertion that probabilities seem to have replaced decree-like certainties in our outlook, in our attitude towards our existence. And if you opt for probabilities, you destroy, if only in part, the very notion of truth, even if the word 'assertion' sounds like a synonym of rule, law and God-delivered messages. Once again, we come across the problem of space, and I wish I could eventually cross this problem and its space in the near future, before I go out in search of the grand *peut-être*.

St Augustine says there was no time before the Creation; Prigogine says that even before the Big Bang there was time and space filled to the brim with virtual particles and fluctuations. The Bible is one of the cornerstones of our universe, but I am often tempted to switch my *Weltanschauung* to the fluctuations, to the quantum mechanics I find in the I Ching. What I have written may be likened to

hexagrams, not to the birth of Adam and the stars, as depicted in Genesis. And a multitude of Big Bangs suits me better than one gigantic Boom which one might easily mistake for God the Father.

My own duplicity boils down to my body's whereabouts – to my house, in other words; or to the canopy of my bed, its pattern, design and probability. I am an obedient servant of fluctuations, for all my immobility, tranquillity and peace of mind. It is as if my mother went on rocking my cradle with a gentle backwards and forwards motion. Why don't I wish to add any activity to my mother's lullaby? Not to be disappointed, I suppose. At least that is what Columbo said when asked why he always orders chilli. Even a 'Large Japanese langoustine poêlé then rubbed in blood orange reduction and ginger' might upset your stomach. And a journey to heaven might upset your mind. So you had better stay in semi-hell, eating sauerkraut.

Columbo said he was not fond of fluctuations which are inexorably linked to disappointments; and revelations, and apocalypses. Even if you stay in bed all day (as I do) you can become the target of human obscenity and stupidity, let alone of barbarous cruelty. A killer enters your room, fires into your body at point-blank range, steals your jewellery and leaves your corpse alone, as if nothing had happened. Your canopy, too, might let you down, crashing through the air and hitting your substance and all the nonsense you have stored up in it ever since your birth. My canopy is probably as lazy as myself or Marlene Dietrich; or the poet that Nabokov speaks of in one of his novels. I think he points out that sloth is one of the qualities one needs to compose great poems such as Dante's *Commedia*. If one recalls Dante's life, however, one is likely to conclude that a bed, let alone a canopy, is not a key-item in the kingdom of poetry; and yet, according to my recollection, Descartes spent a lot of time in his bed. And he was a poet in his own right, otherwise he would not have written at length about the Great Deceiver, or whatever he called the Devil. (The Great Receiver of lost souls, as my one-time friend put it.)

Columbo's friend – the owner of the chilli restaurant in California – said to his cook: 'Make it special for lieutenant;' at the risk of disappointing him. Anyway, even if you try to reproduce the chilli our lieutenant partook of a week ago (as they used to say in the first half of the last century) you may miss the mark and fail to produce another proof of eternal recurrence. Languages fluctuate as much as dishes and countries: today, chilli is different from what it was under Salvatore what's-his-name. Names fluctuate too; at least within the scope and boundaries of my memory. Allende, Aliende, Alienated, Alleluated. And my inner ear listens to Beethoven's *Adelaide* as I do my utmost to recall that president's name.

There is no flying hence, nor tarrying here.

I'gin to be aweary of the sun,

And wish th'estate o'th'world were now undone.

Macbeth was not weary of the sun prior to the assassination of Duncan who intends to leave his host's castle tomorrow. But, as we know for sure, the sun will never see this morrow. When Lady Macbeth gives vent to this ominous prediction, Macbeth is not tempted to answer, 'I wish I were in Duncan's shoes. What a pity I'll see both the sun and tomorrow.' I, for one, am not yet weary of the sun, although I have no fondness for beaches and sun-kissed ladies. I do wish th'estate o'th'world were now undone: this wish is not always linked to threats, sieges and walking (and talking or rather whispering) woods.

Of course I can fly 'hence' and no one asks me tarry anywhere; on the contrary, I get the feeling I have already outstayed my welcome almost universally. And, according to Schopenhauer and others, not necessarily his followers, it is enough to die or to go (or fly) into a deep coma to make the world disappear from the surface of the Earth and all other surfaces you can think of. Only the surface you cannot represent will keep some living creatures against which you might not bear any grudge – for the simple reason that you do not know them. If you did, you might become Macbeth II or Macbeth III, as the case may be. But you do not, and your coma continues to sing you its own brand-new lullaby destined only for you, as Kafka might have put it. And if a law applies to many people living in the same community or country, comas are highly personal, otherwise we would already have gone into the same coma a dozen centuries ago, after our departure from the Dark Ages. The Dark Ages themselves must have been a deep coma; only Scott Erigena stayed wide-awake and even managed to moon around the ruins of ancient worlds.

I do wish the world were undone on the spot, but that does not mean I am Macbeth. Anyway, if I kept saying, 'I've been everybody and everything,' I would find myself in the boat where Pessoa and Borges must talk to each other day in day out. All this is not only old-fashioned – it is downright ludicrous unless you are a Brahman, the genuine article, not a character from Emerson's over-quoted poem. Apparently in the South – and I have no idea which South they speak of in the film I watched a few hours ago – you may decide to become someone else, even if you have no reason to fly from justice; and in this case you just enter this person's body by means of an elaborate technique that ranges from plain, not to say sexual seduction to intellectual talks during which you enlarge upon your knowledge of Spinoza, Jung and the Hindus. But I am reluctant to enter into anybody, for the sake of my spiritual (or pilgrim's) and bodily progress, although I would not mind turning into a woman, if only for a couple of weeks. Why should I head for the political impeccability they are so engrossed in these days? I need a number of gifts and political incorrectness. Where could I find them? In what body could I mix them together? Am I not satisfied with my own gifts and incorrectness?

On the other hand, I would like to spend the rest of my life in the South – in spite of the sun's aggressiveness – on account of the threat I touched upon earlier, in the morning. My personal canopy might fall on me sooner or later, one of these days or months, and no bearers would pick me up and convey me to an altar or Golgotha, if this catastrophe does take place (and space and time, I am tempted to point out). In the South I am enlarging upon they bear you somewhere, two bearers, four

women. Where to? Where to? There are moments when I pray on my knees, asking not only for forgiveness, but also for any movement: sometimes you are unable to reach your bathroom without losing a lot of blood.

I am staying in bed or in my bathroom, and I remain what I am in spite of all the fluctuations I am submitted to on account of my sojourn in this world that the sun might not see tomorrow. Actually the sun must also be weary of this world of ours which has been on the boring side for a few decades, according to my calculations and intuition. Why shine on it? Why twinkle within its field of vision? I might join Hamlet and applaud the beauty of this canopy, even during cloudy nights. But humanity and its inborn stupidity would interfere with my applause, as it does whenever Hamlet goes business on yet another stage. It is true that, from time to time, I applaud my canopy and even the rest of my bed, for all my own deficiencies and crazy ideas. But it is easier to condone *one* man's awkwardness, especially if this man happens to lie in your bed. And I will never allow anyone to lie in my bed.

My last blood test is almost perfect. So what?

*I pull in resolution; and begin
To doubt th'equivocation of the fiend,
That lies like truth*

GOLDEN MOUNTAINS

I dreamt of a character who said to a woman he loved, 'In love there are two persons. I am one of them. I love you.' He waited for an answer but no answer came and reached his brain, which does not mean there was no answer in the head of the woman to whom the question had been addressed. The answer she heard in her head and also in her heart was, 'I don't love you.' For almost two centuries this answer remained in the heroine's head and also in the book where both characters can still be found: *Fathers and Sons*. I hope I am not mistaken, although any mistake in this field does not mean much: everywhere you can find a man in love, a woman out of love, for all the novels devoted to female tenderness. In other words, this situation is widespread and lived for better or worse by many individuals so that you do not even have to switch your TV or computer on: you have these characters in your head as if you were about to write a novel about them.

So I am not inclined to check if I am right or not, if the man and woman I have touched upon eternally spring from Turgenev's novel. I do recall their names, for all the deficiencies displayed by my memory – perhaps on account of the sleeping pills I indulge in for the sake of my brain that is supposed to be in working order, whenever I need its help: deprived of sleep, it disobeys my supplications and commands. Alas, the sleeping pills I swallow every night destroy the *whole* of my brain, not only its part devoted to the past or even to the future. I seem to recall a film entitled *Memories of the Future*. Now I realise that the title is rather ambiguous: one may attribute these

memories to the future itself, to its unknown intricacies, and not to a man lying in his bed and twiddling his thumbs.

I read this novel in my adolescence and I think we studied it at school or during my college years. I re-read it twenty years ago and even wrote an essay about it as if there had been nothing else to write about at that particular time. This sentiment (nothing to write about) is foreign to my nature, but now and then I wish to interrupt this activity of mine or put an end to it altogether: there are activities elsewhere. Or a lack of activities, a sort of prolonged or eternal non-activity. Last night I thought I might avail myself of this variety of thumb-twiddling, but I had a change of heart this morning, and I do not regret it. And yet I have no intention of writing another essay on the novel I do not dislike, in spite of *Anna Karenina*'s unquestionable superiority. Let us say I do not like it to the point of devoting a few hours to considering its structure and characters that might be spent elsewhere – within other structures and features. Besides, I am not fond of the humiliation experienced by Bazarov in this novel: he worshipped Odintsova who, upon seeing him on his deathbed, realised she had never loved him, not even in her nightmares. And he witnessed her reaction which was as unambiguous as his forthcoming death. Actually one wonders what made him suffer: his death or her indifference.

Once or twice I was submitted to this test which was not a definitive version of life's callousness and brutality. I was not on my deathbed and now I am almost sure I did not love the lady whose lack of response to my qualities was even more spectacular than Odintsova's indifference. I met her in Paris and we parted in Paris, one month after our meeting, as if anxious to cut a long story short. She was in love with a boorish, mediocre stage director who laughed rather noisily during our telephone discussions. (I heard him guffaw in the background.) I attended a play he put on and I do not remember if I talked to her about the poor quality of both the work and the production.

Anyway I recalled this woman for the sake of this essay – not because, at some point, she took root in my being. Even Odintsova did not become Bazarov's tree of life, for all the love he felt throughout his body; even on his deathbed, after catching sight of her inconsiderate, merciless conduct. Nor was she his tree of death: he died after a visit he paid to an infectious patient whose disease took root in Bazarov's robust body. No doubt he would have managed to uproot any woman or man or object, had he lived for another thirty or forty years. He would have preserved his body's virginity for science, for the poor, for the cloudless future of humanity. But he died and death in conjunction with the Hereafter removed all the bugs from his essence – once and for all.

What are you supposed to do if your death is far away, beyond any horizon you can spot for the sake of your mental picture that requires space even more than time? Of course we grow with death and to some extent we nurse it in our body, even if we subject it to health diets and the beneficial influence of swimming pools. But if we fall madly in love, we cannot count on death unconditionally: it may not come unless we commit suicide. And our struggle for life forbids us to resort to death's assistance so brutally, without any consideration for the Almighty and His gifts. So we are left to our

own devices because we realise it is our brain and its ingenuity that should supply us with the solution to the problem of love.

We do not feel like putting our hands on the lady's neck in order to squeeze every inch of life from her body. The only way to get rid of her is to make her disappear without violent acts, without knife or bullet. And once again we fall back on philosophy which has already got us off the hook on many occasions. This time its task is limited to one body only, although other bodies may bother us almost as much as the one we are bent on eradicating forever. I have a book on Meinong in my library and I think I bought it in London in the Seventies when I often went to Foyles and other English bookshops. When I open it I find a few notes I made in the margins, which is an eloquent proof of my kinship with Meinong's ideas and concepts.

One of his ideas concerns the mental act, its content and its object, and I hope the distinction he draws between them may come in handy at this point of my philosophical investigation. The effect of identifying content and object, Meinong considers, is to make it appear that what is *in front* of the mind (the object) is somehow a part (the content) of the apprehension of it. Needless to say it is a quite untenable view, for what we see and admittedly worship is most often a physical thing, extended, solid and palpable. Such an object cannot possibly be a constituent of a mental act. What is more, even when we think of non-existent objects (mermaids, unicorns), the mental act of thinking actually exists. Whatever is part of its content, therefore, must also exist – it follows that a round square, for example, cannot constitute content, although it can clearly be an object. So you just say to yourself that the lady you are in love with is just a round square; or a mermaid, if you prefer. In other words, she cannot be content and therefore she does not exist unless you endow her with existence. You do not and she disappears in the twinkling of an eye. Let her remain an object elsewhere – an object of someone else's desire.

But at some point you are bound to get confused, as often happens when you plunge headlong into the domain of philosophy, hoping to find a remedy for your existential crisis. You can also say that the lady in question is content, but not an object because you can neither embrace nor kiss her, let alone sleep with her in the same bed. And it is not easy to deal with the contents of your brain, your consciousness or unconscious unless you resort to alcohol or drugs, which is by no means a definitive, unquestionable cure. These remedies have their own contents that often coincide with those you do your utmost to stay away from, for the sake of your well-being. The lady you dream about is multiplied by them almost biblically as if following God's injunction or rather offer.

And what about humanity? Its members offend your sensibilities either by their hypocritical smiles or by the shallowness of their remarks, reflections and movements. Nicolas de Cues (unless it was Pascal) declared, 'God is a circle the centre of which is everywhere and the circumference nowhere.' What I think about today's humanity can be summed up as follows, 'Its circumference is everywhere and the centre nowhere,' not even in shopping centres. The centre cannot hold is an old saying that no longer applies to the situation one faces in today's world. There is no centre to write

home about and so there is nothing to hold. One might even go so far as to imitate the Tao Te Ching, writing: ‘When there is nothing to hold, one holds the world. When one lets things go, they come back’ – and so on and so forth. But I would rather quote the following verses: ‘It was when the Great Way declined / That human kindness and morality arose.’ Given the number of local and international charities (and overall political correctness), one might speak quite logically about the rise of morality’s and kindness’s standards, although one should never omit the dimension habitually overlooked in our modern world: that of personal consistency, of personality, of the centre. No amount of charities will ever do any good, if the centre is neglected light-heartedly, ignominiously.

We are humanists, but our humanism glides along the circumference that does not seem to belong anywhere, except in economics, in personal belongings and in a shallow recognition one can enjoy, if one takes the trouble to fish for compliments and to work for them. I feel myself at the centre of myself, of my room, of my bed, but that does not give me access to the centre which comes to the fore in Nicholas de Cues’ philosophy. To reach this proverbial or rather philosophical, theological centre, I must skip all the circumferences that lie in between my élan and the centre’s power.

I am forced to fall back on Jacob’s ladder, on the Kabbalah represented this time by Robert Fludd whose engravings, drawings and meditations I found in Joscelyn Godwin’s book. I bought it in the Seventies, in London, but I have hardly paid attention to it in the twentieth century, judging from the lack of notes. On page five¹ I found the following picture of man’s faculties:

Love of God: Will

Intelligence: Action

Intellect: Receptive nature

Love of others: Natural force

Reason: Irascible nature

Aversion to oneself: Vital nature

Aversion to the world: Desire nature

Imagination: Fantasising nature

Sense: Vegetative nature

We are called upon to climb this ladder – the feat I would willingly accomplish, but for the presence of the natural force defined as ‘love of others’. In the first place, I am not quite sure it is a *natural* force that we should take into consideration when dealing with the subject. Of course if you feel isolated and need someone’s shoulder to lean upon, you send messages to your friends and foes, and after a while come across such a shoulder. But I think I have already enlarged on Brueghel’s blind individuals whose fall is inevitable, despite a number of shoulders they can count upon as they hobble along a path they do not see, not even in their nightmares.

When speaking of Bazarov and Odintsova, I might have touched upon this force: Bazarov was not *forced* to fall in love with this thick-skinned, inconsiderate lady. He did it as a matter of course, almost automatically, and we therefore attribute this particular fall to the natural force I am looking at: it is situated near the top of Robert Fludd's diagram. Bazarov had no idea such a picture existed somewhere, and even in Petersburg they might have a few copies of it, due to Peter the Great's cultural fervour. Nor was Turgenev's hero affected by St Paul's instructions and injunctions, for he disregarded all the principles on which the world of his father and mother was built. He would kick the monuments he stumbled upon during his walks in Petersburg: he might have visited the capital once or twice before dying in Odintsova's ruthless presence. And yet he fell in love with her, for all his scientific materialism and coolness. His utilitarian viewpoint did not prevent him, however, from shamelessly grovelling before her body, but I should refrain from paying yet another tribute to this novel which has little in common with what I proposed to do at the outset of my work on this essay, on this book. As Angelus Silesius put it: *'Freund, es ist auch genug. Im Fall du mehr willst lesen, / So geh und werde selbst die Schrift und selbst das Wesen.'*

One can always say, 'That's enough.' In a way this incantation solves many problems, either related or unrelated to the process of writing. And now you should pick up the thread and write a poem or an essay so as to help existence to exist, if only for the sake of your bed and the canopy you look at from time to time or all the time – it depends on the phase you find yourself in. Do you wish or not to be in phase with your bed and your inborn sloth? Heidegger speaks of the opening of the world, of the present. If you light upon this eternal and instantaneous light, you will no longer need any loophole that the cosmos can offer you during an outburst of its generosity. What does the eternal instant open, giving you access to a mysterious salvation? They often enlarge upon an instant which is tantamount to a revelation, to a Mozart quartet one has never heard before. 'The whole town flooded when the river burst its banks.' Thus a German mystic (not Zarathustra, for once) recounts the story of his instant, of his revelation, of his initiation. 'My brain flooded when the time-river burst its banks.' Or you just drink a bottle of Burgundy.

As Angelus Silesius put it, 'That's enough.' I shall no longer speak of Turgenev's heroes and heroines because this essays and its purpose lie elsewhere, nearer the Kabbalah and its exponents. And if the reader wishes to pursue the subject, letting Bazarov live for another weekend, they can consult Heidegger's book on Nietzsche where he devotes a number of pages to nihilism that happens to be one of his favourite topics. I am not sure I have ever got involved with this movement unless my relative allergy towards human beings can be regarded as part of it. I have never betrayed the grand narrative and even my short essays are grand enough (from a psychological point of view) to support this view, according to which one should think big, even in our small, insignificant times that seem to lie scattered around us as if broken into pieces. Well, let us pick up one of these pieces and make it as big as possible.

Let us go back to Robert Fludd and his pictures that are big enough to satisfy our megalomania.

Love of God: Will

Intelligence: Action

Intellect: Receptive nature

Reason: Irascible nature

Aversion to the world: Desire nature

Imagination: Fantasising nature

Sense: Vegetative nature

I have removed from this ladder of our faculties and aspirations ‘love of others’ that does not quite agree with my disposition today. I also disagree with ‘aversion to oneself’: it is a thing of the past; you get over it as you come to know the world and its betrayals. At some point you realise the world is even worse than you are and so you can proceed with the treatment you subject your fellow creatures to without too many qualms and pangs of conscience. Indeed if you look at their photographs, you are sure to say to yourself you do not give two hoots what they think, do, go through and suffer from. And no one (not even yourself) demands your apologies.

In my library I chanced upon the book I bought two years ago in Brussels, and I still have no idea why I was actually tempted by it. Roland Barthes has never been among my favourite authors and I used to confuse him with Karl Barth whom I appreciate a lot. In this book I found his essay on photography. I also found a few photographs that must have assisted him in his search for human nature and its achievements. Most of them were focused on human beings, their faces and intellectual mazes that seemed to be mirrored by their glances. Roland Barthes thought the photographs he had chosen told a lot of tales: old wives’ tales, old men’s tales. The point is I am interested neither in these tales nor in the eyes that look at me from these photographs or in the shops where I buy whatever is necessary for my *joie de vivre*.

From one of the photographs a boy looks at me as if I were his father or mother or brother; I am not even his photographer. I am not keen on photography as such, and I never use a camera because, as Proust put it somewhere, I might damage the picture I preserve in my memory by reducing its dimensions, angles and nuances. Barthes wonders if this boy is still alive, and if the answer is ‘yes’, one might wish to know what has become of him with the passing of the years. As I look at the photograph I neither wonder nor wish to know anything: this boy’s destiny is none of my concern. I am not even concerned with his shoes, singling them out for my future studies and musing, for my curiosity has not been aroused in the course of this contemplation. I might as well look at this picture for centuries – nothing would ever come out of this unreliable, flimsy contact.

I cannot say I dislike *all* the photographs I come across in this book: some of them are imperfect to the point of making a face disappear in the midst of white spots that one might mistake for greasy stains. And I approve of Roland Barthes’ tendency to single out a pair of hands or bad teeth that allow

us to forget the rest: three little boys, two grown-ups of no distinction. There is a house where the author wishes to live, and once again I might agree with him except that I am not sure I would swap my residence for this half-ruin. But at least this photograph does not impose on us *la condition humaine*. I prefer windows to eyes unless the eyes in question belong to a cat, a dog or a horse to whom both Swift and Tolstoy paid homage, as I often point out. Perhaps I should keep ‘love of others’ on Robert Fludd’s list, and I can certainly do it as I go on, provided I specify that it is animals I have in mind, not humans.

Virginia Woolf thought that Queen Victoria was entirely unaesthetic. I wish I could see an *aesthetic* face – from Virginia Woolf’s point of view. On another photograph a woman looks like Nabokov’s widow and one might easily assume it was her chief occupation – even when no photographer was inspired by this resemblance. Looking like Nabokov’s widow. I wonder if there are men who spend their lives looking like Dante or Plato. Or thinking like them, along *their* lines. At least I do not mind *their* pictures, *their* busts.

Aversion to the world: Desire nature. I am not sure I understand what this coupling means, for my aversion to the world has nothing to do with my desire to remain alone, even if my inspiration has been delayed in the vicinity of some nebula or other. Even if I were deprived of the life force altogether, I would not tend to socialise either with my colleagues or anybody else. For all my lifelong experience, I am still not used to their funny little ways and habits that jar with my ideas of how a musician or a writer should live and work. The only desire I experience in their presence boils down to my withdrawal and lonely walk along paths that probably lead nowhere. But at least they are not desecrated by petty triumphs and short-term, ridiculous goals.

Intelligence: Action. Perhaps. What kind of action? Walking along a solitary path? Talking about pettiness and small narratives? ‘Therefore the Sage arrives without going, / Sees all without looking, / Does nothing, yet achieves everything’ (The Tao Te Ching). And then I realise I have not achieved anything. And I am still in my bed, under my canopy at which I am looking as if the picture it offers me could replace not only the sun, but also constellations.

Reason: Irascible nature. I think that my inspiration and also my joie de vivre depend on the fury I often experience as I look either at a picture or a human being in the flesh. And even the sounds I produce when I play the piano depend on it, for whatever I do in the domain of the arts amounts to an act of resistance. I resist death, my neighbours and even the malignant stars that are determined to perturb the course of my actions and bend my resolutions and my thoughts as if, in their learned opinion, they were too straight. If, now and then, you do not get the feeling that whatever you come across contradicts your intentions, you will never have enough energy to cross any space, to go anywhere. As I put it in my early poem: ‘I’ll sit in a bottomless armchair.’ That is what I am probably doing except that, instead of dealing with armchairs, some time ago I appealed to my bed’s sense of loyalty thanks to which I survive and tell a lot of tales.

Sahasrara Chakra (another plate I found in Robert Fludd's book) demonstrates the possibility of communicating with the cosmos without fearing humans, their interference and destructive tendencies. Its opening marks the transcendence of the conditioned realms, empyrean, ethereal and elemental alike. Usually, if you open a book, you meet Susan who talks to Peter. This time you face only the transcendence that seems to ensure your safety and communication with higher forces.

To the highest heaven corresponds the head with its three functions:

The Deific Ray or Mind: Uncreated Light

The Sphere of Light or Intellect: Created Light

The Sphere of *Spiritus*: Reason: the Empyrean

The planetary spheres or ethereal heaven correspond to the thorax, in whose centre rules the heart, equivalent to the Sun in the 'sphere of life'. The elemental spheres of fire, air, water and earth are marked both on the diagram and beneath.

A Cholera (gall bladder)

B Blood (liver and veins)

C Phlegm (belly)

D Faeces or dung (viscera)

The Torso Dissected tells me a lot about both my body and the cosmos in which I belong, if only because I am a man or a woman. Sometimes this mania of the day comes in handy – in the moment when you really need to feel your androgynous aspect or nature. Of course I disagree with Fludd for whom the body is the lowest constituent of the whole human being: a mere vehicle for the Soul and Spirit, and the seat of temptation and sin. I think our original sin has its seat everywhere, in every tiny nerve of our brain as well as in our tendons and tender-heartedness. 'Yet at the same time,' as Fludd or Godwin points out, 'this despised (venerated) object is fearfully and wonderfully made so as to reflect God's cosmos (and wisdom) in its every particular, and from this point of view it deserves our awe and admiration.'

Last week I was asked if I could read a book from beginning to end. 'Yes, if this book features only one poem,' I answered. 'Not the *Commedia*, though.' When leafing through a book (that is what I mostly do) I feel that quite a number of leaves are dead already, no matter how long I study each of them. Perhaps it is my personal autumn, and I have no alternative but to accept it, which may guide me viciously to the *amor fati* I dislike intensely. This autumn of mine offers me yet another picture from the same book – a monochord. 'The monochord, a one-stringed instrument used in musical pedagogy since Antiquity, symbolises the chain of being: the "scale" of levels of existence that runs from the

earth to God.’ I also run in the same direction, but my movement does not prevent me from hearing only one string, one sound in which I repose my trust.

Here is a text I culled from the Encyclopaedia Britannica: ‘Husserl’s commitment to an absolute ego. If this ego is regarded as individual in any way, the problem arises of how any other individual can be as other because it is constituted in this primal ego.’ Seems to run in the same direction, doesn’t it? Actually all others are to be excluded from this ego unless they comply with the rules invented and dictated by the ego’s owner. Of course you must not kill anybody: they are just excluded and you dream of whatever or whoever happens to appeal to your senses and the nonsensical pastime you are engrossed in. You have no obligations, no family to support financially, no mistresses to sustain emotionally: they are all possessive and have no wish to share your charms with any other woman or man.

Of course it is better to keep such an ego to oneself, otherwise human beings will accuse you of selfishness or even of dictatorial proclivities, going so far as to evoke Hitler and his cronies. But the ego I am talking about has nothing to do with tyrants and their regimes because I do not care about politics and have no will to power. But the circumstances (our world today) suggest I should discard many aspects of life to produce a nutshell where I might find both the Absolute and its truth (or God and His verdict). And I wonder what romance I should choose: Humbert Humbert and Lolita or an amorous scrimmage I found in Nabokov’s *Transparent Things*.

In his search for a commode to store his belongings Hugh Person, a tidy man, noticed that the middle drawer of an old desk relegated to a dark corner of the room, and supporting there a bulbless and shadeless lamp resembling the carcass of a broken umbrella, had not been reinserted properly by the lodger or servant (actually neither) who had been the last to check if it was empty (nobody had). My good Hugh tried to woggle it in; at first it refused to budge; then, in response to the antagonism of a chance tug (which could not help profiting from the cumulative energy of several jugs) it shot out and spilled a pencil.

After reading this declaration of love, you feel like going to a shop and buying a public urinal or a bottle drainer or a snow shovel. Even if you have no intention of exhibiting one of them in a museum, you can still enjoy their warmth and sexual efficiency either at home or in a Russian park where you do not have to wait for snow – at least in the winter. You put your foot on the shovel and begin to produce a number of snowdrifts where you might bury yourself, if only for a few minutes. And the bottle drainer will help you in the course of your drinking bouts. Actually I do not think such an apparatus is useful: I usually drain carafes and glasses, not the bottles I throw away without further ado. And what about the urinal? Of course I could play with it for a while, although I never use these contraptions in public toilets. ‘I’ve only used the urinal once, and I never want to use it again,’ I shall say to the visitors of my museum.

As for *Lolita*, I need not quote anything from the novel the beginning of which, according to Nabokov, every American knows by heart. (He said that in the Sixties.) I recall her fiddling with a bicycle and a tennis racket, but Humbert's libido has never been attuned to mine and therefore I am still unable to understand what sex appeal he took advantage of in his Lola's company. The older I grow, the more I appreciate the autumn of female beauty, the dead leaves you find here and there as the body standing in front of you undergoes your examination, basking in its moment of glory. And then you write in your diary, 'Careful examination of the plane revealed minute cracks in the fuselage and wings.' On condition of anonymity, as they point out.

At the end, on the other hand, Lolita seems to satisfy the requirements imposed by time, destiny and the general truth about humans and their so-called condition. She becomes a run-of-the-mill housewife and all sex with its traces and neurasthenic phases disappears from her body and even from her consciousness. And I cannot overlook this truth, saying to myself, 'Anyway Lolita will always be Lolita and I'm not interested in Lolita.' It is true I am still not interested in nymphets, but there is a kind of retribution that reminds us of our place in the universe. And this place is rather modest: we do not need Copernicus to acknowledge the modesty of our cosmic status. And my sense of justice is satisfied, which always happens when upstarts are taken down a peg or two.

Let us dissect Natasha Rostova whose life or rather downfall is akin to Lolita's, for all the discrepancies we find when studying their respective ancestries. Natasha is an upstart par excellence – in the world where very few people stick out and are notorious for their outstanding idiosyncrasies. Of course in those un-democratic days they had more room for manoeuvre, but even in those times it was better not to be as strange as Pierre Bezukhov. Today, it is out of the question, and I am almost excluded from society on account of the criticism I permit myself to voice in the presence of its loyal and optimistic members. If I say our times are rotten to the core and more or less irremediably (even God cannot help, whatever Heidegger thought on the subject), for a few months I receive no invitations, and my computer displays only commercial offers and the trash I cannot identify.

When Natasha first appears on the pages of Tolstoy's novels (and she performs the same tricks in films and in theatres), she jumps, dances and runs through halls as if taking part in some competition or other. One grows weary of her in no time at all, although there are people who continue to associate adolescence with freshness and our overall destiny that almost insists on our adopting Nietzsche's point of view: I salute thee, eternal recurrence. Her freshness and joie de vivre got under my skin 62 years ago, when I read the novel for the first (not the last) time. Even then I was put off her frolics – in spite of my own youth, of my own brand of freshness that despised jumps and waltzes because I could never cope successfully with their athletic patterns. At the end of the novel, Tolstoy brings her down many a peg and her conduct resembles Lolita's to a tee, for all their genealogical divergences.

Some readers (and cinema-goers) are surprised at watching the metamorphosis I am enlarging upon: they are taken aback by these quasi-Kierkegaardian jumps. From my point of view, however, we

are dealing with continuity, as we always do in everyday life or even within the bounds of eternity. I appeal to Pierce's 'synechism' (whatever that is) that Baldwin's *Dictionary of Philosophy and Psychology* defines as 'that tendency of philosophical thought which insists upon the idea of continuity as of prime importance in philosophy, *and in particular upon the necessity of hypotheses involving true continuity*'. My attitude towards my fellow creatures may be expressed as follows, 'Truth will out.'

This continuity means 'back to barracks', but one should not confuse it with Freud's death instinct because it is not an instinct, a drive; it is a downward movement – as if we were just kneeling down, instead of soaring effortlessly above the earth. Anna Karenina *is* on bended knee as death or *fatum* strikes his fatal blow. (*Fatum* – a father figure.) 'She did not take her eyes from the wheels of the approaching car, and exactly at the moment when the middle point between the wheels came opposite her she flung aside the red bag and, drawing her head in, fell on her hands under the car, and lightly, as though she would rise again at once, dropped to her knees.' Actually during her last drive to the station (or to anywhere – her definitive drive) she glimpsed the truth I am speaking of. 'What are those two girls smiling about? Love, most likely. They don't know how dreary it is, how degrading.' I do not mean to say there are no other loves, no other officers or civil servants, only Vronski and Karenin. And even if Dante and Lancelot are discarded for some obscure reason, we can still encounter a sort of until-death-parts-them love. And even the dead leaves I touched upon with regard to an old body are no impediment to some couples who continue to enjoy their partners in spite of death's omnipresence. But, as they say, it is not the subject matter of my train of thought. It is a train of events I am preoccupied with.

Let us compare Anna's death to that of Vronski's horse. (A Russian scholar declared that Vronski had two horses: Frou-Frou and Anna, but let us pay no attention to this vulgar, most inappropriate remark.) We have already described the first part of Anna's death. Here is the second part: 'And at the same instant she was terrified. "Where am I? What am I doing?" She tried to get up, to turn but something huge and merciless struck her on the back, and dragged her along. She prayed, feeling it impossible to struggle.' Inwardly I cannot help laughing at Anna, at her incapacity to recall the rails, the train and the wheels under which she was lying. Something huge and merciless struck her on the back. ('God,' as the same scholar pointed out.) One wonders – I am not alone in this case – how she could pray under the circumstances. Did she have enough time for a half-word? The freight train was backing in – nothing to do with bullet trains zooming past you in a peaceful landscape. But let us not forget that Anna did several things at once. While praying, she felt and realised the impossibility of struggling for life under the pressure of the unknown force. '...and the candle by which she had read the book of troubles, deceit, grief, and evil, flared up more brightly than ever before, illumed for her all that had been darkness, sputtered, began to dim and went out for ever.' I have never liked the unhappy ending of her story. I cannot help wondering if Tolstoy did not wish to punish her himself, instead of his promise to leave her fate in the hands of God. ('...and I will repay.') Didn't he mock her

viciously? Incidentally, the candle seems to make the matter worse: it is an unreliable symbol connected to churches, but also to ballrooms. And Anna spent much more time in the latter. I have no idea if candlelit dinners were her favourite pastime. In the Soviet Union, candles would adorn dinner tables to compensate for the lack of dainty dishes. Even intellectuals were fond of them.

Here is the death of Vronski's horse:

Frou-Frou lay gasping before him, bending her head back and gazing at him with her exquisite eye. Still unable to realise what had happened, Vronski tugged at his mare's reins. Again she struggled like a fish, and making the saddle flaps creak, she freed her front legs but unable to lift her rump, she quivered all over and again fell on her side. With a face hideous with passion, his lower jaw trembling and his cheeks white, Vronski kicked her with his heel in the stomach and again fell to tugging at the rein. She did not stir, but thrusting her nose into the ground, she simply gazed at her master with her speaking eye.

There is no denying that Tolstoy preferred horses to humans, although the former often threw him off so the countess had to take care either of his arm or of his leg or of his entire aching body. Frou-Frou's speaking eye is much more eloquent than any eye you can meet in the world of humans, as a misogynist might say; but I am not a misogynist. I do not belong to any part, be it political or ethical: for many years I was spoon-fed by the Soviet Communist Party. And the political debates I watched on French television did nothing to lighten the ideological burden from which my brain was suffering monotonously. Yet I think that, in comparison with my cat's eyes, all human eyes are mute, with the exception of those exhibited by lunatics, especially if they mistake themselves for Napoleon.

I was on the verge of tears when reading the above excerpt in Nabokov's translation. And I recalled the three deaths I witnessed as I continued to nurse my cats. I continued to nurse and caress my first cat even after his death. Two other cats were taken care of by my mistresses: they were afraid I might follow them into their graves – like a faithful Indian wife.

At some point Nabokov wrote an essay on inspiration where he quoted a few short stories I am too old to read: they are all-too-human. Nietzsche's notion comes in handy rather often now, considering that I would rather live in an all-too-*animal* realm. But in *The Country Husband* by John Cheever, I was elated at lighting upon a *dog's* slice of life. 'The last to come is Jupiter. He prances through the tomato vines, holding in his generous mouth the remains of an evening slipper.' According to Nabokov, this sentence offers a good example of how inspiration works and what result we can expect from its labours. In my opinion, nothing betrays the excitement felt by Nabokov, with the exception of the word 'generous'. One is induced (and pleased) to believe that a lot of humans fell victim to this generosity. An evening slipper is less succulent than a son of a bitch's shin. (A man-hater's remark, but I am not a man-hater or a woman-hater.)

The rest of the story is devoted to human touches, and all this touchy-feely stuff leaves me cold because I am no longer willing to put up with this father-and-son rigmarole: Cheever is not Turgenev after all. And the daughter's behaviour does not enliven the dullness of twaddle and waffle, waffle and twaddle.

Nine times out of ten, Francis would be greeted with affection, but tonight the children are absorbed in their own antagonisms. Francis had not finished his sentence about the plane crash before Henry plants a kick in Louisa's behind. Louisa swings around, saying, 'Damn you!' Francis makes the mistake of scolding Louisa for bad language before he punishes Henry. Now Louisa turns on her father and accuses him of favouritism. Henry is always right; she is persecuted and lonely; her lot is hopeless. Francis turns to his son, but the boy has justification for the kick – she hit him first; she hit him on the ear, which is dangerous.

So Francis says to his son he has to turn the other cheek, exposing another part of his face, virtually offering it to his sister's aggressiveness. 'It is true that neither your sister nor your mummy should hit you on the ear because you're destined to become a great composer. And great composers need their ears to hear their own masterpieces.'

'And what about Beethoven?' asks Louisa. 'I hit him on the ear in the hope that he'll become as great as Beethoven.'

'All right, all right. The point is the Scriptures don't talk about the other *ear*.'

'Because Beethoven was born later. Had their author known anything about Beethoven, he would have spoken of eardrums, not of cheeks.'

'Do you think the world needs many Beethovens? Isn't one Beethoven enough?'

'The more geniuses we have around us, the better,' answers Louisa.

And then little Toby discovers a splinter in his hand and begins to howl. For a while I wondered if Toby was a dog or not, and then I closed the book – in desperation, one might say.

Other readers devour Cheever's stories in search of their children, husbands, nephews and the human condition. I am even weary of looking for dogs. If I need their sights and minds, I shall just go to a friend of mine who has seven dogs and no children. No smacking, no ears, no tears, no buttocks. I am fed up with others' daily routines. If they commit suicide or kill their neighbours, I am prepared to watch their destruction on TV, if I have nothing better to do. (And sometimes you do not have *anything* to do.) But their everyday lives are not even ridiculous; they are *banal*. The last word reminds me of another story Nabokov touches upon in his article on inspiration: *A Perfect Day for Bananafish*. I used to accompany my father to lakes and rivers where he fished for trout and other representatives of our fish-centred meals. It goes without saying I have never heard the word bananafish: in those days I lived in the Soviet Union, and I am not sure J. D. Salinger's stories were

translated in my country of birth (and perhaps of death too). I still do not understand why he is so famous: some people wait for his posthumous works in transports of delight.

If I asked my father, 'What's bananafish?' he might have answered, 'You know, these fish eat bananas and if they can't lay their fins on them, they starve to death.'

'Where could they find bananas? Do they grow underwater?'

'Yes. They're called waterbanana. Melon, watermelon. Are you following?'

'I am. Do you think these fish should be served at the end of a meal, as a dessert? With a banana on the same plate?'

'Why not? And we could also put a few slices of watermelon. On the same plate.'

In Salinger's story (if I remember rightly) there are many dialogues and one might think the hero is slightly unhinged. Let us say banana is a hinge, and so is fish. But if you put them together, you are bound to commit suicide at the end of the story. End of story. Frankly, I prefer Agatha Christie's suicidal maniacs. No highfalutin deliriums. A. went out through the door; B. jumped out of the window – that sort of thing. Twists on twists on twists on twists. And twists again. A revolver is here, a bullet is over there, embedded in a wall.

'Set loose, Sybil immediately ran down to the flat part of the beach and began to walk in the direction of Fisherman's Pavilion. Stopping only to sink a foot in a soggy, collapsed castle, she was soon out of the area reserved for guests of the hotel.' At first I was again deluded into believing I had come across a dog, for 'set loose' is mostly applied to dogs who sleep under tables as they wait for their masters to finish their meals. And then the masters set them loose and they run all around dining rooms or gardens capering and playing with evening slippers to their heart's content. Then I realised (I often realise I am dealing with humans; too often) it was a woman, a young woman in all probability, who was cruel enough to destroy a castle built by some child or other for the sake of a short yet delightful game. This act of destruction denotes a few dangerous trends in the woman's substance because it is related not only to the castle (in the air, in a way), but to its master builder and consequently to humanity in general. Why should you destroy an innocent construction meant for children and their temporary joy? You did not even trip over this castle and so bear no grudge against it. You can kick a root that interrupted your morning walk, but this castle was not even in your way. Moreover, you did not have to stop and pay attention to it, making yourself late for your appointment or lunch or game of volleyball. You stopped and destroyed it intentionally, maliciously, as if wreaking vengeance on its owner (or on the whole of humanity). Of course all this is done for the sake of the narrative at the end of which the hero fires a bullet through his right temple. (He is not left-handed, says Hercule Poirot.) The ruins of the castle destroyed by a pitiless foot only heighten the tension among readers.

And then they (the suicidal maniac and the young woman) begin their talk about bananafish that creep or float into holes and eat their bananas in there as if eating bananas required privacy and peace. The maniac and the woman discuss the origins of bananafish, their very existence, their being able to

eat anything, not only bananas, apples and pears. The man evokes Meinong's doctrine and talks for a while about a golden mountain. 'A mere object – a golden mountain, for instance – can exist or not exist,' he says. 'But it would be nonsense to say that it is or is not "a fact" or "the case".'

'How do you mean?' asks the girl.

'In contrast, an objective – the existence of golden mountains, for instance – can't be sensibly said to exist.'

'What's an objective?'

'It's an objective.'

'Your golden mountain, doesn't it exist at all?'

'It does as an object of a higher order. Or rather it subsists as *such* an object.'

'You're *so* clever.'

'But it either is or is not a fact.'

'Is it or is it not?'

'The nature of an objective can most easily be seen if we think of it as the meaning of a sentence – not what a sentence expresses, the mental act out of which it arises, but what it is about.'

'What *is* it about?'

'We're permitted to conclude that there are only "mere objects", that these are what sentences, as well as separate words, refer to.'

'So golden mountains do exist, don't they?'

'Can't you see the difference between the phrase "golden mountains" and the sentence "golden mountains do not exist"?'

'I do. So they don't exist, I suppose.'

'We're talking about the non-existence of golden mountains, not about golden mountains as such. Objectives are distinct from "mere objects". You see, objectives are the objects of our judgements.'

'I can't see anything. You're too clever.'

'The objective *the existence of a bananaman* sounds like a judgement, but the mental act as a result of which we arrive at this combination of words is a "supposal", not a "judgment".'

'What about bananawomen?'

'Do you think a tomatoman exists? He eats a lot of tomatoes, you know. In his cubby-hole.'

'No, I don't think so.'

'What about a lambwoman.'

'No.'

'What about a breadman?'

'No.'

'But humans have to eat, don't they?'

'They do.'

‘What about a waterwoman?’

‘They have to drink too.’

‘So they don’t exist, do they? Human beings.’

PAINTERS AND SCULPTORS

1

For many years, out of idleness, I have thought about days of yore and times when I could be happy and not entangled in ideologies and doctrines of socialist and communist parties. I do not know if ‘vicious circle’ is the right conclusion to any train of thought bent on a thorough analysis of human ways and destinies. You think the former president improved on your country’s policy, and the economic prosperity you seem to enjoy, even if you cannot buy either luxury yachts or ordinary planes, is wholly due to his wisdom and patience. And then another president comes and you realise that ‘nothing doing’ and ‘vicious circle’ are the best definitions of whatever happens to you and others. You also realise that all former presidents were wrong: they thought they might save human beings from the calamities that are always in store for them. And more often than not these calamities just stand in front of them or even pat them on the shoulders or on the heads as if implying they are already inside, in the brains, like tumours.

My friend, Vladimir Martynov (a composer in his own right) thinks that one has to move with the times as if the when and the where were a train one should not miss on any account. Incidentally, the idiom ‘the train is gone’ means you have irretrievably lost a golden opportunity that will never present itself again despite the omnipresence of vicious circles. Arvo Pärt who is, arguably, the most important composer in this vale of tears was ten years ago fêted in the Vatican where he met Robert Wilson. They continued to see each other and their artistic and human relationship resulted in two DVDs I bought in Paris last year.

My friend went to Robert Wilson’s school or workshop (situated in the States and not in Germany, as one might presume) and spent three weeks in his company, discussing with him the project sponsored by a Russian billionaire. In 2008 the sponsor’s fortune dwindled to a tenth of its former size and the project fell through. It is pointless to recall that Martynov’s rendering of Apocalypse was to be performed on Red Square before cameras and television companies. Instead of taking up where they had left off, Martynov and Wilson, the latter got involved with Arvo Pärt’s magnificent works, and I said to my friend, ‘Sad, isn’t it? Or do you still believe that if one is not on the market, one doesn’t exist?’ ‘One doesn’t exist,’ he said as if reluctant to change his mind, his history-rooted point of view. What we go through is our history, and our degeneration, our decline and fall are wholly due to its inexorable growth. Martynov takes the problems created by our obnoxious day and age in his stride, probably influenced by the Tao Te Ching or just by common sense: no one wishes to take two roads at once, for the sheer pleasure of contradicting Robert Frost.

In what way could the Tao Te Ching help Martynov to put up with the hardships imposed by the Soviet regime, by the unbearable ideology? To some extent and for some time, we all found solace in Plato’s *Republic* where Socrates or somebody else advocates telling lies for the sake of the state; or of

the communist regime. Anyway we were required to obey instructions, to accept and love not only *fati* but also our leaders and their ideas.

He could bring it about that the people would be ready to lay down their lives and lay them down again in defence of their homes, rather than emigrate. There might still be boats and carriages, but no one would go in them; there might still be weapons of war but no one would drill with them. He could bring it about that the people should have no use for any form of writing save knotted ropes, should be contented with their food, pleased with their clothing, satisfied with their homes, should take pleasure in their rustic tasks.

Tao Te Ching

What Martynov concentrated upon must have been limited to the boats and carriages that could not be used, given a general paralysis induced by the wise and flawless ruler. (All Soviet rulers were flawless and wise.) ‘In the West the grass is probably greener but you are not cows,’ we were told. We might have replied, ‘True, we’re not cows – we’re deer.’ Anyway we felt sorry for our cows whose food was not as gorgeous as their Western counterparts’, their greenest grass. As for writing, a lot of books saw the light of day in the Soviet Union, and Nabokov believed they were worthless, most of them. My acquaintance with Soviet literature is limited to what we were supposed to study at school and at the college where I spent four years before entering the Moscow Conservatoire. I discovered the best Soviet writer, Andrei Platonov, in Western Europe, but it was not too late: it is never too late to read Platonov.

In the Tao Te Ching we are told about knotted ropes. As Arthur Waley points out, ‘One knots ropes as an aid to one’s own memory (compare our “tying a knot in one’s handkerchief”).’ Sure enough, we were supposed to remember our leaders’ projects and slogans, and your handkerchief projected them onto your memory. On some of the handkerchiefs I saw their owners had written: ‘Brezhnev, Andropov, Suslov.’ At some point, Stalin said, ‘Platonov should have no use for any form of writing save knotted ropes,’ and a dozen handkerchiefs were brought to Platonov’s flat.

‘Especially amusing in these circumstances,’ writes Nabokov, ‘is the romantic theme in Soviet novels.’ Under what circumstances? The party line? The overall slime? He quotes two excerpts from these amusing novels. The first dialogue is culled from *The Big Heart* by Antonov.

Olga was silent.

‘Ah,’ cried Vladimir. ‘Why can’t you love me as I love you.’

‘I love my country,’ she said.

‘So do I,’ he exclaimed.

‘And there is something I love even more strongly,’ Olga continued, disengaging herself from the young man’s embrace.

'And that is?' he queried.

Olga let her limpid blue eyes rest on him, and answered quickly: 'It is the Party.'

Shall I make the above excerpt sound dead serious? *Sickness unto Death*, no less.

Sören was silent.

'Ah,' cried Regina. 'Why can't you love me as I love you.'

'I love God,' he said.

'So do I,' she exclaimed.

'And there is someone I love even more strongly,' Sören continued, disengaging himself from the young woman's embrace.

'And that is?' she queried.

Sören let his limpid blue eyes rest on her, and answered quickly: 'It is Jesus Christ.'

Whatever Nabokov might think on the subject, an *idée fixe* or an ideal blurs contours, faces and loves, leaving on the surface either God or party or literary inspiration. According to Flaubert, a poet should not own a passport or any other ID because his IDs are his poetic ideas on which he counts when composing his verses. These ideas or flashes of inspiration muddle up the objects you habitually find in your room and even the trees in your garden, their English order or disorder. You have your garden now, your room that vaguely resembles what you are accustomed to. The same goes for Regina whom Kierkegaard must have loved throughout his Christ-devoted existence. As the philosopher drifted into his dogmatic sleep, Regina's face began to blur and fade, being slowly but surely substituted by Jesus Christ's faces and cross. Sometimes Regina would appear on the cross and our philosopher let her hang on it for a while as if assured that nothing could happen to her as long as he loved her dearly and truly. 'I am married to Jesus Christ.' This sentence resounds rather often even nowadays, among born-again Christians. Atheists accuse our Saviour of polygamy, but all this has no bearing on the subject under scrutiny.

You open a book and begin to embroider on the text your eyes have just lighted upon: you are a creator yourself and the books you open are full of open works, as Umberto Eco would certainly have put it. This time you are dealing with the sentiment of love directed towards an invisible entity that counts much more than whatever is visible and audible. A man or a woman speaks to you, and the word 'love' fills up the room where you happen to discuss your relationship. But this relationship is one-sided or lopsided: Regina loves you wholeheartedly, but your heart is unequally divided between her face and Jesus Christ's cross. Or between his face and the Communist Party that was omnipresent and rather visible (almost palpable) in the Soviet Union and also in France; at least until the advent of socialist power in

1981. I, for one, do not find these substitutions and resolutions grotesque; for many years, I had to grin and bear them so as not to spend a few years in a lunatic asylum.

Kierkegaard's love for Regina is pathetic and marvellous, and I wrote a book about this torn-apart couple whose destiny is much more exciting than Anna Karenina's or Vronski's or Pierre Bezukhov's. I am not acquainted with the rest of *The Big Heart*, but the embroidery you create when reading it must be at least as intricate as whatever stories may arise from Salinger's and Cheever's inspirations. Tolstoy wrote about Father Serguiy who chopped his finger off, fearful of his libido's resurgence. When writing my book on Kierkegaard, I visualised him in a monastery, kneeling before a cross, chopping his fingers off, one after another. Abstract ideals are far more fruitful than everyday life and its futilities, its nervous breakdowns, its castles erected on beaches.

Here is another excerpt chosen by Nabokov whose eagerness to prove the inanity of Soviet literature knew no bounds.

The young worker Ivan grasped the drill. As soon as he felt the surface of metal, he became agitated, and an excited shiver ran through his body. The deafening roar of the drill hurled Sonia away from him. Then she placed her hand on his shoulder and tickled the hair on his ear...

Then she looked at him, and the little cap perched on her curls mocked and provoked him. It was as though an electric discharge had pierced both the young people at one and the same moment. He gave a deep sigh and clutched the apparatus more firmly.

Gladkov, *Energy*.

I seldom read a more erotic, libidonesque text: in comparison with its devastating undercurrent, Henry Miller appears childish, if not ludicrous. You spend a part of your libido on objects, on tools you are working with: a dignified prelude to any sexual act. And even if this act is more or less non-existent, you do not waste your time, for fetishists never overlook the energy emanating from objects. This energy can be sacred (Mircea Eliade thought so). Yet their sexual impact is far more important, even if they are not directly connected with the person you love, cherish and desire. In a way, you can make love to your inkstand, assuming you still have such an antiquated object in your possession. You might recall your own flashes of inspiration as you caress its surface or even its entrails that you know better than anybody's bowels and livers.

There are a few human-touch nuances that embellish Gladkov's text, conferring on it a sort of honorary degree associated with romantic lovemaking or merely romance – warts and all. 'Then she placed her hand on his shoulder and tickled the hair on his ear.' First she placed her hand on his shoulder, and one might suppose the hand did not remain utterly motionless. Its pressure, however intimate, might have triggered off another wave of the liquid that was to see the dark of night several

hours later. Then she tickled the hair on his ear, not just his ear, which would have been vulgar – inadmissible from an inveterate lover's point of view. The contrast between the delicacy of this touch and Ivan's clutch, his dealing with the apparatus bent on producing a few thousand holes before calling it a day, is striking and even moving to some extent. I am reminded of what Joseph Hoffman said about Rachmaninoff: 'Gold in his heart, steel in his fingers.' And the hero's sigh is another sign through which his libido seems to squeeze, anxious to join the factory where the romance is taking place: it has nothing to do with pain and frustration or with sheer boredom; or with the exclamation, 'Get off my ear, will you?'

I picture to myself Ivan the worker who, upon reaching his studio or communal flat, hastily removes his clothes, goes to bed and embarks upon his journey to self-abuse or rather to its climax, to a harmonious deliverance. Let there be no mistake about it: the visions he avails himself of during this sonata-form procedure are not centred upon a woman he might be infatuated with. It is himself and his favourite, faithful tool his inner eye has been feeding (and feasting) on for several hours at least.

In the Montreux Palace, Nabokov's widow asked me if I had read Vladimir Vladimirovich's *Ada* from beginning to end. I said 'yes', although I could go through it only with the help of the French translation I began to use at some point, weary as I was of all those wordplays, puns and games that are played for someone's sake. And while all those someones and somebodies went on making love almost everywhere (even on the moon) I thought that my Nabokov-oriented love was steadily dwindling to be perfidiously replaced by *Der Man ohne Eigenschaften*.

Let us compare Ivan's masturbation with that of Van Veen's.

In a series of sixty-year-old actions which now I can grind into extinction only by working on a succession of words until the rhythm is right, I, Van, retired to my bathroom, shut the door (it swung open at once, but then closed of its own accord) and using a temporary expedient...vigorously got rid of the prurient pressure as he had done the last time seventeen years ago. And how sad, how significant that the picture projected upon the screen of his paroxysm, while the unlockable door swung open again with the movement of a deaf man cupping his ear, was not the recent and pertinent image of Lucette, but the indelible vision of a bent bare neck and a divided flow of black hair and a purple-tipped paint brush.

On a liner Van Veen met his sister, Lucette, and did his utmost to protect his body or rather his fidelity: he was in love with his other sister, Ada. I think I read about the beginning of their incestuous relationship in English. Lucette continuously sings The Beatles song, 'I want you, I want you, I want you,' but Van Veen hesitates: The Beatles did not sing, 'I don't want you, I don't want you.' Besides, his libido is partly independent from his duty and other sentiments of this kind. Judging from the novel's weft and woof, it is so wild that servants, men and women alike, have to hide whenever their master walks (whistling or singing) along his mansion's corridors, coming to a standstill in front of a

nook or a cranny to fantasise about another sexual partner or competitor. Actually neither Van Veen nor Nabokov were fond of men (at least in the domain of unbridled sexuality) and so some male servants venture into some of the corridors so as not to make too many detours. Some female servants – contrary to what I have just written – position themselves in a nook or a cranny in expectation of their master's libido and its effusion.

To avoid this effusion and diffusion, Van Veen had to resort to self-abuse four times a week, contrary to what Nabokov affirms in his novel. Let us not forget that he was faithful to Ada and for nothing in the world did he intend to betray her with a servant or even with the princess Orlova. Nevertheless, one wonders why the vision he enjoyed on the liner was focused on his sister: he outrageously neglected the sex-appeal of his door, which might have reminded him of many doors through which he walked or crept when making way for yet another victim of his charms. And what about Paradise? What about Beatrice? By the way, I have no wish to find out when Van Veen began to use self-abuse either as a deterrent or a self-assertive ritual.

At the beginning of Van-Veen's self-abuse (of its description, rather) Nabokov touches upon his sworn, lifelong enemy's notion defined as 'sublimation'. (Did Nabokov hate Freud when studying in Cambridge?) Your libido stands by the door, like a cat or a dog, waiting for you to let it out. But you do not open the door. The libido enjoins you, 'Open the door!' but you do your best not to open anything; even your fly remains closed. Then you sit down at your writing desk and begin to write a masterpiece about brothers and sisters or fathers and sons. Your libido goes back, climbs on the writing desk and strikes a pose by your computer's side. Shortly afterwards it installs itself on the screen and in your books, in the Library of Congress.

To tell the truth, I do not understand why the final victory of the Soviet army or communism made Nabokov uneasy to the point of discarding Soviet writers and replacing them by their inspired American counterparts. I am reminded (my memory seems to function this morning) of Bertrand Russell's assessment of the role played by Thomas Aquinas in the history of philosophy. (Not in the history of humanity or the Roman Catholic Church.)

There is little of the true philosophic spirit in Aquinas. He does not, like the Platonic Socrates, set out to follow wherever the argument may lead. He is not engaged in an enquiry, the result of which it is impossible to know in advance. Before he begins to philosophise, he already knows the truth: it is declared in the Catholic faith. If he can find apparently rational arguments for some parts of the faith, so much the better; if he cannot, he need only fall back on revelation. The finding of arguments for a conclusion given in advance is not philosophy, but special pleading.

Bertrand Russell, *History of Western Philosophy*

There is such a thing as harmony and you can feel or reproduce it, even if you know in advance that God will help you and therefore triumph in the end. As for communism, it is much inferior to democracy and liberal economy, and I must admit that, on the whole, American writers are head and shoulders above their Soviet colleagues or enemies. Yet I do disagree with both Bertrand Russell and Vladimir Nabokov because one had better not look at this problem from a teleological angle.

When I read about Aquinas in Etienne Gilson's book on medieval philosophy, I was struck by the harmony emanating from the mere account of his doctrine. When you bathe in light, you do not say, 'It is a pity I know where this light comes from so it's pointless to look for its source.' Or you lie in your bed, motionless and happy. And you do not ask anybody why you have no need to move, why you are happy for no reason. Even if you spend hours reasoning out the solution to your wellbeing, you will end up saying, 'Harmony, harmony, harmony.' And you will listen to the echo of this word.

It should be said that something can belong to the contemplative life in two ways, essentially, and dispositively. The moral virtues do not belong essentially to the contemplative life, because the end of the contemplative life is the consideration of truth. But to know, which pertains to the consideration of truth, carries little weight with the moral virtues, as the Philosopher says in Ethics 2.4. Hence, in Ethics 10.4 he says that the moral virtues belong to the active life, not the contemplative. However, moral virtues belong to the contemplative life dispositively. For the act of contemplation, in which the contemplative life essentially consists, is impeded both by the vehemence of the passions which deflect the soul's attention from intelligible to sensible things, and by exterior disturbance. The moral virtues both impede the vehemence of the passions and make exterior disturbances subside. Therefore, the moral virtues belong dispositively to the contemplative life.

Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*

'...the unlockable door swung open again with the movement of a deaf man cupping his ear...' Would I include this bit in my *Anthology of Inspiration*? 'In the preface to an anthology of Russian literature, Vladimir Nabokov stated that he had not found a single page of Dostoevsky worthy of inclusion,' wrote Borges. 'This ought to mean that Dostoevsky should not be judged by each page but rather by the total of all the pages that comprise the book.'

2

My friend might think that, considering the time and space of his birth, he should not travel profusely in search of the greener grass. His fate has always chained him to Russia and he is not eager to lose his chain. (This losing chains is actually a thing of the past.) I left the Soviet Union in 1980 and he was prepared to follow in my footsteps, but the chains began to clang and he relinquished this idea. His *amor fati* was boundless. As for myself, I preferred my armour to any *amor*, and my attitude persists,

endures, as if aging had no influence over it. I am still fond of the protection ensured by my walls and of the allergy I feel towards whatever moves, rides and laughs beyond my window, with the exception of horses and dogs. Needless to say, I fly off the handle whenever a motorcycle zooms up or down the street where I live and lie half-asleep.

When I said that Martynov was a composer in his own right, I did justice neither to his gift nor to our friendship. He used to be a wonderful composer and his loss of inspiration denotes mostly his stubbornness with regard to the movement of history that drags us down on a regular basis. He strips away whatever he deems unnecessary in the light of today's artistic mentality (or market) and presents his listeners with his own skeletons. And all the rest is literature. I might compare him to Karenin, which should not be considered a derogatory remark, given that I prefer Anna's husband to all other characters of the novel. Martynov is mechanical, but his machinery was described neither by Gurdjieff nor by Descartes. Tolstoy, on the other hand, seemed to know him as well as his wife; or myself, for that matter. But I am not in the mood for quoting the novel once again because I find the vestiges of Martynov's mentality and life in other works, in other reflections and meditations.

We are not our own; therefore neither our reason nor our will should predominate in our deliberations and actions. We are not our own; therefore, let us not propose it as our end, to seek what may be expedient for us according to the flesh. We are not our own; therefore, let us, as far as possible, forget ourselves and all things that are ours. On the contrary, we are God's; to him, therefore, let us live and die. For, as it is the most devastating pestilence which ruins people if they obey themselves, it is the only haven of salvation not to know or to want anything oneself but to be guided by God who walks before us.

Calvin

When reading such a text (it does not feel lonely in my library) one is reminded of Bruckner and the angels who were munificent enough to dictate symphonies and choral works to him. Martynov does not go from one extreme to another when he feels like embarking upon a pious, spiritual monologue. Of course he is either God or a worm, but that is not the point because he is always guided by someone or something; in the latter case, it is our day and age that take over from God. Thanks to his own doctrine – either you are on the market or you are *not* – he accepts his destiny and its blows, although I am fairly convinced he does not love them. The law of the market that he wholeheartedly agrees to offers him no loophole through which he could squeeze in the hope of finding another outlook, another world. I, for one, am not ready to recognise the superiority of any modern writer or pianist on account of their intimate knowledge of the market and its consumers. Martynov bows before the winners, even if their victories make his defeats more pathetic.

Should I study our history to find out why the downward movement to which we are submitted has dominated it for more than three decades? What slices of life reflect my mentality and wishes?

Twenty years ago I read for the first time the book devoted to freedom and to the method one might resort to when determined to escape from it. In Russian it is entitled *Running from Freedom* and this escape from the most precious gift of God is attributed to one's isolation from others. I, for one, suffocate in other individuals' presence, but I am probably alone in this category, and solipsism is not my cup of tea, not yet. And my isolation brings about neither an escape – I have already escaped from others – nor a series of nervous breakdowns, a soap opera based on their succession and ravages.

The author of the book, Erich Fromm, insists on a close bond between freedom and the feeling of isolation so that one should think twice before making up one's mind as to what way of life to choose for the rest of one's existence. Once again one is tempted to take two roads at the same time, contradicting not only Frost but also Hitler, Stalin and the rules of our democratic game. As a matter of fact, neither Hitler nor Lenin is far away except that we do not spend our eternity in concentration camps or in torture chambers or on battlefields.

For some time I planned to write a book made up of quotations, taking my cue from Walter Benjamin, from *The Arcades Project*. In the Soviet Union they taught us their own history inspired by Marx's and Lenin's ravings, and this idiosyncratic approach put me off the subject for many years so that now I am unable to speak either of the Middle Ages or of the Renaissance unless I am allowed to pay homage to philosophy and the arts. But even in the domain of painting I am bound to rely unconditionally on my intuition that may turn out to be quite unreliable, given that I prefer the Middle Ages to the Renaissance only because it lacks model-imposed pictures. In my opinion, whatever I see in the books where the Middle Ages takes pride of place have nothing in common with the men and women who used to sit beyond Raphael's and Leonardo's canvasses, waiting for their salaries and a few slices of meat. Perhaps I am convinced that whoever comes out of the blue is closer to God and His truth than a boy next door or a woman brought up in the slums of Florence.

In the Middle Ages a painter seemed to content himself with the image of sanctity he kept in his mind – just in case. He had no idea what being true to life meant and, all things considered, he was not even true to heaven, for everything was heaven in those days, even the most earthly occupations. Or rather they (these occupations) were suspended in between heaven and earth; and so were the saints depicted in the works I admire to the detriment of portraits, cardinals, Lisas and so on. When looking at Byzantium's frescos or early Russian icons, I know I am not in the midst of my fellow creatures that start nagging me as soon as I switch to Raphael's Madonnas. Sometimes, to regain my suspended paradise, I fetch a book on Kandinsky or spend an hour in Mondrian's company.

'We are not our own,' says Calvin; 'therefore neither our reason nor our will should predominate in our deliberations and actions.' I am not my own when surrounded by today's representatives of humanity. As for God and His guidance, I count on Him for the series of paradises I experience in the course of my journey through vales and veils. I think it is better to behave like Karenin whose mechanism was handled by our Master Builder, and it does not really matter if the result did not rise to the challenge, given the others' sinful behaviour, as Russian priests declare in

their sermons. At least in Mondrian's paintings you do not encounter human eyes and their omnipresent sin.

'Much that is now mechanical,' says Professor Tawny about the life of a medieval city, 'was then personal, intimate and direct and there was little room for an organisation on a scale too vast for the standards that are applied to individuals, and for the doctrine that silences scruples and closes all accounts with the final plea of economic expediency.' In a medieval city I might have accepted invitations to dinners and gone so far as to mingle with others.

To be a machine or not to be a machine? In Calvin's days you were to become a doll, a plaything in God's hands. God walked before you, a rope in His hand. You were at the end of this rope tied around your waist. Thus you proceeded along the road, and you knew there was a sort of paradise at the end of it, not just the end of the tether, death and his magnanimous deliverance. 'For it is an ancient and true observation that there is a world of vices concealed in the soul of man. Nor can you find any other remedy than to deny yourself and discard all selfish considerations, and to devote your whole attention to the pursuit of those things which the Lord requires of you, and which ought to be pursued for this sole reason, because they are pleasing to Him.'

'Calvin's theory of predestination,' wrote Fromm, 'has one implication which should be explicitly mentioned here, since it has found its most rigorous revival in Nazi ideology: the principle of the basic inequality of men. For Calvin there are two kinds of people – those who are saved and those who are destined to eternal damnation. Since this fate is determined before they are born and without their being able to change it by anything they do or do not do in their lives, the equality of mankind is denied in principle.' My wife is keen on the basic equality of men and women, on this principle, and our relations have recently become strained on this account.

The doctrine of equality! There is no more poisonous poison anywhere: for it seems to be preached by justice itself, whereas it really is the termination of justice. 'Equal to the equal, unequal to the unequal' – that would be the true slogan of justice; and also its corollary: 'Never make equal what is unequal.'

Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols*

For many years she mingled with the individuals who were not worthy of her company, of her brain and gifts. I am not sure she was looking for a big heart, but that is what she would find in the end, and mostly those big hearts proved to be so small you could not even see them, let alone feel their warmth. Her friends' and husbands' intellectual capacities had no value in her eyes as if she had been looking only for mechanisms, for dolls. But there was no rope in her hands and therefore she could lead all those men and women nowhere, not even to mutual harmony and understanding. And she is so obstinate at times that no one (not even God) can lead her – continuously, unswervingly.

I do not know if the people I despise are damned, and the priest I shall talk to next week is sure to tell me I should not despise anybody, however despicable the objects of my indignation. And I doubt the very notion of salvation, if applied to this day and age, to this unworthy, undignified world that is damned – no doubt about it. (No point in speaking of *Dämmerung*.) However, there might be some nooks and crannies that keep a tiny quantity of light – a candle to which Tolstoy compared Anna Karenina's life. Was Anna saved or damned? Suppose you have this light in your heart, in your chest – all over your body and soul. But you are irremediably dead and no light will ever save you.

THE MIDDLE AGES

The economic interests are subordinate to the real business of life, which is salvation, and that economic conduct is one aspect of personal conduct, upon which as on other parts of it, the rules of morality are binding.

Erich Fromm, *The Fear of Freedom*

OUR TIMES

Liberty? The true liberty of a man, you would say, consisted in his finding out, or being forced to find out the right path, and to walk thereon. To learn, or to be taught, what work he actually was able for; and then by permission, persuasion, and even compulsion, to set about doing of the same! That is his true blessedness, honour, 'liberty' and maximum of wellbeing: if liberty be not that, I for one have small care about liberty.

Carlyle, *Past and Present*

Democracy, which means despair of finding any Heroes to govern you, and contented putting-up with the want of them, – alas, thou too, mein Lieber, seest well how close it is of kin to Atheism, and other sad Isms: he who discovers no God whatever, how shall he discover Heroes, the visible Temples of God?

Carlyle, *Past and Present*

But truly, as I had to remark in the mean while 'the liberty of not being oppressed by your fellow man' is an indispensable, yet one of the most insignificant fractional parts of Human Liberty. No man oppresses thee, can bid thee fetch or carry, come or go, without reason shown. True; from all men thou art emancipated: but from Thyself and from the Devil –? No man, wiser, unwiser, can make thee come or go: but thy own futilities, bewilderments, thy false appetites for Money, Windsor Georges and suchlike?

Carlyle, *Past and Present*

One thing I do know: Those Apes, chattering on the branches by the Dead Sea, never got it learned; but chatter there to this day. To them no Moses need come a second time; a thousand Moseses would be but so many painted Phantasms, interesting Fellow-Apes of new strange aspect, – whom they would ‘invite to dinner’, be glad to meet with in lion-soirées. To them the voice of Prophecy, of heavenly monition, is quite ended. They chatter there, all Heaven shut to them, to the end of the world.

Carlyle, *Past and Present*

I leaf through the book of life and light only on dark ages, dead leaves, bodies, ideas and instincts. As if they had all thought only in terms of death, those people, seeking what may be expedient for them according to the flesh, self-delusion, pride, arrogance, futility, thirst for recognition, thirst for demolition. Riches, as St Antonio says, exist for man, not man for riches. Fame exists for man, not man for fame. Recognition exists for man, not man for recognition.

I think that demolition exists for man, not man for demolition. ‘Luther and Calvin,’ wrote Fromm, ‘portray this all-pervading hostility.’ (To what does ‘this’ refer? Too slothful to find out. ‘All-pervading’ suits me perfectly.) ‘Not only in the sense that these two men, personally, belonged to the ranks of the greatest haters among the leading figures of history, certainly among religious leaders; but, which is more important in the sense that their doctrines were coloured by this hostility! And could only appeal to a group itself driven by an intense, repressed hostility.’

My hostility is neither repressed not suppressed, I’m sorry to say. And whenever I think about the darkest hour and the dawn, I watch a documentary on the Second World War, on the advent of Hitler and his regime. After that I think only in terms of the darkest hour.

If he steps for the first time out of his small workshop or out of the big enterprise, in which he feels very small, into the mass meeting and is now surrounded by thousands and thousands of people with the same conviction...he himself succumbs to the magic influence of what we call mass suggestion.

Hitler, *Mein Kampf*

People want nothing at all, except to be governed decently. They are nothing more than the stone is for the sculptor. Leader and masses is as little a problem as painter and colour.

Goebbels, *Michael*

What a pity I cannot replace the last quotation by a declaration of love. ‘Human beings are nothing more than the stone is for the sculptor. God and masses is as little a problem as painter and colour.’

NONCHALANCE

When you trip over a root, you do not always curse your fate and give a few kicks to the source of your displeasure and fall. And your fall does not necessarily remind you of Adam, of original sin. Not very original, is it? as an Orthodox priest put it. Some Russians think that Catholics, inspired and prodded by St Augustine, exaggerate the importance of sin which, in their opinion, is even less important than the significance and solemnity of the first name Ernest. Anyway it is better not to trip over roots, even if your legs are not subjected to the pain I experience, whenever I endeavour to rise up after dinner, after sitting on the same chair for more than an hour. It is unfair to take advantage of human beings' misfortunes, but roots are callous, and empathy is neither their forte nor even their piano: they have no idea what this sentiment is about, and if there is such a thing as empathy or indeed emotion.

But there *are* individuals who talk about original sin, even if they are molested neither by roots nor by carpets over which you can trip as well, if you pay no attention to where you go and how you do it – if you do not choose your itinerary with care and perspicacity. And original sin is nowadays associated mostly with our unconscious which is sure to remember not only your former lives but also Adam's sojourn in Paradise. Theologians go so far as to attribute to us the sins committed on other planets, and the planets they talk about are always inhabited. Their behaviour might be regarded as inhuman or antiplanetiran, for there is such a thing as an anti-constellatory nebula that destroys whatever it manages to engulf or just wrap up as a gift. And some semiologist always points out that *Gift* means 'poison' in German, but I am not fond of languages to the extent of attributing to them original and artificial sins, authentic transgressions and theatrical misdemeanours.

Our Oedipus complex has nothing to do with the forbidden fruit: Eve or Adam might have raped God on many occasions – all the more logically since the same theologians affirms that God created them out of His libidinous needs. According to them, He was weary of making love to nebulas, constellations and solitary stars. The forbidden fruit, the prohibition appended to its name was somehow linked to God's sexual potential, to His eagerness to make love *in earnest*, with a creature of flesh and blood. 'Don't waste your time on fruit,' He seemed to have meant as He raised His index finger and pointed to the Tree of Knowledge. (Its real name was '*L'arbre du temps perdu*.') But Adam and Eve did everything they could to waste their time, for whatever lay outside their intimacy with God was sheer hell, and for the first and last time God felt the tortures designed for the reprobate. Even constellations seemed to spend their time in one of hell's circles, considering that the show they waited for with enthusiasm was daily postponed. Incidentally, when they say there were no days and nights in Paradise, they are bitterly mistaken: the putting off of Adam's and Eve's copulation divided eternity into days and nights, years and decades.

As usual, there are theologians who tend to go to extremes, and they do go to extremes when they affirm that God ought to have provided food for Adam and Eve – a sort of *inner* food, the one

you can consume without putting anything into your mouth. And they do not mean you need a lot of spiritual, uplifting food: in Paradise no uplifting is needed, given that you are on the top of the world, of the universe, of God's Creation. So they talk mostly about vegetables and fruit apparently stored in your stomach so that, whenever you are hungry, your stomach takes care of your hunger and digests whatever it can lay its hands on in its own interior. (They are keen on colourful images, metaphors, tropes and so on.) And if you say to them, 'Your theories are far-fetched and you make them even more indigestible by dragging in a pair of hands,' they answers thus, 'In Paradise every organ was in the shape of man and so Adam contained many small Adams all along his digestive tract. His heart was called "Adam Hearton".'

Sure enough, birds are nourished daily and sometimes hourly, for God's mercy (the meals on wings, on angels' wings) is always at their disposal. Were Adam and Eve inferior to birds, for all God's racist declarations? 'You're the highest species one can think of,' He said and only in the twentieth century did we resolve to protect flora and fauna from our greediness, fascism, racism and delusions of grandeur. So, after much soul-searching, our theologians went to another set of extremes and resorted to Occam's razor. They felled all the trees for which our Paradise was justly renowned, leaving only *l'Arbre du temps perdu* that was more than a mere tree – it was a severe test designed to measure the quantity of love in Adam's brain and Eve's uncorrupted soul. Were they to show more interest in food than in love? In spite of St Peter's precepts? And what about music? Isn't it the food of love? But Adam and Eve did not care about Shakespeare and his genius; nor were they keen on music. They just devoured the forbidden fruit, turning a deaf ear to God's declarations of love, to His melodious murmur. From that day on, gluttony has always been regarded as a mortal sin.

At some point in the history of literature, writers opted for dialogues to the detriment of novels, poems and essays. Scores of dialogues are devoted to the standoff that marked the end of the couple's stay in Paradise habitually referred to as the Golden Age or Golden Delicious. God and the couple stood opposite each other and for a while no one said a word. And the murmur of love that issued from God's mouth stopped forever (according to Spinoza) as if the brook of love had run dry; or the river of love. So not a word was uttered, not a murmur, and no brooks, no rivers were flowing in the neighbourhood, in the vicinity of the tree that captured Eve's imagination. 'Too tired,' the Almighty grunted at last and sat down on a bench. That is how the dialogue where you can find the last conversation (not the Last Supper) sounded – resounded throughout Paradise in days of yore.

There are individuals who have no fondness for whatever is last as if there were no other manifestations of death in the world. They correct you as soon as you finish your remark, 'Not the Last Supper – the *First One*, the *First One*. The *First Supper*, you fool.' They do not hesitate to insult you as they make a tremendous effort to save Jesus Christ from His ignominious death. The same goes for the last will and testament. 'The first will, the first will,' they repeat ad nauseam. Try as you may, you will never make them understand that the 'first will' they touch upon dates back to their first action, to the birth of their free will. When does this birth occur? Upon your leaving your mother's

womb? Hardly. You just cry, cry, cry, cry, and this crying of yours is a manifestation of your disgust and astonishment. ‘Did I really deserve all this?’ you say to yourself as you look around you, casting a glance at a wall, at a doll.

Eventually God said to Adam: ‘How did you dare disobey me?’

ADAM: How? What?

GOD: I told you not to eat.

ADAM: How could I live without eating?

GOD: Your stomach produces enough food for a regiment of soldiers.

ADAM: But I’d like to *enjoy* the food I digest.

GOD: What about love?

ADAM: What love?

GOD: What about my murmur? My brook?

ADAM: The apple was delicious. When munching it I realised that food could be good.

GOD: From now on you’ll work and suffer.

ADAM: What about supper?

GOD: This will be your last supper in Paradise.

ADAM: What about my first supper? When? Where?

GOD: Tomorrow.

Painstakingly God explained to the couple that their first supper would take place on one of the planets of the solar system, but Eve objected to this solution of her problem and said, ‘I’m too tired to travel. I’d like to have my first supper here, in this dining room.’ ‘Supping room,’ objected Adam. ‘And I’d like to have my second supper in here as well.’ That is why all theologians call this situation ‘the first standoff’.

There are theologians (we are surrounded by theologians) who believe that the only atonement for the original lack of love resides in our carnal desires which result in our propensity for making love wherever we come across an *acceptable* body. Some of them (of these theologians) say we should sleep with *any* body, however unacceptable and ugly, but the notions and doctrines they air belong to yet another set of extremes. And I, for one, am not enamoured of extremes: they seem to disregard and even despise the Middle Way about which I have already written in other self-centred books of mine. Anyway the woman I propose to describe and *judge* as if defying Spinoza and many other humanists is to some extent a partisan of this doctrine, judging from her approach to life and its necessities.

What do many women and men think about when the problem of marriage appears on the horizon? Actually it is rather their families whose chief preoccupation lies in the domain of money. Their parents are far more mature and less likely to appreciate only good looks and the sexual potential of the candidates who file through ballrooms where young men and women await their destinies. And their parents think first and foremost in terms of money because they know what hardships are in store for their children: life is unpredictable and full of blood and guts like a Hollywood movie. But my

heroine did not give a thought to money – or to intellectual and artistic gifts, come to think of it. She looked at the candidates and only their looks were projected on the screen of her expectations and intentions. And she chose a man whose qualities amounted exclusively to his title so that, when talking to him, one might conclude he was the only count in the whole creation. Once again I have the feeling of *déjà-écrit*, but I often fall back on my own creations, for I am reluctant to go out and meet other people whose idiosyncrasies (nowadays there are not many idiosyncrasies around) could fit into one of my books, matching their furies and sounds.

The woman I am writing about is French and, to match the wording of the previous sentence, I might say she is a *furie* (shrew, termagant), but I shall refrain from following this linguistic path: it is easier to tame a shrew than a *furie*. And sometimes one has no alternative but to tame this woman, otherwise hysterics and other psychological and physical inconveniences come down on you like a ton of bricks. But when I first met her, I was under the impression she could not harm flies and other insects that we often mention to show how humane and tender-hearted we are, when dealing with humans. Now I know she does *not* harm flies, but her treatment of men (I am thinking mostly about myself) is not above all suspicion. At the time, at the outset of our relationship, she was in love with a middle-aged Italian man who, for the space of a few months, played the part of a father figure in her life. Do we always need fathers? Turgenev did. What about us?

Once I met him at a famous flea market, but I was not aware of his existence. Of course I saw a middle-aged man: I could not help seeing him, although he was neither tall nor obese. And had I failed to take notice of him, the heroine would have resorted to her suggestive powers, to her telepathic gift (if any) to draw my attention in his direction. She would have thought with frenetic insistence, ‘Look at him, look at him, look at him. Your encounter is premeditated. I wanted him to meet you. He must believe he has a rival, otherwise he won’t divorce his wife to marry me once and for all. What am I talking about? Have I gone crazy? (At long last she *has* gone crazy.) I should talk to *him*, to my beloved, not to this moron.’ The former should take notice of the latter, in other words (but in the same deed).

When you talk furiously (or soundly) about a woman, everyone concludes you are in love with her, but I have never felt anything towards my heroine with the exception of gratitude. She is not a feminine version of Doctor Jekyll and Mr Hyde, and I wish to unburden my memory, before embarking upon a lengthy analysis of her behaviour, of her nature and whims. For nothing in the world would I skip her two suicide attempts, one of which shed an ominous light on our so-called friendship. It is unpleasant – to say the least – to find a woman in her bed during a performance of the definitive version of sleep. If you happen to get involved in such a dramatic occurrence, you are sure to find a number of sleeping pills on the bedside cabinet. Sometimes they are scattered around the cabinet and the room; sometimes they remain in the box as if to prove that on the threshold of death the victim still had all her faculties. I am not sure my heroine was good-natured – and yet her nature is

good – on the brink of her personal disaster: on the same cabinet I found a note in which she accused me of driving her mad. ‘And only mad women commit suicide,’ she rounded off.

An ambulance conveyed her to hospital where a doctor said to me unconditionally, ‘This time she’ll pull through. But sooner or later she’ll repeat this act.’ She has never repeated it, which does not really matter: you can commit suicide without swallowing sleeping pills or flinging your body from the top of a skyscraper. I am tempted to describe her life shortly, instead of beating about the bush for another week or so: a protracted, tedious suicide. But there are many nuances I feel duty bound to deal with, otherwise I shall never understand what original sin is – or any sin, for that matter. (Or anything, anything.) At my age one begins to prepare oneself for the grave which should be clean, appropriate for the reception of the body. And sinful bodies are not likely to reach Purgatory either in no time at all or two or three centuries later because only Hell awaits them indifferently, not impatiently. And my heroine, my former mistress, seems to undergo the punishment of God in this vale and dale, contrary to what many right-minded individuals think. They pretend that God always drags His (Her) feet, instead of swooping down to snatch the guilty party and put it on the huge, heaven-sponsored frying pan.

But before I quote anything, any author upholding this view and talking about the Almighty’s chronic miscarriage of justice, I propose to discuss another suicide attempt of hers, of my friend and former mistress, although this time I am not able to go into detail, for the simple reason that I neither attended the performance nor was put into the picture about it. I just know that she attempted to commit suicide in Rome where her lover’s family lived and prospered; until her appearance in the neighbourhood of the ancestor’s mansion. As usual she took a dozen sleeping pills and her lover must have brought her back to life, otherwise she would never have written a farewell accusatory note directed against *my* persona. She might have messed up *his* family’s morning and evening routines, had his wife taken the episode seriously, giving the third degree to her husband.

I know nothing about the follow-up to the story I was told six years ago, more than 30 years after the real event or non-event. There are suicides and non-suicides, but the latter might get rid of ‘non’ with the passing of the years. My friend whose interest in repetitive music is quite limited did not resume her activities in the suicide department. And she thinks her Latin lover has been dead for some time, if not for a decade or twenty years. The father figure disappeared from her life, and even if she was in love with me at some point, I was neither her father nor her mother nor even her niece to whom she intends to leave what is left of her family’s fortune.

For a while we lived together in Versailles. Of course she kept her Belgian house because, at the time, she thought that life in Belgium was far less expensive than *la vie Parisienne*. You had better not compare these two lives: every comparison must take place in the same dimension where inches and miles have the same length. And you should not compare the length of a male reproductive organ with that of an arm, even if this arm belongs to a baby. Nor can you compare Offenbach to a mug of beer. Anyway she used to buy cleaning products in Belgium so that her car was cluttered up either with

washing-up liquids (on her way to Paris) or with dirty clothes she would have dry-cleaned in Brussels. One might presume the rot set in during these journeys or rather before and after them.

The rot must have set in when she chose her husband, the mediocre man whose physique was as ridiculous and obnoxious as his brain and mental capacities, necessities. He was absolutely mediocre, run-of-the-mill, and for once I feel like piling up a number of predicates in spite of their uniformity and basic similitude. She might have felt a sexual urge: one never knows how the libido works in others, and that is why we shall never come to any understanding with them. There is no accounting for taste, and sometimes I wonder if we have anything else in our possession. Our theories smell of our taste, and so do all other aspects of our life so that whatever we do, wherever we go, we find only our taste or instinct or just ourselves. And we have no idea how we taste because we are not inclined to devour our own body.

Her husband had a nasty habit of picking on his wife in meetings – in the course of dinners, lunches and balls. Sometimes she would say to him, ‘Please, don’t be nasty Thierry.’ He was keen on Thailand or rather on the girls he met there, and she told me with resignation, ‘They’re beautiful. The most beautiful girls in the world, you know.’ Many years later my former friend told me after spending a few days in Bangkok, ‘There are no boys like that in the universe.’ I went to Thailand once and liked neither their cuisine nor their boys and girls who must meet on a regular basis – with foreigners mostly.

I do not even know if my heroine was driven to sex like another woman I met at the Moscow Conservatoire. She sacrificed everything for the pleasures one often comes across in beds and even in cars, provided these cars are parked legally, not in the middle of thoroughfares. She sacrificed for sex’s sake (sounds nice, doesn’t it) her career and even her wish to have a few children – near her bed, in the mornings. I am not sure my heroine has ever done anything for the sake of anything: she just followed the crowd and her stream of consciousness. Sometimes they coincided, sometimes they did not. I am not sure whether she really cared about these coincidences. She just floated on her private dead sea as if determined to imitate Ophelia, her madness and death. She is still alive, but yesterday I was struck by her physical and psychological appearances. I might say she looked like a corpse, and I am convinced that many unbiased onlookers would agree with my description (assuming it *is* a description) of her substance. (Assuming it is her substance and not just a quantity of nonsense.) I cannot say, ‘She tends to stoop because she is so tall’: she is not. A priest would certainly say she is overburdened with sins, and I might agree with him. That is the feeling I get whenever I look at her; and I look at her once a week. Perhaps we should meet once a month: it is painful to contemplate so many sins at close range.

For many years my memory did not offer me the images linked to my heroine’s second suicide. Of course I could not forget it, but the note she had left before opening the box magnanimously stuffed with sleeping pills did not bother me in any way. Even at the outset of my work on this essay I did not give it a thought, which allowed me to think of this woman *positively*: I said to myself she was *bonne*,

generous. Exposed to my inner eye, she stood in front of me, her heart aching with pity for her blind, lame dog. And then I recalled the note which could not have been either written or left on the bedside cabinet by a fundamentally virtuous woman. Perhaps it is easier to write about sins, if you have such an image in your memory and can use it to your heart's content. And your honest heart would never be satisfied with circumstantial evidence only.

The theory that proclaims the libidinous inclination of God may be used as a justification of any sexual drive, however immoderate and outrageous. Of course, if asked about her doings, my heroine would never have answered (20 years ago), 'I'm doing all that to atone for Adam's sin.' Let us not forget that Adam and Even did not fulfil their mission: they did *not* make love to God round the clock, contrary to what the law of Paradise imposed on them. Nor did she (my heroine, friend and former mistress) wish to atone for *her* sins. Needless to say she has never regarded her behaviour from the biblical, life-or-death point of view. Even the word 'misdemeanour' has never cropped up in her mind impervious to negative thoughts and ideas.

She must have taken a few piano lessons – somewhere, somehow, in a typically haphazard manner. For some reason (I cannot say this reason is best known to herself) she still believes that marrying for money is obnoxious, indecorous. And yet you are not forbidden from taking money into consideration *as a sideline*, as an item you can turn to advantage during your holidays – with your husband at your side. On the other hand, she does not wince while listening to her own piano-playing, which is so insufferable that even her cousins put their hands over their ears whenever she sits in front of a Steinway or any other instrument. (She might as well play the harp.) She literally murders the pieces she performs so that, when in need of blood and corpses, I just put on her recording of a Schubert sonata – no Hollywood movies for once.

A lot of sins align when one takes the trouble – nobody does – to dissect her life, which might make one understand the difference between a crime and a misdemeanour. Some time ago she bought a Steinway and she practises, I suppose, every day – even at her age when innocent people suffer from arthritis and even paralysis. She continues to play the piano, but when her hands indulge in this pastime at home, I do not think the Almighty takes offence, although the universe must suffer appallingly from such a treatment inflicted on Mozart, Beethoven and Brahms. Carelessly, almost absent-mindedly. The point is my friend or former mistress also performs their works in public, and that might be regarded as a crime or a mortal sin: in comparison with such a murder, gluttony looks like Juliet on her balcony.

Recently I struck up an exciting conversation with this pianist. I asked her if she realised to what extent she molested our favourite composers. 'They'll tide me over till doomsday,' she replied. That is how she proceeds so as not to starve to death. She rings up all her cousins and also the ambassadors she is acquainted with thanks to the dinners she attends in the hope of meeting them or at least their secretaries – anybody apt to find concerts for her abroad, sometimes in distant lands. 'I need at least 10 recitals,' she says and her cousins pick up their phones. They do it all the more willingly since they are

not financially disturbed by her Schubert or Bach. They see and even hear how she ill-treats the piano, but most of the time the instruments she plays belong to embassies or to *others*: she seldom, if ever, destroys her cousins' property.

It goes without saying she gets money for her performances. Once I told her I had received a modest sum for my book of essays. 'I'm paid much better for my concerts,' she answered. A minor misdemeanour? One of the cardinal sins? I was elated at being rewarded for my literary efforts: this does not happen often. Thanks to her cousins' unrelenting efforts, she plays all the time and is rewarded far more modestly (ridiculously, one might say) than professional pianists. Why did she feel an urge to take me down a peg?

There is a something in man's substance which was created by the devil. The devil persuaded evil as a sin; he did not create it as a nature. No doubt he persuaded nature, for man is nature; and therefore by his persuasion he corrupted it. He who wounds a limb does not, of course, create it, but he injures it. Those wounds, indeed, which are inflicted on the body produce lameness in a limb, or difficulty of motion; but they do not affect the virtue whereby a man becomes righteous; that wound, however, which has the name of sin, wounds the very life, which was being righteously lived. This wound was at that fatal moment of the fall inflicted by the devil to a vastly wider and deeper extent than are the sins which are known amongst men. Whence it came to pass, that our nature having then and there been deteriorated by that great sin of the first man, not only was made a sinner, but also generates sinners.

St Augustine

I found this text in a volume where they put St Augustine's writings against the Pelagians. There are several texts in this book, and they all stigmatise Pelagius and his followers. As a staunch admirer of St Augustine's, I often thunder against the evils of our society, world, false humanism, false literary style and the false dawn that will never suppress or wipe away the darkest hour. And even if St Augustine did not vouchsafe to adorn our history and its atrocities, I would stigmatise A, B, C – the entire alphabet. Actually I would use the Hebrew alphabet to remove today from today, Creation from Creation.

I found this text three days ago, but I cannot lay my hands on it right now as I leaf through this volume that I open every month and sometimes twice a week. The texts included in it are entitled: *On the Merits and Remission of Sins, and on the Baptism of Infants; On the Spirit and the Letter; On Nature and Grace; On Man's Perfection in Righteousness; On the Proceedings of Pelagius; On the Grace of Christ, and on Original Sin; On Marriage and Concupiscence; On the Soul and its Origin; Against Two Letters of the Pelagians; On Grace and Free Will; On Rebuke and Grace; On the Predestination of the Saints; On the Gift of Perseverance*. Which one bears in its bosom the above text? I would not vote for the baptism of infants; and yet all the paraphernalia the devil needs to create

a sin or a multitude of sins is present in babies, let alone in children. They all have limbs, unless stated otherwise; and some children are incurably lame which may affect their cheerful dispositions, turning them into Machiavellian misanthropes who bear a grudge against the whole of the universe as if any human or thing were responsible for their infirmities; with the exception of their parents and genes. Many invalids are involved in the crimes for which eternal judges send them to hell without trial: in their cases only tribulations count and are called upon.

Well, the devil can wound anybody, independently of this body's age and beauty, and even babies and adolescents whom we adore because they all prefigure our future, our second childhood, are vulnerable to the point of exposing almost willingly their bodies and souls to the devil's arrows, bullets and bombs. That is why some of those 'first' children kill their grandmothers: the latter have no wish to offer them a doll or a toy farm. But we must not lose sight of our heroine who is probably in her second childhood – until further notice anyway. To my knowledge she has no intention of killing her grandmother, and we may safely leave babies and children to their own devices.

On Nature and Grace. I think at this point I had better not waste my time on grace, although even my heroine might go to Paradise (according to Calvin), for all her deficiencies, misdemeanours, crimes and offensive comments. After her second botched departure from life, she was confined to her bed for a fortnight at least. At the end of this stretch of time she looked up, spotted my face and said, 'My poor friend, it's not for you I did it.' 'And the farewell epistle you put on your bedside cabinet?' I might have asked, raising my eyebrows. I did nothing of the sort: you do not kick somebody when they are on their bed.

Now that passage, in which the Apostle James says: 'But the tongue can no man tame,' does not appear to me to be capable of the interpretation which he would put upon it, when he expounds it, 'as if it were written by way of reproach; as much as to say: Can no man, then, tame the tongue? As if in a reproachful tone, which would say: You are able to tame wild beasts; cannot you tame the tongue? As if it were an easier thing to tame the tongue than to subjugate wild beasts.' I do not think that this is the meaning of the passage. For, if he had meant such an opinion as this to be entertained of the facility of taming the tongue, there would have followed in the sequel of the passage a comparison of that member with the beasts. As it is, however, it simply goes on to say: 'The tongue is an unruly evil, full of deadly poison' – such, of course, as is more noxious than that of beasts and creeping things. For while the one destroys the flesh, the other kills the soul.

St Augustine, *On Nature and Grace*

I can assure anyone – my guardian angel, among other archangels – that my soul was not destroyed in the least; not even an infinitesimal particle of it was damaged by the outrageous remark. Nonetheless, the remark *was* outrageous, not to say *criminal*; so was the farewell note. I might have gone to prison

for murdering such a wonderful woman. I might have spent nine years in prison, losing my touch: I am also a pianist, until further notice. One might say I could have practised on a table after drawing a keyboard on it. And I could have sung at the top of my voice so as not to hear the clatter of dishes, chains and knives. But let us return to our lady whose destiny is chained to her sins, her tongue and its capacity to move at the wrong moment, in the wrong direction. Now and then I get the feeling it flaps furiously both in and out of her mouth, like the wing of a bird. At such a moment I am yearning to say to her tongue, 'Please fly off, otherwise your owner will go to Hell, to one of its prisons.'

In my opinion, at some point the devil realised it was pointless to waste his time on legs: the lame do not wreak havoc on the world. Of course I compare my countess neither to Trotsky nor to Mussolini, but her tongue is certainly her enemy, as the Russians put it, as if they were acquainted with the countess personally. And there is no denying it is my enemy too, otherwise I would not devote an essay and a few hours of my precious time to it. That time grows shorter as the tomb gets closer and closer to one's muscles, skin and blood vessels. Am I stating the obvious? Anyway I would not spend so much time on this lady, if her tongue was my intimate friend and trustworthy counsellor.

I am afraid that even the flight of the countess's tongue (I cannot call her 'my former mistress' throughout the essay) and its disappearance inside a comet would not save her soul from Hell. I am not sure I should ask myself whether it is fair to condemn her *soul* to eternal torture, given that her tongue runs away with her and consequently with her soul that is unable to control it efficiently. It is her tongue that God should send to the lowest circle of Hell, for it betrays humanity, its ethics, morals and codes of behaviour. But I am almost certain that, after her death, her tongue will fly off at last and spend its time amidst the clouds, talking to the wind and occasionally to the stars, whereas her soul is bound to rot in Hell.

I am wrong once again: even deprived of her tongue, the countess would offend many people, considering the eloquence of her gestures, mimics and eyes. She can bury you in no time at all just by casting a glance at your shoulders. Suddenly you feel the universe's unavoidable weight and the earth swallows your body as if greeting it with open arms.

My wife admires St Augustine from a distance: she has not read all the volumes I have in my library. But she always says, 'Open a book at random and you will know what you should do.' At least I know what I should say about the countess's tongue: I opened the book at random and my eyes fell on the above characteristic of the tongue. For a while I had no idea from what angle I could judge or just observe our countess's shortcomings, the discrepancies that come to the fore whenever she opens her mouth. Sometimes I get the feeling it is her tongue that opens this mouth of hers which might remain shut for centuries, if her unruly tongue did not manifest its displeasure and fury, often at the wrong moment. But her tongue is not always linked to pleasure or displeasure: it acts in accordance with its own free will that is quite independent from the countess's will to power or to the perseverance of her life. One does not really know what she wants and why she wants anything, instead of lying down in her coffin and asking four of her cousins to put the lid on. They might also

carry her coffin to the nearest cemetery, not to the area where her father and mother found their eternal rest: it is too far away, as far as I can judge. She is not obese, far from it, but perhaps her sins are too heavy for any number of cousins who do not descend from Atlas, as far as I know.

St Augustine does not speak of *our* volition to which we might owe our perdition – at least within the framework of Christianity. He emphasises the role of the tongue that seems to have its own free will separate from the other wills we count upon, when on the horns of dilemmas. No matter how numerous the wills are, swarming all over our body: it is the tongue that has the last word; and even the first word, come to think of it. Before any will starts clearing its throat, the tongue wakes up with a jerk and says, ‘You just shut up. Be quiet, you fools, nonentities and morons par excellence.’ And then its free will unleashes a lot of passions, words and insults so that others (other human beings) withdraw from the tongue’s field of vision – forever or just for a month, hoping that the countess might eventually placate her boisterous child. It usually takes them years to realise that, on the day of her birth, the countess did not leave her mother’s womb, contrary to what any man or woman may suppose, provided we do not talk to the inmates of a lunatic asylum. I am not sure our human tongues are supplied with wombs, but the countess was born from her tongue – no doubt about that, whatever midwives and midhusbands think and say, when questioned on the subject.

It is true that malnutrition and wild beasts are capable of destroying our body, but the tongue I am enlarging upon was entrusted (by the devil) with a higher mission: it is the soul it must attack, bite, nibble at, munch and swallow. In English, from time to time, you have to swallow your words, if (for instance) the scheme you did your best to denigrate turned out to be a huge success. In Russia they say ‘He swallowed his tongue,’ when the man you look at has not uttered a word for one minute at least. One might conclude that the countess swallows her tongue on a regular basis, allowing it to wander amidst her intestines in search of her soul that the devil has been longing for ever since she was born from her tongue. Her body bears no resemblance to tongues, to this father of hers; or to her mother. What about her soul?

Anyway, after killing her soul, the tongue is bound to take its place, for neither humans nor animals can live without souls that guide us from the earth to heaven. But for this final journey, we would waste our time in this world, listening to the tongues that wag in delight as they talk nonsense and stick out of their caverns whenever in need of yet another, more spectacular insult. ‘My poor friend, it’s not for you I did it.’ This wagging of the tongue is ludicrous and weird in the light of what prompted it to spread its message through the air: our countess must have thought I was in love with her. I suppose she endowed all the males she knew with the same feeling so that, according to her calculations, everybody was in love with her except women: she is not interested in women, as she says whenever one talks about lesbians in her presence. Her offence is all the more grievous since she was determined to humiliate my presumed infatuation, after accusing me of murder, thereby protecting her Latin lover. Her tongue was wagging within my reach. Luckily for me, I did not reach for it. Nor did I pluck it out of her mouth, anxious to munch it to my heart’s content. (Is its taste entirely different

from that of a tongue of veal?) Of course you had better spit such a tongue out, otherwise it will destroy not only your soul but also your digestive tract.

'The next question we shall require to be solved,' says he, 'is this: By what means is it brought about that man is with sin? – by the necessity of nature, or by the freedom of choice? If it is by the necessity of nature, he is blameless; if by the freedom of choice, then the question arises, from whom he has received this freedom of choice. No doubt, from God. Well, but that which God bestows is certainly good. This cannot be gainsaid. On what principle then, is a thing proved to be good, if it is more prone to evil than to good? For it is more prone to evil than to good if by means of it man can be with sin and cannot be without sin.'

I do not know who says that but determinism and its corollary, eternal salvation or damnation, do not seem to wait for our will's decision and determination. I might say it is the necessity of nature that brings about frying pans, eternal thirst or the rock of Sisyphus. There are people who, when asked about their preferred way of drinking whisky, never say 'on the rocks' because the word 'rocks' reminds them of Sisyphus' punishment; and of Hell, generally speaking. (And you often think about Hell *in general*, encompassing within one ordinary thought its ingredients from tortures to the devil's laughter.) In a manner of speaking, we are all innocent, given that our crimes and misdemeanours were stuffed into our body, soul and even our unconscious from time immemorial. We remember the Big Bang, don't we? But no one remembers time immemorial and the insertion of sins into our substance.

And what about freedom of choice? From God – this also goes without saying. So let us say nothing and let it go, I am tempted to write except that both my words and my freedom's comings and goings are also inscribed on the first page of my book. And I have no idea whether this is a book of life, of death or of half-existence. If there were such a thing – a book of half-existence – only half of its bulk would be covered with letters, equations and diagrams. And the book of death? Wouldn't its pages show the reader a number of four-letter words? As if he needed to refresh his memory in this field. In the Soviet Union most of the walls were enlivened with four-letter words (*five*-letter words in Russian) so that, to keep them in proper repair within your memory, you just had to walk along the walls – with the exception of that which encircles the Kremlin – two or three times a week. And you should on no account forget you are not there to chat up girls or guys: you are out there to read the walls.

Once the countess said when looking at my mistress's photograph, 'I remember her well. A beautiful girl. I mean, she *might* be beautiful, if someone took the trouble to chop her head off.' Was she inspired by Lewis Carroll's queen? She does read books now and then, and she even devoted one hour to Joyce's *Ulysses* at some airport or other. I wonder if she continued to leaf through the book on the plane while eating petit-fours, which should not be excluded from our investigation: you can leaf through a book without reading its contents. You can caress a woman without saying to yourself,

‘Tonight we’ll make love at 10.30.’ In other words, you spend the greater part of your life *automatically* as if you were duty bound to live it: leafing through the book of life is better – from a theological point of view – than shutting it by means of suicide. And let me remind the reader that the countess has not committed suicide yet, for all her impulses and Sibelius-inspired waltzes.

She knows perfectly well that speaking of the superfluity of heads may be found *du côté de* what Nietzsche’s adversaries call ‘evil’. But if you dare remind her of this truth, she says, ‘I’ve never *done* anything evil,’ which exonerates her from all responsibility for six-letter words, seven-letter words – for any words or sentences she uses on the spur of the moment. In her opinion, words (and tongues) do not count unless you cut someone’s throat when talking about the uselessness of your victim’s life. And if I try to make her understand she could have behaved differently with regard to my needs and demands, she answers, ‘I haven’t done anything to you.’ And what about sinning by omission?

She omits whatever can be omitted, but she is well aware of the life force ensconced in vegetables, fruit and fish. So she goes on eating and turning a deaf ear to my requests and quests: when looking for the Grail, you should not forget about sponsors. But my analysis has already grown too personal, and sins are *impersonal* to some extent, especially if you are still alive in spite of wagging tongues, tails and fingers.

Forasmuch, however, as there is, owing to the defects that have entered our nature, not to the constitution of our nature, a certain necessary tendency to sin, a man should listen, and in order that the said necessity may cease to exist, learn to say to God ‘Bring Thou me out of my necessities;’ because in the very offering up of such a prayer there is a struggle against the tempter, who fights against us concerning this very necessity.

St Augustine, *On Nature and Grace*

In my opinion the aforementioned defects continue to enter our countess’s nature; in any case, she never takes notice of what I say to her. We live and learn, and that is part of our struggle for life. If you do not learn the lessons given to you by life and its representatives, you may fall into a chasm or expose yourself to severe criticism in the wake of which you lose your job, your vim and vigour; or just your vim.

What is her chief defect? She is convinced she has never harmed a fly, but I am not talking about flies, am I? Besides, she loves animals as much as I do – to the point of nursing a blind dog and rejoicing ecstatically whenever he eats a morsel of meat or wishes to go out for a breath of fresh air. Well and good. But what about the heads rolling downhill – like a multitude of stones in Buster Keaton’s movie? My wife is a magnetiser and the countess dubbed her ‘Sorceress’. (No inkling of what was in store for her.) Many cinemagoers complain there is too much gratuitous sex in the films they spend their time watching. Sex and violence – they are not gratuitous if you go to a cinema and

pay for your ticket. What kind of profit did our countess gain from her witty, yet gratuitous remark? 'Bring Thou me out of my gratuitous remarks!'

I am afraid this last remark of hers was counterproductive to such an extent that the countess had no alternative but to write a letter of apology addressed to my wife. Some time ago her left shoulder was submitted to rough treatment by some tenant. The same tenant turned her chalet upside down and took a few photographs of the wreckage to persuade the jury he had lived in a ruin, not in a decent house for which one should pay a rent, if one does not own it. The shoulder does not leave my friend in peace. As a matter of fact it does, but more often than not this friend of mine has a sudden urge to speak of her pains, and it is her left shoulder she chooses for this purpose: it is far more difficult to speak of one's heartache.

So she says she can no longer put up with her physical suffering, and the only person her pain evokes in her mind (and body) is my wife whose sorcery might cure the unfortunate victim of her tenants and her own unsocial remarks. My wife is reluctant to cure her of anything, even of her insolence, but the victim does not seem to take my wife's refusal seriously because, as she points out, 'I wrote a letter of apology. What more do you need?' Once she came to my house that I had left an hour before and rang the bell at least thirty times. Then she began to honk her car horn and my neighbours heard the cacophony of her intolerance. I wonder how she would perform it on the piano. Actually one might say that whatever she performs on the piano – and on other instruments, on her cooker, for instance – sounds like a symphony of intolerance and impatience. I came back on time, and yet I might have guessed she would ring my bell a quarter of an hour before the scheduled beginning of our appointment. Once our talk and tea ceremony were over, she asked me for a piece of paper and wrote a letter of apology addressed to my neighbours whom she had disturbed while waiting for my arrival. My neighbours might have forgiven her; my wife has not.

Whatever she says, does and thinks is off the mark, wherever this mark might be located and whatever it means in various contexts. Off with her head, sorceress, honking your horn – the gap between her actions and efficiency widens before my very eyes, and I cannot help thinking she has endured God's punishment for more than thirty years. Once – it did happen only once – I came to her place with a friend of mine. As we entered the house I said it was chilly inside – even for a man conceived and born in the North of Europe. By way of an answer, she made the following speech: 'Do you mean to say I can't afford to put the heating on? Perhaps I can't. So what? But even in Siberia I would survive, you know. I would survive anywhere.' She went on and on for at least five minutes, and I had no wish to stop her, although I was not writing this essay at the time.

Freud thought that confusing the inner world with what we have to confront (the outside mess) may lead to all sorts of nervous disorders. My friend must live in accordance with the well-known maxim: as inside so outside. In her mind she never misses the mark, whereas reality shifts the marks and so she is always off the mark, wide of the mark and even not within the mark's reach. And she must be ill – not round the bend, though. You do not have to wait for a self-proclaimed Napoleon:

there are plenty of them in lunatic asylums. But there are other lunatics, and not all of them are Marie-Antoinettes.

Be that as it may (be she as she may), God's attitude towards her sins or half-sins is far more important than lunatic asylums and their inhabitants, be they Napoleons or Queen Victorias. She does not belong on the lunatic fringe because her opinions are not outside the usual range, but her remarks stick out a mile and that is what attracted my attention to her persona or substance or nonsense. In those days (forty years ago) she was not bad-looking and her flashy clothes would elicit ironic comments on the part of her friends, enemies and unbiased onlookers. A Russian countess I was in love with at some point kept talking about our countess's clothes and her way of maltreating pianos (and the composers she played). I hope God overlooks her inability to play the piano and interpret any piece of music with the exception of *Jolly Good Fellow*.

When reprisal comes as soon as possible after the event, it immediately bars the way against people who are strongly inclining towards making use of their badness while it is in full flow. For deferment of the debt of punishment is not only more debilitating to the injured party's hopes and more depressing than deferment of any other kind of debt, but it is also the best boost to the wrongdoer's daring and audacity; on the other hand, retaliation which wastes no time in challenging audacity not only deters future crimes, but is inherently the greatest possible consolation to the victim.

Plutarch, *On God's Slowness to Punish*

As I said earlier, I do not think that God procrastinated as He studied my former mistress's conduct for which she was punished rather quickly – at the age of 36. In 1980 I moved to Paris and she was most instrumental in carrying out my personal ritual, another of its stages. In the course of my life I have kept moving from one country to another. And yet, for all these metamorphoses, I am still a daredevil – a Kazak, as a Russian song puts it. As I said earlier, she kept the house her father had bought for her near Brussels. She came rather often to our flat in Versailles, bringing with her cleaning products and even a music stand I needed. Even in those days she thought only in terms of pennies. (No pun intended.) And this parsimonious stance made her life hell. But she did not realise she was living in hell: to her this hellish parsimony was as natural as a walk in the woods or going for a swim in the Adriatic. In the course of all these years she has been so blind to the hell where she stood or lay or crawled on all fours that now and then I wonder if God's mind keeps in check our lives and controls a number of retributions.

Once I called her from Versailles and asked if I could spend a night at her place near Brussels. She said, 'Yes, of course,' and willy-nilly I embarked upon my journey: I like neither motorways nor steering wheels. As I entered her house I saw a man whose beauty struck me neither that night nor on any other occasion. Actually I do not think I have ever seen him again; not even in my nightmares.

She said he was her cousin whose house or flat was redecorated. I said 'good night' and went to bed. Around 3 a.m. I felt the consequences of what I had eaten at a petrol station. My stomach ached so obnoxiously that I went to her room, apologised and asked for a medicine. 'You've come to check if I'm with him or not,' she answered. I do not remember if she gave me any medicine that night or any other night. The following morning I found the couple in the living room or rather on cloud nine. They were sitting on a divan and smiling at each other. For a moment I thought they had not noticed me, but suddenly the countess said, 'Do you know that our ancestors met on a battlefield? In the fourteenth century? His ancestors led the German army, mine were in charge of the French.' Was I an injured party? Am I still an injured party in spite of my utter indifference to the countess's past or present or future beauty?

At the beginning of the Eighties, she came to Versailles every other month, spending three hours at the steering wheel. Once she parked the car, entered the building where we lived, opened the front door of the flat, saw the mess I had left behind and went back to Brussels without so much as a by your leave. I was not at home and as usual my memory lets me down: I do not remember where I was. But I do not think this really counts. Besides, I am loath to imitate her behaviour centred on off-the-marks: she is always flying off at a tangent. What counts, therefore, is her *mild* lunacy: she does not mistake herself for Marie-Antoinette yet. However, one might visualise a scene in the course of which – after another obstruction, humiliation or kick – she will say at the top of her voice, 'I'm talking to all the women of the world. Why am I so ill-treated? What have I done?'

If you draw her attention to one of her follies, she always says, 'What have I done?' or 'What have I done to you?' *Il n'y a pas de mort d'homme*, as the French say rather often – to vindicate somebody. A man was not killed – in other words, she thinks that words neither kill nor wound, and consequently she can say whatever crops up in her head. Oddly enough, in her adolescence she was longing to become an archaeologist. In her library one comes across a lot of books on Egypt. She must have leafed through them without paying attention to the words and their significance. You could molest a human being – or any being, for that matter – by sticking needles in his name or by spitting on it. Even our countess's words count, whatever we might think about her intelligence: you do not have to read Spinoza in order to insult your next of kin.

More often than not I have the feeling she lives underground, in another, distant world – in the Hereafter, of all places. The other day she reminded me of Osiris' court of justice: she said 'I haven't done anything' five times in a row.

*I spoke truly, I did right,
I spoke fairly, I repeated fairly,
I seized the right moment,
So as to stand well with people.
I judged between two so as to content them,*

*I rescued the weak from one stronger than he
As much as was in my power.
I gave bread to the hungry, clothes to the naked,
I brought the boatless to land.*

I have never heard about her close links with the hungry, but she did give her old dresses to a Soviet friend of mine who paid me a visit in the late Seventies. She brought at least five dresses in a bag that she also gave to the poor woman (a famous violinist), and a few days afterwards I asked her why she had not parted with one of her Hermes scarves. 'I need them all,' she said. At the time she had as many as 54 Hermes scarves. Considering her atrocious poverty, I do not think her collection has been enhanced in the course of the last 20 years.

Incidentally, she never seizes the right moment, and one might go so far as to affirm she does her best to seize the *wrong* moment. Last week I went with her to an insurance company to which she owes a lot of money for no reason at all. Eager to get her off the hook, an employee was consulting his file while she kept thrusting an irrelevant document into his hand. During a visit to a telephone company she decided to discuss with a member of the staff the procedure you are supposed to adopt when transferring 200 euros to your niece's account. The wrong thing at the wrong place, at the wrong time. Off-marks, off-times, off-places, off-centres, off-keys, off-limits. One cannot even say she was thrown off balance by the wreckage of her chalet or rather of her life, unless one goes back to the roots – to her childhood perhaps. But I know nothing about her childhood except that she was born on the Flemish territory and learnt Flemish – 'to communicate with the servants,' as she put it.

Throughout a large portion of Africa it was, and still is, the custom to bury alive with dead kings a number of slaves, whose souls were intended to go into the Other World, and to wait upon the soul of their king as they waited upon his body in this world. In dynastic times the Egyptians dropped this barbarous custom, and substituted figures (ushabtiu) of men and women made of stone, wood, faïence on which they at first only cut the names of the persons for whom they were made. Subsequently they cut on the figures a formula, in which they called upon them to do any work which might require to be done in the Other World...When called upon by the deceased the figures inscribed with his name turned into full-grown men or women, who followed their master, and did all that he commanded them to do.

E. A. Wallis Budge, *The Book of the Dead*

My friend is accustomed to ringing up her friends or mere acquaintances and ask them to prune her trees or mow her lawns. For all the excellence of her upbringing, she always sounds like a general in front of whom the soldiers tremble and shudder. When obeying her commands, her future servants take into consideration her indigence and age: she is five years my senior. But in spite of getting older

and older (no time machines within her reach), she seems to go from strength to strength. Six years ago, one of her cousins gave me a call and said, ‘We all hope she’ll die with dignity. Is that asking too much of her and God?’ During the last decade she quarrelled with many of her cousins and nephews, but the cousin I mentioned remained her friend – perhaps on account of his daughter who will inherit the countess’s fortune. Incidentally, she has not forgotten me either: I am to inherit one of her portraits.

She calls our gardener or rather our odd-job man and says, ‘There’s water on the floor – I must have a leak. Please, come as soon as possible, otherwise I’m sure to drown. I can no longer swim because of the horrible pain I feel in my shoulder.’ Her new tenants turn a few taps on and forget to turn them off; or they leave them on intentionally, for they must know the countess cannot swim. But they are convinced she can take care of their rubbish and so they deposit it in her car.

In the meantime our odd-job man came, mowed my lawns and drank a few cups of coffee. And then he said, ‘I’ll never go to her again. Last spring she called me and screamed, “My house is about to collapse,” and when I came she didn’t even open the door. Someone else had already fixed it. I don’t like driving for nothing. She could have called me.’

To some extent I am also her servant; or her soldier who listens to her commands and does not dare disobey her voice. ‘You should come and play at my festival.’ I went to Knock le Zout and played at her festival. She did not even reimburse my travel expenses. ‘You should buy my chairs. *La Régence*, you know. I need 40,000 euros.’ Last month I talked to her about these chairs, about the way she forced them on me. ‘I’ve never sold you anything,’ she shouted. ‘Anyway your furniture isn’t worth much nowadays,’ she added. I am sure she does not have Alzheimer’s. Just another instance of God’s punishment? Who is being punished?

If God takes time and is in no hurry to impose punishment on sinners, this is not because he is worried about making a mistake or changing his mind if he punishes quickly; it is because he is freeing us of the bestial savagery we employ when punishing, and is teaching us to avoid anger and to avoid the time when ‘our temper is leaping higher than our intelligence’, and is burning and seething – in other words, to avoid assaulting people who have hurt us as if we were slaking thirst or satisfying hunger. Instead, he is teaching us to imitate his gentleness and procrastination, and to turn to punishment in an orderly and concordant fashion, with time assisting our decisions rather than involving us in the slightest regret.

Plutarch, *On God’s Slowness to Punish*

Had we continued to see each other on a regular basis (we parted in 1983), I might have slapped her face 1001 times. I did it only once and I regret it deeply, for I have no liking for sins, and even half-sins do not arouse my sympathy and passions. It is true that she can infuriate an angel, let alone an archangel, but I ought to have restrained myself in 1979 when we had a memorable argument that I

cannot forget: only repentance might free me from its ugliness. (Her black eye.) It is not enough to confess it in an essay I am determined to offer to its heroine: reading it might help her repent of what she has done during forty years at least. And if *this* is the aim I am pursuing, I am not finished yet.

I have no idea to what extent she lies whenever speaking of our mutual friends who ‘hold a grudge against you for various reasons’. A beautiful daughter of an old, fat and insignificant lady said on the phone, ‘Thank you for your invitation. I’ll come on condition that Valery Aleff doesn’t appear in your house in the course of that evening.’ What experiment should I undertake to check the veracity of her report? Should I check anything except the size of my incredulity? Shouldn’t I use Occam’s razor or the intensity of my indifference? The same goes for another woman who said, ‘I’ll never invite Valery again.’ The same goes for my friend: did she lie on both occasions?

Our newspapers inform us that the recent pattern of weather deviates from the norm for this time of year. The countess is neither a pattern nor weather, but she deviates from threads and from the norm, whatever it is, so two hours ago I once again lost the thread of what I was saying. Even in this essay I have already lost a lot of threads on account of her invisible yet audible presence and stubbornness. I talk to her on the phone and also in reality, doing my best to understand her reasons and unreasons, her threads, deviations and horrible misfortunes; and unhappiness, unhappiness, misery. And the gratuitousness of her remarks and gestures.

That is perhaps the crux of the whole situation, of the condemnation she is involved in, for all her goodwill and good nature. What she does has no substance, no matter; it is volatile, airy and can be easily avoided because it leads nowhere. Many people insult and humiliate their colleagues for the sake of a more important job or status; and for the sake of money, needless to say. Her remarks make no sense from a *practical* point of view: thanks to them she has neither become a better pianist nor found an intelligent and wealthy husband. There is no point in them, unless you maintain that pleasures are not measured by the yardstick of success. She must draw *some* pleasure from what she says, but this pleasure, if any, is short-lived because it leaves only nuisance and sheer chaos in its wake. You struggle for life and in the course of this struggle you have to resort to both fair means and foul. The countess’s spitefulness, her wickedness, are not part of the Darwinian struggle, and this gratuitousness may lie at the root of her downfall and distress.

If you endeavour to find an appropriate punishment for Hitler, Lenin and Stalin, you are unlikely to come up with the right instrument of justice: their crimes are too horrid and immeasurable. The hypertension from which Stalin suffered at the end of his life cannot be compared to the number of victims whose corpses were strewn all over the Gulags. And Hitler spent a few unpleasant days in his bunker where he drank champagne and married Eva Braun who was not the ugliest woman on earth. You could pull their living bodies to pieces, but that is not enough, and no teachings, no Christs, will ever assuage our thirst for justice, if its ritual is to be carried out in this world, in this life, in our cities and meadows. So we leave it to God whose omniscience is apt to resolve the problem that even the Great Inquisitor would never have straightened out to our satisfaction.

Our countess is tender-hearted and good-natured, and we can voice this truth whenever under the influence of our humanistic tendencies, provided we disregard her farewell note and the following explanation of her deadly act, ‘My poor friend, I didn’t do it for you.’ We would also have to disregard the words she addressed to a Russian prince, ‘Your wife is very vulgar, my dear.’ Of course she does not recall what she said in some ballroom or other, and I often hear her complaints profusely centred on the prince’s neglect of her persona or substance or whatever word we attribute to such a woman. ‘He used to invite me to dinner and lunch. What’s got into him? What have I done?’ The couple she invites to her afternoon teas and dinners is neither princely nor baronial, and she feels duty bound to enlighten her *other* guests about their presence. ‘I invite them because they’re my neighbours,’ she explains.

What aspect of her conduct infuriates her friends and tenants? The off-marks I mentioned earlier: deviations, discrepancies, gratuitous comments, questions, answers. Her tenants felled a few young trees in her garden, on her territory of this garden. Instead of saying, ‘You had no right to touch anything on my territory,’ she asked them, ‘Why did you do it?’ People know how to deal with *right* questions, with their logic. And the why and the wherefore of this affair are not important, given that you cannot go back and enjoy these trees’ unobtrusive presence, their fruit and pacifying murmur. You just stick a needle into the culprit’s conscience – for nothing, as usual. That is why she has all sorts of aches and pains in her shoulders, shoulder blades and arms.

Another tenant avenged himself in a childish way. Freud did his best to persuade us that in our childhood we adored and even worshipped our poo. I do not recall any worship associated with my excrement: I liked neither its look nor its smell. Anyway, according to Freud, we prefer our poo to anyone else’s faeces and urine, even if they belong to our best friends and loyal mistresses. The tenant I singled out from a myriad of culprits confused his room and the countess’s living room with what they vulgarly call ‘toilet’ so that her guests (he never welcomed anybody) would say, upon entering her house, ‘Ugh, it looks like poo!’ ‘Ugh, it smells like poo too!’ ‘Her dogs no doubt.’ Her tenants, her tenants. (Her dogs poo too, now and then.)

If you cast a look at her battered car, you will realise immediately she has undergone God’s punishment for 10 years at least. ‘He is teaching us to imitate his gentleness and procrastination, and to turn to punishment in an orderly and concordant fashion, with time assisting our decisions rather than involving us in the slightest regret.’ I might have written this essay 30 years ago. Had I done the job, the essay would have been as violent as Nietzsche’s and Carlyle’s works. This is a mild, watered-down version of that distant essay. I am determined to show it to the heroine. Another act of vengeance? Hardly. I am sure she will not read it from beginning to end. Besides, she has only a smattering of English and dictionaries are not likely to assist her in her task, for she will never take the trouble to open them. Pity, pity.

Yesterday I quoted Nietzsche on the phone, in the original: ‘*Das ist ja die Art der menschlichen Dankbarkeit: sie m i s s v e r s t e h t ihre Wohlthäter.*’ (After all, that is the way of human gratitude: it

misunderstands its benefactor.) ‘I don’t give a damn about Nietzsche,’ she said. Pity, pity. She might learn something from this essay. She might repent. She is ready to repent, she told me, but during this ritual you have to *remember* your foul deeds. Thanks to this essay, she might be reminded of them exhaustively, with all their details and nuances.

Am I being sadistic? Do *I* have to repent? Like anyone else, I must confess my sins, but I shall never do it outside the country of my birth. For some time now I have been consulting books on Russian monasteries. I could confess my sins in one of them. I could die in one of them.

Should I show her this essay?

Postscript

I did show her this essay and she read it without opening a dictionary. No wonder she misunderstood my intentions and paid no attention to the style I am rather proud of. She did not recognise some of her misdeeds, and for once I do not blame her untrustworthy memory exclusively: her scant knowledge of English prevents her from paying homage to my style and her own conscience that is duty bound to open the gates of Purgatory where we might meet in a few years’ time.

She called me to say she would never see me again: for years and years I had indulged in dragging her existence through the mire. ‘What have I done? I’ve done nothing of the sort.’ Yet she reminded me of something she *had* done, of another misdemeanour of hers on which I had not dwelt, anxious to spare her another proof of her memory’s disloyalty. Contrary to my supposition, she did recall the incident I am about to enlarge upon: better late than never. This ought to have taken place 20 years ago, as usual. One day two men brought a grandfather clock to my Versailles apartment. On the day of my departure from France, I asked three men to put this valuable antique into the removal van. Two years later I met my future wife and the countess sent me a letter which informed me that the clock had belonged ‘to my mother and, understandably enough, I have no wish to infringe on my forebears’ heritage.’ Two days later, the clock disappeared from my Belgian house. (‘How? Did she send someone to steal it back?’ asks the common reader.) She reminded me of this disappearance, and I am making use of it to emphasise the discrepancy between the countess’s genes and conduct: you can claim back the overpaid tax, but leave your gifts where they are. ‘Thank you very much for the loan of your mother’s grandfather clock,’ I said to her. ‘I didn’t want your wife to inherit it,’ she answered.

For all that, I think my friend’s future (her life in the Hereafter) will not be as horrific as one might presume upon perusing my account of her deviations from what I might define as the ‘norm’. Her failures and traumas are a sign of salvation, whatever Calvinists are willing to say on the subject. To them, such a sign is eternally linked to triumphs in worldly life. And what about the eye of the needle?

Three days ago the countess brought to my place (to my garden, rather) a plant I water every day. In front of my favourite window.

SHIP OF THE MOON

I do not like photographs that offer one a false eternity, a short-lived promise, an abortive attempt to keep an instant within one's reach as if anyone could reach this instant. You look at the dead who continue to smile, and yet no one smiles in the grave, even if they say with a smile, 'She is already in Paradise – look at her radiant, happy face.' I do not say one cannot be happy in the Hereafter, but if you were audacious enough to violate a tomb, you would find a corpse or a skeleton radiating neither happiness nor even the joy one may experience upon receiving a chocolate bar.

In addition to its hypocrisy and vain promises, a photograph is liable to distort the images preserved and enshrined in your mind. They move around your brain, allowing you to enjoy a variety of angles from which you contemplate the past and your personal eternity. I am doubtful whether this variety of eternity is able to keep its promises, but at least it makes no promises unless you submit it to metaphysical harassment as a result of which you might lose not only your memories but also your mind.

What is the difference between images and words? If you visit a museum, you do not content yourself with *standing* in front of statues: you *walk* around them. You never walk around words. It is their duty to move around your mind, turning this way and that as if taking part in a fashion show. You know you can count on them even at the end of your life, while musing about the Hereafter on your deathbed. Your members are no longer in service, but you are not entirely paralysed: words and their meanings are swarming in your head, and whatever you think about is literally covered with swarms of words. They are a faithful representation of *perpetuum mobile*, and yet nothing stirs, being as dignified as eternity itself.

When I read Japanese poetry – I have a book devoted to Japanese death poems – I have the feeling I am on my deathbed; and yet, hopefully, the bed I am lying on today is not my deathbed, the threshold from which I am supposed to look at the Hereafter. I do look at it, however – through the death poems and even through Japanese pillow books, through their idleness and quietness. Isn't the following poem idle and peaceful?

Cargoless,
bound heavenward,
ship of the moon.

The ship is cargoless, and I wonder if I am on it or not, considering that my soul is weightless, I suppose – at least in our world where humans distinguish souls from their bodies and other objects of interest. The soul is said to partake of immortality, of eternity, and the body lets you down whenever it acquires an additional wrinkle or loses some of its capacities: no more New York marathons. But the

soul flies all over the solar system in the moon's ship or in the sun's liner and nothing can stop her from exploring space, not even the lack of fuel.

Cargoless, painless, sleepless, nevertheless. Down here you are always confronted with 'nevertheless' which contains hopes and disasters, protests and eternal resignation. Up there you float round and round as if alluding to eternal recurrence which might take place if you return and walk again on the earth. Isn't any photograph a keepsake offered to you by eternal recurrence? And what about the following text I chanced upon in *Essays in Idleness* by Yoshida Kenkō? 'A criminal being flogged with rods is placed on a torture rack and tied to it. Today no one knows the shape of the rack nor the manner of attaching the criminal.'

Suppose someone comes and says, 'I know the shape of the rack, and I can tie the criminal to it.' Would that mean eternal recurrence is back? Is it a proof of its existence and unwavering loyalty? Suppose someone says, 'Well and good. But do you know how to flog the criminal?'

'Yes, I do.'

'Will you flog him?'

'I can't.'

'Why can't you flog him?'

'Because it's no longer done. We're far more humane than our ancestors.'

What would Nietzsche have said, had eternal recurrence been compromised on account of this all-too-human rebuff? At least the return of this book I read in my adolescence signals the advent of my second childhood, for I experience the same feelings as if I had not lived in between, as if the earth had stopped in expectation of my rebirth as a reader of Japanese literature. Of course I have been in touch with it throughout my life, but the tenderness I feel within my bosom departed a long time ago so that I thought I would never recover it again. The situation was all the more hopeless since I have failed to feel anything like that towards human beings whose indelicacy is evident and obstinate.

I found the delicacy I was yearning for in the company of a few old women with whom I was prone to fall in love. I *might* have fallen in love with them, but they would die, one after another, and I was left amidst individuals who had no idea how to behave appropriately and what to do with their lives outside their offices, banks and favourite beaches. Time cannot be regained unless you talk to phantoms and read about old customs. 'Kenkō was impressed,' wrote Donald Keene, 'by the Abbess Genki who remembered from childhood that the "bell-shaped windows in the Kan'in Palace were rounder and without frames." What did it matter, we may wonder, if the windows in the new palace were slightly different in shape? But for Kenkō a window-shape at variance with the old traditions reflected the degeneracy of the age; it was certainly not a sign of progress. Kenkō was dismayed that "nobody is left who knows the proper manner of hanging a quiver before the house of a man in disgrace with His Majesty —"'

Sometimes I wonder if anyone is left in the world: everything and everybody is at variance with art, culture, ideals and Platonic ideas. And those people do not even know the proper manner of

hanging themselves, those Judases who continue to betray humankind. Moreover, many of them never try to hang themselves, declaring that the disappearance of the death instinct is a sign of progress – no more back-to-stones élan. Our ancestors *were* like stones: they were their own monuments, Pushkin, Horace. And their offspring do not even realise they live through the degeneracy, through its stages, going down and down and down. They have no idea in which circle of Hell they would find themselves, if they were in search of themselves. They are in search of things and others on whom their things, possessions and beings depend.

In all things I yearn for the past. Modern fashions seem to keep on growing more and more debased. I find that even among the splendid pieces of furniture built by our master cabinetmakers, those in the old forms are the most pleasing. And as for writing letters, surviving scraps from the past reveal how superb the phrasing used to be. The ordinary spoken language has also steadily coarsened. People used to say 'raise the carriage shafts' or 'trim the lamp wick', but people today say 'raise it' or 'trim it'.

The future is not like the past, and the past itself is no longer like the past: even if people recall it vaguely, they say they are superior in every way as if they knew any ways, any paths with the exception of those that lead up the garden path. They pay no attention to the garden through which they walk because their aims are not rooted in gardens, in cascades, in fountains. And if, once in a while, someone does talk about fountains, what she means encompasses only fountains of youth, nothing else. And I am in my second adolescence, prepared to write a few haikus as if someone, a colleague of mine, could read it, admire it and drink a few cups of tea as homage to it.

How delightful it would be to converse intimately with someone of the same mind, sharing with him the pleasures of uninhibited conversation on the amusing and foolish things of this world, but such friends are hard to find. If you must take care that your opinions do not differ in the least from those of the person to whom you are talking, you might just as well be alone.

The prince C. to whom I have talked many times, for many years, enlarges upon the same ideas, the same bits, and they grow so large and bulky I can no longer breathe as if he were stuffing them into my throat. During our talks I keep turning down the sound of his voice and so the prince ends up mouthing whatever he says. And I badmouth everybody, everything, and he dislikes this habit of mine most intensely, most ostentatiously. So we no longer see each other. He thinks our science progresses by leaps and bounds; so does piano playing. 'Even the Koreans play the piano today,' he says looking triumphantly and approvingly at the world. 'And the number of young pianists everywhere? Everybody seems to play the piano today.'

'It is quality that counts,' I said.

‘What about it? Don’t you like them? I know, you’re interested only in geniuses.’

‘No time for others.’

‘Stop badmouthing these others all the time. Are you acquainted with the string theory?’

‘I know it’s been hanging on inconclusively for 50 years now.’

‘What? Inconclusively? They added another dimension to it last month.’

‘Scientists even compare this stand-off with Einstein’s failure —’

‘Einstein never failed. And boson?’

‘It was discovered and described in the Sixties, 50 years ago.’

‘But they got it, got it!’

And then he switches to Putin and the Crimea. The Russians should not have invaded it because in 1945 Stalin said that the map of the world was to remain intact. ‘No tampering with the map,’ he pointed out. ‘And Kosovo?’ I asked. ‘What about it? What’s wrong with it?’ he asked. And so on and so forth, and so forth and so on. And so, so, so, so. Boson, bosom, boson, bosom, buzzing. These people may be likened to mosquitoes. They *are* likened to mosquitoes. They *are* mosquitoes. They *are*, I’m sorry to say.

A house which multitudes of workmen have polished with every care, where strange and rare Chinese and Japanese furnishings are displayed, and even the grasses and trees of the garden have been trained unnaturally, is ugly to look at and most depressing. How could anyone live for long in such a place? The most casual glance will suggest how likely such a house is to turn in a moment to smoke.

My neighbours live in such a house which, for all my prayers, does not turn to smoke. (I have been waiting for this metamorphosis since my arrival in Belgium six years ago.) A second-rate designer left his imprint on the house where you will find no antiques, no valuable pictures. Trash, trash, trash, not even words, words, words. And their gardener spends his time training the grasses and trees unnaturally. Yet he is a natural idiot, moron and hooligan. His machines make a lot of noise, but he cannot live without noise pollution – without any pollution, frankly speaking. His whole life is polluted, judging from the language he uses whenever I can hear him; and it is not four-letter words he utters – I would not mind that. And if the word he utters is more or less right, he does it so abominably (his voice, his pronunciation) that, if given a choice between his monologues and rush-hour traffic, I would choose the latter, not the former.

‘A man’s character, as a rule, may be known from the place where he lives.’ A multitude of plastic surgeons and hairdressers polished my neighbours’ faces and bodies, but the most casual glance suggests they look unnatural, sound unnatural. What is more, God continues to train them unnaturally; they grow awry somehow as if determined to stick out like a sore thumb. Two persons, one sore thumb – that is what they look like whenever I see them together. Luckily for my eyes and

brain, such a meeting has not occurred for two years at least. And I hope that these two years will live happily ever after – until my death.

Yesterday I squeezed through another birthday, and I am delighted not to have spoken of it over the phone: only two persons called me, but I was out, walking around our district. Listening to voices – not to those of spirits – gets on my nerves rather quickly. But spirits communicate with us mostly through sounds divorced from voices and lungs: they tap their fingers on our desk, and I no longer say, ‘Last night the branches tapped against the window.’ The spirits did it – I am quite aware of that.

You might suppose that a man who listens in general agreement to what the other person is saying, but differs on minor points – who may contest an opinion, saying, ‘How can I possibly agree?’ or argue, ‘It’s precisely because of this that that is the case’ – would be a great comfort when you were bored, but as a matter of fact, if ever anything is said which might require a word of apology – of course, even when conversing with people who are not of the same mind, differences over the usual insignificant gossip do not matter – one realises sadly what a great distance separates this man from the true friends of one’s heart.

And this distance grows, instead of following the body’s chief tendency – shrinking, losing its capacities, will and energy, going down. The distance, on the other hand, goes from strength to strength, from space to space, and I have no idea when and where it will come to a standstill, allowing me to meet my former friends without being tempted or even induced to walk out in disgust, after a few preliminary comments. The people I have known all my life come into the open, saying what I would never dare say in their presence, voicing their innermost thoughts directed against my achievements, my expectations. And I begin to wonder whether they have always talked to me like that. Is it my decrepit mind I should blame for my intolerance? I make a vow, imitating King Lear: ‘Never, never, never, never, never,’ but either the feeling of solitude to which I succumb now and then, for all my kinship with silence and withdrawal, or my indefatigable nostalgia gets the upper hand in this struggle for dignity and peace.

Yet I am not sure I need smooth talking or full agreement: what I think and do have nothing in common with truth, be it absolute, partial or unsubstantial. I just go my way as Falstaff does in Verdi’s opera and perhaps in Shakespeare’s masterpieces. Or I lie my way, in my bed, and whether the weather agrees with me or not has no significance. What I need is good advice, a piece of information related to my health, pains, death and the Hereafter. For instance, the warning issued by Yoshida Kenkō: ‘You should never put the new antlers of a deer to your nose and smell them. They have little insects that crawl into the nose and devour the brain.’

One is tempted to ask where all these people find the new antlers of deer, and once again the world lapses into silence and we are left with yet another mystery in our brain, provided this brain of ours has not been devoured by our fellow creatures, not by the little insects coming to the fore in the

course of Kenkō's idle hours. He was at pains to fill his solitude with gossip and historic monuments on which he was so keen that he could not desist from writing about their eternity every other day. So he made use of insects to whose busy bodies we eagerly resort whenever in need of distraction or minor destruction. After all, if someone's brain has been devoured – no leftovers, no more juicy bits – one might always say there was nothing to devour in the first place, and the insects you touch upon in the hope of distracting your brain from a lot of existential worries came home empty-legged and empty-winged. 'Looking at the moon is always diverting, no matter what the circumstances. A certain man once said, "Surely nothing is so delightful as the moon," but another man rejoined, "The dew moves me even more."' Why not little insects?

What am *I* moved by, deeply or superficially? My blanket often moves me, for the warmth of my body and of my heart depends on its fidelity that I cannot always feel, for my legs continue to shift it during my wanderings through the mazes of my nightmares. I wonder why every other night I find myself in a city that resembles St Petersburg, Paris and Moscow to the point of making me rush to a railway station I seem to recall, in spite of my mind continuously going blank. But if my blanket helps me keep my natural warmth, I shall keep at bay all these stations, airports and columns that remind me of all the palaces I have ever seen either in reality or in books. So, upon awakening, I am often moved to tears as I look at my blanket and realise to what extent my dreams depend on its cooperation.

*My blanket. Are you the source
of my dreams, my life, my
afterlife. Are you the earth?*

*Adrift between the earth and sky
I call to the east and change it to west.
I flourish my staff and return once again
To my source.*

Shun'oku Soen

It is pleasant to think one returns to the source, and I say to myself, 'Stop shilly-shallying and make a decision now!' What kind of decision? And my source is also my pillow – at least it is my pillow without which my life makes no sense. My pillow book is the source of my energy, of my movement towards the moon where a ship awaits me from time immemorial. But how to get to the moon without this ship? Ship of the moon, not ship of the earth. Am I supposed to walk as far as their ship? My blanket is not a flying carpet, is it?

*I once asked a man rated as a champion backgammon player the secret of his success. He said,
'You should never play to win, but so as not to lose. Decide which moves will lead to a quick*

defeat, and avoid them, choosing instead moves which seem likely to result in a slower defeat, if only by one throw of the dice.'

This was the teaching of an expert in his art; the same holds true also of how a man should control his conduct or a ruler govern the state.

That explains my attachment to my pillow book, to the writing process: it does not lead to a quick defeat. The defeat I am preparing for myself is on the slow side, and this side suits me much better than any other sides, however magnificent. Once upon a time, I was shown as many as 1001 sides and I said to myself, 'I should write about my pillow, my bed, its canopy and my thoughts that also have their pillows, their beds and their canopies. They probably even have their own thoughts so that I have no idea which thoughts I am exploring, digging into now. Anyway I am dragging my feet, my hands, for I am not ready yet for any grave of mine. How many graves do I have within my reach and out of it? Perhaps the same number: 1001. Graves are the other sides of the same coins. It is a pity I write too fast and my thoughts are born as soon as other thoughts die. And they replenish my brain, not the earth. Pity, pity.'

A man who fails even for a short time to keep in mind the preciousness of time is no different from a corpse. If you wish to know why each instant must be guarded so jealously, it is so that a man inwardly will have no confusing thoughts and outwardly no concern with worldly matters; that if he wishes to rest at that point, he may rest, but if he wishes to follow the Way, he may follow it.

How long can I hold my breath? It is not yet another yoga exercise. It is a struggle for life. Why should I struggle for it, for life, for Darwin, for Spinoza? Why not struggle for Purgatory where I might land up after my life and afterlife? I haven't the foggiest idea. Some of my ideas are foggy, others are as clear as the clear desert sky. But in their midst I cannot find any idea alluding to the problem under discussion as if they were all unconcerned about the future. As I look at them, study them, I find some old ideas, pictures, reflections and once again the doctrine of eternal recurrence to which I am chained forever sees the light of day, my light, my brain, my dark side of the moon.

I am a king, a god. I am everything. My hands and mind are building the highest world, the highest tower. I do not fall into the pit. I fly above the pit. I am the pit. I can fall only into myself. And I am not pursued by anybody, save by myself. I will catch up with myself. How fast I have run. Now I am tired. I will lie down on the star-bed. I will embrace myself, kiss myself. I will close my eyes with my own hand.

No idea when I wrote it. Anyway I can sign this text today because I feel exactly as I felt on the day when I wrote it; even if I wrote it in the Soviet Union, at the age of 15, at the Moscow Conservatoire. I might have written it in Russian, and then someone – my guardian angel, for instance – translated it into English for the benefit of the ill-disposed (towards my works) individuals. And also for the sake of my friends: I need not their fingers to keep my eyes shut within and even outside of my eternity. I am the pit, I am the Tower of Babel that was built a long time ago. It has been finished and open to tourists for centuries, for millennia. According to Rudolf Steiner, I was born at the bottom of the Atlantic Ocean. And then I went East, East, East, crossing fogs and bogs. ‘Bogs’ mean ‘deities’ in Russian. At last I have caught up with myself, with my Russia, my *Bog*, my monastery.

A SORT OF POEM

Is love just a common cold?

You sneeze and produce your handkerchief.

‘I think you’re allergic to the fur,’ says the hostess,

Removing her cat from the room.

‘It’s nothing. Just love, you know.

I’ll get over it in no time.’

And the cat resumes its place on the sofa.

I removed all my loves from my life. What is left amounts to self-love, self-dove. All my problems are solved peacefully, Gandhifully. No violence, not even towards the blanket. Why is my pillow so crumpled? Is it really the book where my thoughts and dreams are faithfully inscribed? And the cat resumes its place on my bed or near it. And he runs across the living room where I am always drinking my tea. Everything is my cup of tea nowadays, given that very few people call me on the phone. (There are no other calls and callers, *Gott sei dank*.) And when someone does call me, I do not answer the phone. Nor do I answer any question. They do not ask them any more.

Nihilism is a thing of the past unless we enrich such a negative disposition (this macabre symphony) through partial and virtual destroyers – those, for instance, who would like to obliterate the past for the sake of the present and the future. Of course Bazarov partly belongs to this category, but he is no fan of the present which, in his opinion, has been contaminated by the past. Actually today’s nihilists do not strive to get rid of their ancestors; they just take no notice of them. Is this a refined form of nihilism?

It is not. Unconsciously they realise they cannot hold a candle to their ancestors, to the greatness of the past, and so hold no candles, for fear of being disappointed, downcast, demoralised. But they still

enjoy candlelit dinners – in their clubs and elsewhere. In the middle of such a gathering, one is liable to jump from his or her seat and shout, ‘Nonsense, nonsense, rubbish. All this is rot and not, not, not. It is not, can’t you see? We are *not*.’ Such a person is capable of blowing out the candles and breaking crockery, china and what *not*. But then the individual resumes his or her place at the table. (My cats always jump onto tables.) As if nothing had ever happened.

The old adage has it, ‘When the dragon has soared to the summit he knows the chagrin of descent.’ The moon waxes only to wane; things reach their height only presently to decline. In all things, the principle holds true that decline threatens when further expansion is impossible.

Yoshida Kenkō, *Essays in Idleness*

Does my bed-rooted existence mean I am a dragon whose downfall is embedded in his soaring up, in his summit, top and stardust? At least I am a dragon and a cat, not a human being. I must have reached my limit and, as the I Ching points out, I must decline and fall like the Roman Empire; or the Russian Empire. The cliffs on which the houses are built are starting to crumble. Is it a photograph? One of the houses is in danger of being tipped over by an unreliable, unfaithful cliff: you could see that in a photograph. Many haikus look and sound like photographs: when reading a death-focused haiku, you might get the feeling you will remain forever on the threshold of tombs.

Is any further expansion out of my reach? In what direction could I expand? What for? I do expand towards my bathroom and even stay for a while in the dining room where I avail myself of petit-fours, of grand-fours. And if my moonship comes neither today nor next year, I shall expand as far as the stars and their dust, their hospitality. Could my expansion touch the piano, its keys and melodies? Haven’t I done my duty? Two years ago I recorded six CDs in six days, in August and June.

I deprive my performances of theatrics, of all exterior elements and even of movements associated with it independently of music theatre: neither pianists nor violinists can play their instruments without moving their fingers, arms, and so on. The music of forgetting I hear inside me concerns the domain of theatre as well; besides, I no longer need to move my fingers and arms to play a piece resounding at the core of my being.

*Today is the day
for one last view
of Mount Fuji.*

For the *first* view. Yet another photograph.

Let them remain ignorant of you and indeed of Horace and Pushkin who used to talk about the monuments they had erected for themselves.

My life follows no pattern; and yet patterns are not injurious, provided you do not attempt to impose them on other people who may not be on the same wavelength with your disposition and humour.

In Dickens' numerous works unhappy children and their tears stand out in sharp relief against grown-ups, their cruelty or commiseration. Children shed tears whenever grown-ups either maltreat them or shield their bodies and souls from a misfortune. The point is their tears of gratitude are also moving.

Our writers are ghost-writers—'nègres' (niggers), in French; and yet their works have not been ghost-written. They are faint second images offering entertainment akin to what one may experience at a funfair, on board a ghost train.

The first image. My photograph.

ERRAND OF MERCY

(To Rudolf Steiner)

*Another yet? – A seventh? – I'll see no more: –
And yet the eighth appears, who bears a glass,
Which shows me many more; and some I see,
That two-fold balls and treble sceptres carry.
Shakespeare, Macbeth*

We are not alone and I repeat this saying (and whatever I say) as often as I can because you need to engrave your words not only on rings and other things, but on life itself; and on the universe of course. I am not alone and I realise the truth of this saying as I look at Saturn for a change or for the permanence I need for my eternity or immortality. I have uttered these words so many times they seem to come to the fore throughout my body as if I had been tattooed with them for many years; for another eternity perhaps. And Saturn looks at me to intimate he is my brother and probably my sister as well: I need a huge family around me, at my dinner table where I set out a lot of dishes in the hope of attracting my relatives, ancestors and offspring to it. They all spring from nowhere and we have dinner together, singing their and our songs that make the air vibrate in unison with our hearts. My doctor says, 'Your heart vibrates too much. You may die at any moment.' 'I am immortal,' I answer, for I know answers to all questions, all doubts – to time, to its unfaithfulness: it lets you down all the time. Only eternity is trustworthy and you can confide in it as you walk together through the streets and avenues of your New Jerusalem.

I should not worry about my family or rather my lack of a family which I might have suffered from several years ago: at the time I did not know that plants and herbs belonged to the same club, alias my family. If you take (as I do) a tomato plant and analyse it from every point of view, sooner or later you will realise that you are this plant – not only in a manner of speaking. Of course you had better be more specific about it, saying for instance that you took up where this plant left off, for it is not as mature and intelligent as you are. Its intelligence is restricted to a few main vital forces thanks to which it has grown in your kitchen garden and is ready to eat – a perfect match for the bottle of wine you put on your dinner table two hours ago: it is ready to drink. You might think its intelligence originated in the hands that inserted it into the soil where it spent some time before finding itself on your dinner table, in the immediate vicinity of your knife and fork. In other words, its roots are your hands and your own intelligence that guided it through the mazes of time and space – right into the hole you had dug for it and its colleagues in your kitchen garden. Then you pulled it out (your intelligence and energy did) and took it to your kitchen where you cut the tomato into pieces in expectation of the salad you are about to enjoy. The same goes for a cucumber that you nursed meticulously as if it were your own child; and it *is* your child. So your dinner contradicts Freud's doctrine, according to which it is the child that devours his father, not the other way round. Sure

enough, you can get round the Oedipus complex by eating a salad (with a lot of olive oil) every night, around 8.30 p.m.

These plants are intelligent enough to offer only token resistance to the efforts you need to pull them out and cut them into pieces: you might wound your fingers in the process. If a police officer rings your doorbell and says, 'Let's go to the nearest police station,' you will pick up your grandfather's walking stick and deal him a blow – without further ado. Feeling muzzy from the blow on his head, he will get up very slowly and hobble out of your flat or house, muttering to himself, 'I'll never ring this bell again, whatever happens, whoever gives me orders.' Judging from this comparison, your intelligence is far superior to that of the vegetables grown in your kitchen garden; and to other vegetables, to tell the truth. It is true they do their best to damage your fingers or even your hand in its entirety as they struggle for life under your knives and nails. Nevertheless, for all their naughtiness, you continue to arrange them in your salad bowl which makes your mouth water, whenever you happen to cast your glance in its direction.

Of course your garden's maturity and wisdom, its capacity to persevere in its being *arenot* limited to carrots that cannot successfully vie with your instinct of self-preservation. Even if your fingers are embellished with scars, you will go on and stop only at the end of your ceremony that precedes your dinners, lunches and even your breakfasts: you love vegetables and believe in their healthy vitamins. Nature seems to take care of your life expectancy, on condition that you only use vegetable fats in cooking. But you should pay attention to the way you treat your trees which are far more dangerous than carrots and Brussels sprouts.

Suppose you attempt to climb one of them, convinced that its top will offer you a more breathtaking landscape than the one you have been fed up with for several years. However, instead of rejoicing in your good fortune – you have eventually reached the treetop – you may perform a spectacular *salto mortale* and content yourself with an early grave which is waiting for you under every tree you dare to climb. One might think, if only for a moment, that the tree on whose loyalty you innocently counted as I thought about the fabulous landscape and your aesthetic experience let you down on purpose, being a real man-hater, busybody-hater or merely body-hater. Try and picture to yourself its state, its apparent powerlessness during your vicious, egomaniacal climb. Your body's intimacy might displease it no end, even if a number of beautiful young women do not mind your caresses and sexual intrusions. Besides, in the course of the same disrespectful climb you are sure to break a few twigs and branches, when in search of more or less reliable footholds. And while you are at it (you go on picturing to yourself the tree's unconscious and state of mind), try and imagine what *you* are likely to feel, if someone resolves to turn your body into a ladder. Someone's foot uses your hand to a good account, and even your armpits can no longer avail themselves of freedom and solitude. And then the individual you visualise for argument's sake plants his feet on your head and you become a pedestal, doomed to support and to some extent exhibit a nonentity whose hand you would never shake in your everyday, routine-suffocated life.

There is no denying we have a lot in common with plants, trees and animals whose sentiments we often share without being able to capture and understand their thoughts. But let us stay for a while with plants and trees because we have not probed their innermost nature; even their superficial, shallow nature remains hidden from our investigation and intuition. The tree I touched upon (I did not touch it, mind you) may dislike my body and its interference in the life explored by the trunk and branches of the tree I am talking about. What I am puzzled by is its personality, its resistance to touchy-feely individuals who are often tempted to climb apple trees and shake them until they yield their fruit – their self, to some extent. How many people have been rejected by trees in the course of our history? How many corpses have we found under trees, under their desecrated branches? Why should I bury all these corpses? Do I have nothing else to do? As a matter of fact my works are a huge burial ground, and enduringly, everlastingly I bury whatever lies around me, above me, overhead, in the clouds. God is dead, but Nietzsche did not clarify this point so that we do not know exactly where the Almighty's dead body can be found and whether it can be found at all. Why should I climb birch trees and sunbeams if there are no gods in the clouds and in the vicinity of nebulae?

Suppose we climb an apple tree and not a single twig objects to our inexorable movement towards the top that our bodies aspire to reach in no time at all. Another question is likely to lead me astray at this point: which body of mine do I have in mind? There are several of them, and I am duty bound to venerate their particularities, putting them to use and protecting them to the best of my abilities. The body I am enlarging upon this morning has a lot to do with physics and the mineral kingdom, and no wonder I am tempted to drag in stones, for the sake of a few comparisons. Of course a stone cannot climb a tree and even if we went so far as to endow a stone with vital force and kinetic energy it would not climb a tree. (Even if we implored it to do so on bended knees.) On the other hand it joyfully rollsup and down the companionable garden path, and we revel in its performance throughout the afternoon, blessing our little boy's enthusiasm. But we should on no account discard the mineral nature of both our stones and our first, lowest body thanks to which we walk around instead of sleeping like logs or looking at the ceiling.

Well, let us go back to the tree I put in the very centre of my narrative, for I am eager to investigate its moods and features, its physical and psychic natures. Does it have any? No one can doubt its presence (I am still talking about the tree) unless we admit that the world is nothing but a gigantic illusion to which, in days of yore, we were chained by a malicious god, a demiurge. The Indians call it '*maya*', and I remember a joke I heard many times at the Bolshoi Theatre, during Maya Plisetskaya's performances. 'She is no illusion. No, no, she is no illusion. A lot of dancers and human beings are illusions, delusions, but she is no *maya*.'

For argument's sake, let us accept my tree's corporeal, material presence without which I would not be able to discuss its relationship with the outside world. Its trunk or branches can fling you down on the ground, like an overexcited horse, determined to prevent you from violating its solitude. But it can also welcome your body's interference in its private life: even trees feel forsaken now and then.

When keeping in touch with your tree, you might get the feeling it is in love with you or at least with your body. And yet it seems to understand your innermost thoughts so that, at some point, you begin talking to the tree as if it were a human being you have been acquainted with since your childhood. What is more, no friend of yours understands you so well as this tree, its branches and its murmuring which you listen to, saying to yourself that Wagner's *Waldweben* is nothing in comparison with your tree's music. In the long run you fall in love with your garden and out of love with the humans who surround you as soon as you venture outdoors as if you were offering them a dozen tins of caviar.

Be that as it may, we are not alone, and if we do not succeed in realising how close we are to plants and animals, we shall always run round like headless chickens. Not like *normal* chickens, mind you, mind you, mind you, mind you. Apparently this combination of words ('mind you') was coined by someone who thought she might thereby furnish her boyfriend with an omniscient, razor-sharp mind. And what about *you*? Why didn't she content herself with 'mind', adding to it 'you', 'you', 'you'? She probably believed her boyfriend lacked personality because he paid no attention to his genealogical tree which was indissolubly linked to trees, animals and even stones – to the whole universe, in other words. What is indeed our body without its ancestors: minerals, stones and suchlike? Even wines about which they often say 'You should appreciate their mineral aspect,' have pride of place on our genealogical trees.

Our body is the pedestal of our mind where a lot of sentiments and projects disport themselves, unless we are in the throes of a mid-life crisis and lie wailing on the ground, prostrate with grief. And this body ought to take its cue from stones, otherwise it is sure to lose its balance every two minutes. 'Be as solid as stones,' a model father says to his children, and they obey him as they practise their solidity in the middle of a living room. They meditate upon monuments, and their members look like all those arms we admire when sightseeing or going for an innocent walk. These arms show the right way to the social or economic paradise; or they betray the mood of a hero, of a president, of a mother. And our body receives a lot of energy from those minerals or whatever they are called in this day and age. And this transference of vital force reminds us of the universal brotherhood, of the network where we receive Saturn's assistance, the ebb and flow of its waves and vibes. On another level, in another dimension, we welcome a similar boost to our confidence from babes and wives.

If we take Saturn and stuff it into our pocket, we can study its properties, if only figuratively: but there are no pockets into which you could put Saturn on any other planet. That is why whatever we analyse in this domain, in the domain of the universe, may be done only figuratively and virtually, even if we have a dozen telescopes to hand. These telescopes allow us to see a lot of stardust and also a ring, here and there, and we wrongly conclude that this ring belongs to Saturn whose marriage to Venus is forthcoming and is already celebrated by Mercury and also Jupiter, Venus's honourable father. But we are not invited to the wedding ceremony and therefore our thoughts should switch to another channel

of the cosmic radio where other pieces of information float on the air and even in the space from which the air has withdrawn in protest against the ascension and power of ether.

What can we draw from Saturn and its ring? For all our efforts and the suffering that accompanies these efforts' ceaseless effusion and diffusion, on earth we cannot find our astral body. Our mineral body comes from stones and for a while we suffer from the stones that travel around our bladder. But then their negative energy shifts to the opposite pole and we grow as solid as the monuments we admire during our walks through capital cities. But our so-called astral body escapes us, for the simple reason that we need a great many *astres* (stars in French) to build an astral body inside our body. (Body-building, they call it.) Sometimes we are lured to Saturn, to its ring or rings that might become our astral body, on condition that we stick or glue a multitude of stars to them. We collect these stars, instead of lazily and leisurely gazing at them, and begin to stick them to a ring, to all of them. Unfortunately our procedure yields no positive results. 'Farmers are reporting a bumper harvest this year,' someone whispers in your ear. (Your guardian angel.) You shake your head, then you nod and start gluing the stars you have picked up to Saturn, its rings, its wedding rings, its wedding ceremonies. And when the bride eventually penetrates the hall where you stand and tamper with a tube glue and a dozen stars, the guests burst into thunderous applause: from head to foot her (the bride's) dress is adorned with stars. 'O, adorable one,' exclaims the groom as he plants a kiss on the bride's rosy cheek. 'She is my astral body,' he explains, turning his head and opening his mouth. 'And my ether body is right here,' he adds, showing off his muscles.

'Why is Saturn conspicuous by his absence?'

'What about the bride?' asks the groom.

'We'd like to see this planet in the flesh, as large as life.'

'Life is as large as my future wife,' says the groom. 'And Saturn's rings are also here,' he adds putting a wedding ring on his bride's finger. And then he raises his own finger on which a ring was put a few minutes before.

Last night I saw a documentary on our wish to communicate with other planets and their inhabitants. Obstinate we endeavour to detect traces of water on the surfaces revealed by our telescopes' screens and by other apparatuses. 'I wish some ET could stick up two fingers at me,' said a famous astronomer.

'I would be satisfied with one finger only,' said his colleague.

'What about a four-letter word? Would a one-letter one satisfy you?'

They think one day they will send a huge spaceship to the nearest exoplanet to find out if an extraterrestrial creature awaits them with open arms. If they are lucky enough to come across such a creature, they will be in seventh heaven unless it (this androgyne) does not welcome them in accordance with their dearest wishes. Sure enough, its arms, legs and eyes are closed and its mouth emits obnoxious sounds and smells. 'How unfair!' they think and say to each other. 'We've spent five light years inside this dungeon, and now we realise there are many dark years in store for us.' They are

right of course: it is a prison that opens its arm as the creature continues to push them towards their future cells. It is better to focus our attention on astral bodies which have inherited neither Stalin's Gulag nor Hitler's racial theories. So we call them 'astral': as soon as we utter the words 'the body' (the lowest body) we see and hear a torture chamber to which a dozen individuals have just been conveyed. They are already naked and the instruments to which we traditionally pay attention as we watch documentaries on the Inquisition and the Holy Office are displayed on screens and blackboards.

We do our best to vindicate ourselves, declaring that the crimes imputed to us were committed in days of yore, on another continent, on an exoplanet. 'What's an exoplanet?' asks the Great Inquisitor.

'It's a planet located beyond the solar system.'

'Why are you talking about it?'

'Because our body that you're about to torture is not astral, contrary to what you might think.'

'How do you mean?'

'If you do torture us, we're bound to feel a lot of pain. Aren't you Christians?'

'Are you Pelagius?' asks the Great Inquisitor.

Now you realise why it is so important to have an astral body; even an ethereal one can protect you from the tortures they used to inflict on your ancestors and fellow citizens. They ring your bell and they put handcuffs on your wrists, failing to take into consideration the ethereal (or astral) character of your body. The handcuffs literally slip through your fingers and you begin to kick them as if to keep your foot in: you used to be an outstanding footballer. You score with a cracking shot into the back of the goal or rather into the farthest policeman's crotch and once again the audience bursts into applause.

We cannot be objective because our body is confined to one group of society and the space it avails itself of does not encompass the universe. If we talk to an audience, however large and representative, the stars do not hear us, even if we install a lot of loudspeakers on our spaceships and satellites. But that does not really matter, considering that the stars know much more than we do, and we can hardly teach them anything. Of course our quarrels, argument and projects lie beyond their ken, but, roughly speaking, they do not care, and they are absolutely right, which confirms our basic hypothesis: the cosmos (or God) is always right, whereas humans and their brains are wrong, even when they seem to be right.

Many people agree with the truth that affirms without beating about the bush: 'We're not up to cosmic standards.' Of course there are humans who beat about the bush all the time, for it is their favourite pastime, their vocation. One might even say, when studying their behaviour and habits: 'They're duty bound to beat about the bush.' All our attempts to question them on the subject of their stupidity are met by prevarication, and 'nothing doing' is the only verdict we can come up with at the end of our discussions. But even those people care about what they eat and how they eat both vegetables and fruit: they seem to have given up both meat and fish a long time ago. All right, they

live and work on a higher stage of human maturity, and so they deserve our smile, although this smile of ours should not exceed the recommended dose that I define as politeness. Unfortunately I am not allowed to give everybody a piece of my mind, otherwise I might land up in prison, which would not coincide with my intentions, plans and hopes. Let us say it is not advisable (giving a piece of one's mind) and the whip recommended by Nietzsche and his followers cannot be used on a regular basis. Actually its assistance should be resorted to not only in the kingdom of women, but also in that of young and decrepit men whose foolishness knows no bounds.

So they eat vegetables and believe their immortality is ensured by the mere presence of organic cucumbers on their dinner tables. However, one question should be asked and answered: 'What kind of link did your tomatoes establish with the cosmos on the day of their birth?' Of course they might say their cucumbers drew a lot of juices from the soil, from its mineral substance and juicy texture. But what about the planets turning overhead and under our feet? Do they (those unfortunate people) see the network, the beautiful spider's web in the midst of which we plant both vegetables and trees? Do they pay any attention to Saturn? Of course they say to each other: 'These plants need a sunny spot with good drainage,' as if the cosmos could be dealt with so superficially, offhandedly and ludicrously. And they talk about the rain as follows: 'Do you think those are rain clouds on the horizon?' Do they realise to what extent rainy days are linked to the moon, to its rays and the waves (and ebbs and tides) it sets in motion? In a way, our vegetables also move in unison with the sea and whatever can be found on its surface and under it.

The moon sends its liquid to a number of molecules at which we look as we admire the blueness of our skies. And we say to ourselves, 'Everything will come to us out of this blue.' And we smile to ourselves, laugh to ourselves and others, the members of our family, the members of humanity. And suddenly the liquid of the moon begins to saturate the colour we admire so much, and a number of clouds form on the horizon and elsewhere. A solution begins to form in these clouds' minds and soon we enjoy a few drops of rain that annoy us somehow: we are still planning to spend a sunny afternoon in our gardens and even on the beaches where our bodies can acquire another tint, the highest beauty. But the rain has another duty in its mind: it intends to water the vegetables we have been growing in our gardens for many years. The point is the rain is helpless and unable to carry out its ritual unless we realise what is going on before our eyes. We should *communicate* with the rain and the moon, otherwise they will never work for us, for humanity, for the technological and psychological progress about which we boast in newspapers and newsreels.

How could we get in touch with the rain and the moon? And the sun, while we are at it? It is not enough to strip off and offer our bodies (all of them, down to the astral body) to the drops we can hear if we spend the same afternoon at home, listening to our roof's symphonies. We should see what happens inside every drop, every ray of moonlight. These rays contain a certain amount of light, but there is much more light in them (there is more to them than meets the eye), and we are unable to avail ourselves of this additional light unless we actually see it. This light comes to the fore and takes

centre-stage only if we manage to grow what the Indians call ‘the third eye’. This particular eye comes into manifestation as the energies of the soul, flowing through the Sahasrara or crown chakra and pineal, interacting with the energies of the personality working through the Ajna chakra and the pituitary gland. Frankly speaking, I am in the dark and cannot figure out what our sacred books are talking about, but I know I need the third eye, if I wish to die at the ripe old age of 260.

The point is everything is dark, and we can illuminate this darkness only through the third or eleventh eye (in Burma this eye is called ‘the fifteenth eye’) because this eye enables us to see through fruit and vegetables, let alone through our fellow creatures’ minds. You pull out a carrot and what you actually see has nothing to do with the light you are accustomed to – the light you take advantage of whenever you switch your lights on. You have two eyes and they see only objects and faces whose wrinkles continuously talk to you about decrepitude, death and tombs. But if your acquaintance with the outside world develops into a lasting friendship, you will be able to see a ray of moonlight (not moonshine) inside both carrots and cucumbers. This light is your health, your life expectancy, your immortality. What is more, even if you are determined to die at the unripe age of 83 – you are fed up with the world – you need these rays that are designed to cure you of cancer and high blood pressure.

And you should not forget the projects you are duty bound to form inside your brain and in the outside world that awaits your innovations and positive, progressive interventions. To tell the truth, I do not care about you, whoever you are, and whenever I say ‘you’ and ‘you’ I’m just talking to myself, to my train of thought. Or to the train of events, as the case may be and often is, whatever we do to prevent it from imposing its laws on our lives. As for my project, I cannot speak of it freely and exhaustively, not yet; I need another portion of Saturn’s power that seems to have flown over to its rings. Some sages whose names I shall pass over in silence pretend it is enough to wear one of these rings – they call them ‘wedding rings’ because you are supposed to get betrothed to wisdom – to grow wise in the twinkling of an eye, without listening to gurus or reading sacred books. I am not sure it is as easy as anything, but no harm in trying, as they say. And I did try to wear one of these rings – in my dreams which habitually comply with my innermost wishes and peremptory instructions.

Projects are important: but for them, we might remain at the stage where a lot of wild animals prowl, for they too intend to ascend to the higher rungs of our universal ladder. If you prowl or walk around an area without an idea – a train of thought that might and should convey you somewhere, to a reliable source of light – you act like a pet dog wasting his or her or its time on someone’s lap. (A lapdog, as Chekhov put it.) But a wild animal to which you might compare a great irreplaceable man is on the prowl, making sure that no one can see and disturb him. So acts every dignified Taoist, I am told, but I feel like disregarding Tao and its credos for the time being: my animal or great man has a project and does not prowl for the sake of prowling; he prowls for the sake of prying on life, its secrets, its bonuses, its Holy Grails. At night, adult scorpions prowl the desert for insects. Let us substitute a great man for scorpions and his triumphs for insects.

Where could you get enough energy for such a project (remarkable triumphs, enlightenment)? You look for triumphs in the world where nonentities continue to thrive in spite of the stars, the sun and its loftiness, its all-important, all-inclusive teaching. But I am fed up with nonentities and the descriptions of their wicked ways I am prepared to supply whenever I allow them to sneak into my field of vision. One thing is more than certain: they take no heed of Saturn, its rings and the sparkles which enliven all these aspects of the nocturnal sky. These sparkles are inherent in almost every heavenly body; in comets and stars they are more visible than within the kingdoms of Saturn or Pluto. (They are visible within the kingdom of Plato, though; he calls them ideas.) People forget or omit to mention Saturn's temperature, its unquestionable warmth that seems to contradict its gloomy, gaseous substance. 'Both Saturn and Jupiter resemble stars in that the bulk of their chemical composition is dominated by hydrogen. Also, as is the case for Jupiter, the tremendous pressure in Saturn's deep interior maintains the hydrogen there in a fluid metallic state.' No wonder that, after reading such a piece of information, you are not inclined to talk about sparks and warmth: both hydrogen and a fluid metallic state sound cold, unfriendly, inhospitable and downright hostile. At least the stars we sing about keep on twinkling as if they could not keep quiet and had to fidget all the time like children who wonder what they are. (We know what they are, don't we?)

And we should not forget the lives we lived before Bing-Bang; and also after it, for many things and substances have taken place *after* Bing-Bang, in its aftermath. We carry all our lives in ourselves – not in our plastic bags, as some might presume: plastic bags are not dignified enough to contain our lives, if only for a few seconds. So we have to keep in mind and body all these lives and also Saturn whose rings we have been betrothed to for some time, if not for eternity. If we do not put our lives on the dinner table where so much caviar and salmon is on display, we shall never build either our soul or spirit which depends on both our physical strength and memory. What *do* we remember? A few odds and ends, as usual, and this habitude of ours cannot tide us over till doomsday or joyday: we are left stranded in the middle of nowhere, everywhere; and all these wheres amount to the same thing. To the same king, as they used to say in days of yore.

FORMER LIVES

Even Strauss's waltzes remind us of our irremediable fragility (we live in the world only once) instead of boosting our self-esteem that dies upon hearing such a verdict. Indeed you are not likely to show a lot of respect towards a mortal creature whose head and shoulders are far beneath those of ordinary, local gods, let alone the Almighty, His shoulders and head. The remedy we often resort to when deploring our final disappearance boils down to our treatment of 'final' which does not mean much within the framework of our hopes, analyses and calculations. We are told about our former lives that seem to create a perspective, a series of horizons beyond which there are other skies and seas and trees. In short, human life is often short and hopeless, but it may give rise to a lot of numbers where our incarnations disport themselves, wearing armour, crowns or just a toga.

Apparently you have to meditate on your spinal column, going down and down and down along it until you find your previous death and the bed on which you lay, while waiting for it. You hear your cries, groans; from across the town comes the rattle of machine-gun fire and you realise your nearest former life moved through hard times, through one of the twentieth-century wars. And you have no wish to live in the twentieth century, even if it is your former life you contemplate as you do your utmost to unravel the mysteries related to your karma, dharma and numerous mamas. In this life of mine I was a mama's boy, but I am not sure that in the days of Julius Caesar my mother kept me company during my journeys and visits to the music school where I eventually fell in love with Mozart and Bach.

How do you proceed when in search of your former lives? All right, you visualise your spine and glide along it, down, down, until you come to your wine cellar and, after yielding to a customary temptation, choose and open a bottle of wine. At least I am used to this procedure that helps me go as far as my nineteenth-century existence spent in Russia, at the Russian court. When I leaf through the book devoted to Petersburg palaces, I might get an itch on the back of my neck; and the neck is regarded as the seat of former lives. But due to lack of training – I ought to have submitted my mind to it 50 years ago – I fail to withdraw anything from this seat of mine, which does not prevent me from consulting the same book for several days, till the end of the week.

My wife affirms I have a lot of affinities with Versailles and the court of Louis XIV, but she makes it clear I was not necessarily a count or a prince; I might have worked in the kitchen or in the laundry, taking care of sauces, lobsters or napkins. I lived in Versailles for 33 years. In the early Eighties I would walk around the park for hours, listening to recordings of *King Lear* and *Macbeth* in English. I attended a *son-et-lumière* presentation of the life at the Louis XIV court, but both the courtiers and cooks were foreign to my feelings, for the simple reason that I *was* a foreigner watching a performance in the language I had begun to learn at the age of five. Yet one of the characters I became acquainted with as I listened to *King Lear*'s recording did not sound foreign to my senses: to my sense of honour, my sense of justice and my sense of humour. I break into indecent laughter when

a middle-aged woman identifies with a queen upon reading a historical novel. I grow even more jubilant when the same woman pictures to herself either Juliet or Desdemona or both, anxious to adopt their ways and physiques. Nevertheless Edgar and I have always been on the same wavelength.

Throughout my life I have been betrayed by my friends who wrote anonymous letters to our authorities or just humiliated me by speaking highly of my rivals, of other pianists and poets. ‘What hast thou been?’ asked Lear. Tom answered thus: ‘A servingman, proud in heart and mind; that curl’d my hair, wore gloves in my cap, serv’d the lust of my mistress’ heart, and did the act of darkness with her; swore as many oaths as I spake words, and broke them in the sweet face of Heaven; one that slept in the contriving of lust, and wak’d to do it. Wine lov’d I deeply, dice dearly, and in woman out-paramour’d the Turk; false of heart, light of ear, bloody of hand; hog in sloth, fox in stealth, wolf in greediness, dog in madness, lion in prey.’ I did not love dice dearly.

Lear touched upon pelican daughters. Inspired by the word ‘pelican’, Tom sang the following song:

*Pillicock sat on Pillicock hill:
Alo, alo, loo, loo!*

There are days and nights when I do nothing else. I set out to follow wherever the words I hear or read may lead. For instance:

*Word, word, word,
World, world, world,
Cold, cold, cold,
Tom, Tom, Tom,
Homme, homme, homme,
Beast, beast, beast,
Communist,
Anarchist.*

In my opinion, anarchism is the only alternative to the regime I was submitted to in the Soviet Union. If asked, ‘Are you for a liberal economy?’ I answer, ‘I am an anarchist – like Kropotkin, Chomsky and Bakunin.’

For the first time, my mother raised me from the dead on the seashore or rather at the bottom of the Black Sea where I all but drowned at the age of five. For years and years she protected me from the fists and knives of bandits as she ostentatiously walked by my side in the streets of Moscow. ‘The Pelican loveth too much her children. For when the children bee haught, and begin to waxe hoare, they smite the father and the mother in the face, wherefore the mother smiteth them againe and slaieth

them. And the thirde daye the mother smiteth her selfe in her side that the blood runneth out, and sheddeth that hot blood vppon the bodies of her children. And by virtue of the blood the birdes that were before dead, quicken againe.'

In the Sixties and Seventies, a senior Soviet official might say to his stooges: 'In today's session, the object of the exercise is to improve your interpersonal skills.' Everyone knew what he meant: they (the stooges) were supposed to sort out how much each culprit owed to the state. They were in the habit of saying, 'Three years, four years, 5000 miles,' and the exercise they had to take allowed them to figure out to what place or space the culprits were to be conveyed either by a Black Maria or an airplane. As a result of their calculations, you would find yourself either in a concentration camp or in a lunatic asylum or in Germany where Solzhenitsyn was welcomed by Heinrich Böll. ('*Bol*' means 'pain' in Russian.) In lunatic asylums our intellectuals were submitted to various psychic treatments among which I am encouraged (by Shakespeare's genius) to single out the *King Lear* – the most inhuman, atrocious of all tortures.

Some scholars declare that nothing physical was done during the process, and only actors disported themselves on a makeshift stage, talking to prisoners, capering in front of them. One actor asked another, 'Where's our prisoner?'

'Contending with the fretful elements;
Bids the wind blow the earth into the sea,
Or swell the curled waters 'bove the main,
That things might change or cease; tears his white hair,
Which the impetuous blasts, with eyeless rage,
Catch in their fury, and make nothing of –'

In the meantime the prisoner did what he was told, although no wind blew either through the lunatic asylum or the concentration camp. Of course the authorities might wait for suitable weather, but they were not keen on waiting and so often began their trials and their prisoners' tribulations well before any wind could be heard in the neighbourhood, let alone in the courtyard where the action was set. Nevertheless, the prisoner would tear out his white or black hair, opting for the pain associated with this process: other pains, he had rightfully concluded, were far more frightful. After a while Lear said, 'Singe my white head!' and a few stooges singed the prisoner's head. 'And thou, all-shaking thunder, / Strike flat the thick rotundity o'th'world! / Crack Nature's moulds –' 'The building's foundations are rather shaky, and it could collapse at any time,' said another stooge. Prisoners were to go mad, even if no needle touched them, no liquid flowed into their bodies.

Eager to reduce the number of tortures, the prisoners would learn their lines by heart. 'Thou wert better in a grave than to answer with thy uncover'd body this extremity of the skies.' 'Do you really think so?' asked a stooge. Often they would put the uncovered body in a makeshift or real grave. 'They say they're doing it for my benefit,' thought the prisoner. 'With the benefit of hindsight it is easy for us to see where we went wrong,' thought the stooges pulling the body out of the grave and

exposing it to yet another gust of wind and showers of rain. If only in part, I lived all these parallel lives, all these tortures; in the Sixties, in the Seventies.

And in the Twenties, in the Thirties? ‘Poor Tom; that eats the swimming frog, the toad, the tadpole, the wall-newt, and the water; that in the fury of his heart, when the foul fiend rages, eats crowdung for sallets; swallows the old rat and the ditch-dog; drinks the green mantle of the standing pool; who is whipp’d from tithing to tithing, and stock-punish’d, and imprison’d –’ I often cry upon seeing a lame dog, one-eyed dog, a stray, emaciated dog, and I am not sure I would be affected in a poor human wretch’s company. Not because human wretches can shift for themselves: sometimes they cannot and would not, being weary of life. Family ties are weaker if you move a long way away; the same goes for humanity and my moving away from it. I am so far from it now I do not know whether I could come back somewhere, anywhere and look around me in a region where humans gorge themselves on crisps, drink and lounge around pools. I do cry when, at the end of the tragedy, King Lear and the Earl of Gloucester appear on the screen. And I cry when watching the documentaries on the Shoah. I hope I was a *zedek* in the Forties.

‘Besides what has been said of his love of learning already, one instance more was, that in his youth, upon a suggestion of writing the Marsian war in Greek and Latin verse and prose, arising out of some pleasantry that passed into a serious proposal, he agreed with Hortensius the lawyer and Sisenna the historian, that he would take his lot; and it seems that the lot directed him to the Greek tongue, for a Greek history of that war is still extant’ (Plutarch’s *Lives*). I might have been Lucullus. ‘It is plain from the anecdotes on record of him that Lucullus was not only pleased with, but even gloried in his way of living. For he is said to have feasted several Greeks upon their coming to Rome day after day, who of a true Grecian principle, being ashamed, and declining the invitations, where so great an expense was every day incurred for them, he with a smile told them, ‘Some of this, indeed my Grecian friends, is for your sakes, but more for that of Lucullus.’ Once when he supped alone, there being only one course, and that but moderately furnished, he called his steward and reproved him, who professing to have supposed that there would be no need of any great entertainment, when nobody was invited, was answered, “What, did not you know, then, that today Lucullus dines with Lucullus?”’

Whenever my neighbours’ gardener spots me, he shouts, ‘Buzz off!’ And his dog barks.

Lear. The little dogs and all,

Tray, Blanch, and Sweetheart, see, they bark at me.

Edg. Tom will throw his head at them. Avaunt, you curs!

A few police officers ring my bell and tell me I should turn off the music I listen to so as not to hear the gardener’s mower.

Aleff. My music protects me from their machines. If I listen to their inhuman music, I'll go mad. I'm not John Cage, you know.

Officer. Move house! Buy a hut in the Ardennes.

Fool. He that has a house to put's head in has a good head-piece.

NEVER-NOTHING

If there are no doubts anywhere, one might think there is nothing to arise and no one to build up anything as if the world had relinquished its ideas and projects which are pointless anyway, pointless, ludicrous. It goes without saying, but sometimes one has doubts; in other words, one might think there is an idea that is sure to shed light on all enigmas, mysteries and Fermat's theorems. One switches on the lights, but nothing moves, changes – not even colours, nuances, let alone bulks, forms, the teeth of a lion that one's grandfather hung on the wall opposite; almost a century ago. Does one need this sight, these lights, and those nights hanging over this part of the Earth for nothing, for nothing?

And what do you get for nothing? Nothing engenders nothing (and endangers everything). One nothing may be capable of holding out, just for the fun of it or out of sheer necessity, but two nothingnesses are too much for anyone determined to keep a cool head, a warm head – any head, for that matter. One keeps warm or cool (as the case may be) for that matter, for this matter, and matters continues to grow so that one no longer knows if it is a (the) matter one is dealing with; or spirit, or God, God forbid. As a matter of fact it is easier to tamper with matter than with the spirit and its tempers. Anyway the chief thing concerns one's survival which is vital as long as one does all one can to keep it vital, important; vital for one's survival. And then one trips over a trifle and one's survival is in danger as if the species could not disregard a carpet, a miniscule fall that has nothing in common with Adams and Madams; and their paradises. If you talk to a cat, you say, 'Your Paradise and mice.' When you talk to one, you just say, 'One and only,' and that clinches the deal, even if there is no deal to clinch and pinch.

Cordelia says something to this effect – to the effect advocated by Buddhists who keep talking about nothing and nonsense, about a total absence of senses that toe the line (at first, at first) and then refuse to toe anything as if they had no toes at all. So we conclude they have no toes and probably no fingers either, for if you have no toes, there is no rhyme or reason to your handling hands, arms and arms: Kalashnikovs, among other lethal objects. Gloucester had no eyes, at the end of his life; at the end of his path and tether. But what could he have seen anyway apart from the unseen that was accessible to his senses, nonsenses and the way he looked at the world without seeing it? You are told there is a path and you put your foot on it, hoping it will bring you to happiness as advocated by Aristotle and other thinkers and tinkers of our humankind. It is a path or the path, the only one; and

you are the only one as well, so it would be unwise not to follow this path to its very (happy, unhappy) end, as the case may be. And the case is always *may*; it is always *be* as well.

You say you should aim at nothing, and if everything crops up somewhere you rush towards it and everything becomes nothing in no time at all; as if there were no time at all. So one (and you, and I) wonder(s) if there is anything, and anything comes to the fore as if there were such a thing as the fore. And then everyone says, 'That's all over,' and Cordelia dies once again because dying once does not mean anything. And King Lear says, 'Never, never,' instead of saying, 'Nothing, nothing.' Nothing will come of nothing and nothing will come to nothing because we are in the very middle of a vicious circle, and wherever we cast our glance, there is a nothing, alias Cordelia's corpse. Indeed one might suppose the King turns round and round as if dancing a rondo and whenever he utters the word 'nothing', he sees a corpse which, to all intents and purposes, belongs to Cordelia, for it is her property and no one is allowed to deprive her of it.

Why should one enthusiastically venture into the domain recurrently exploited by last judges, gravediggers and necrophiliacs? There are men who are always in love with men-about-town or women-about-town, and they are always about, so to speak. There is also such a being as a man-about-cemetery and one might presume our king was one of these who always shout, 'Never, never, always,' because someone is always assassinated or killed or poisoned, which amounts and descends to the same grave. So King Lear looks around and says, 'This is nothing, this is nobody, this is nothing, this is never,' and he is always right, considering that never-never is our keyword, keyorder as if someone (God, of course) were shouting, 'Never-never,' whenever we cast our glances and lances at the image called a 'never-never kingdom'. What do we care about Cordelia and her corpse? She is as insignificant as her husband or paramour or *amour*: let us not forget we are in the Kingdom of France. We are bent on dissecting the world itself, himself, herself or the cosmos that unfolds itself, himself and oneself in front of our feet, eyes and numerous minds; and senses. And bodies: astral and ethereal bodies, among other bodies, substances and molecules.

'I thought the King had more affected the Duke of Albany than Cornwall.'

'I thought the King had more affected cornflakes than bunnies.'

'My wife's computer crashed an hour ago and she's lost a morning's work – she's not a happy bunny at the moment.'

'Is she an unhappy bunny?'

'She is.'

Cordelia has lost a morning's work – or life's work, as the case may be and is, given that she bungled everything required of her mental efforts that morning. And if you bungle one morning, you bungle and mangle all other mornings and evenings.

FROM EDGAR'S DIARY

What do we do when deciphering God's language as foreigners? At the push of a button. Which button?

Tant de sauts dans la vie. Entre deux personnes. Entre deux langues. Se retirer de la vie – un autre saut.

Leibniz. The same person living in another world.

The Beyond. Yearning for God (Cusanus). Stages, infinite. Only in the Hereafter can you know God. Spinoza: three stages. Frying pan (Hell), relations (Purgatory) – you are on friendly terms with many people – essences (Paradise).

Climbing the Mount of Purgatory.

Come on, sir; here's the place: stand still. How fearful
And dizzy 'tis to cast one's eyes so low!
The crows and choughs that wind the midway air
Show scarce so gross as beetles; half way down
Hangs one that gathers sampire, dreadful trade!
Methinks he seems no bigger than his head.

Not to teach? Not to guide? To show a chasm. Others should leap into it by themselves.

The individual and the universal. Today, a conflict with society is such as to resemble what occurred to Abraham (almost).

Bergson. You think more about what is not there. How to replace it? You go on thinking about the thing gone.

The definition of a Christian. (Artist.) Some still bother about Christianity, but they never talk about art.

Christianity is not poetry. To Christianity *through* poetry.

In 1982 Czeslaw Milosz said to Ayyappa K. Paniker, 'The power of money against which the Marxists would like to struggle is only one aspect of the human striving for power – and if you see the experiences of such countries as Poland or the Soviet Union you see the ferocity of the struggle between men is not small, not mild. On the contrary, naked power can be a goal more eagerly pursued

than even money.’ Today, money is pursued more eagerly than power; you cannot have your cake and eat it. But money is equated with power – in the anti-Marxist universe – so that you *can* have your cake and eat it. The Soviet Union collapsed because money is more powerful than power which does not confine its sphere of influence to the stock market: a poet can be influential in spite of his poverty.

According to Chomsky, language is an extension of the mind – or rather, it is the mind itself. In other languages, in other minds, I would not be able to have my cake and eat it. What *would* I have in other languages? In Russian, for instance? Caviar or sturgeon, I imagine. Smoked fish. Shall I write the rest of this book in Russian for the sake of my gourmandise?

You have to fight a *real* duel with your doppelgänger: a *psychological* one is not efficacious. Another hit. What does it matter if both of you perish as a result of the duel! Anyway neither of you was truly born.

I am not a shrewd observer of human beings and only my face, my shame and my despondency stare at me from looking glasses through which I yearn to go.

I wish, I so. So and so. I don't
Sow carrots in between the onions.
I sow only 'so'. Is that so?
I sow neither 'is' nor 'that'. I am not 'is'.
I am not 'am' or 'nem' or 'name'.
I am not a name; I have none.
Listening to this melody, an infinite melody, as long as
The soul. I walk along my soul, up and down.
I go down my soul.

Don't, don't. No news. Yet
There are pieces of news and the past,
Many pieces. You live among
Odds and ends. There are no ends
To these ends, no odds to these
Odds. There are odes.
You sing them, play, live the odes that are ends
And deads. Dead and ode and odd.

No end, either happy or unhappy.
 Beyond, beyond. Neither evil nor unevil.
 Hoping that life will unveil
 The unevil.

FROM GLOUCESTER'S DIARY

I have no way, and therefore want no eyes;
 I stumbled when I saw. Full oft 'tis seen,
 Our means secure us, and our mere defects
 Prove our commodities.

Is that what they call 'nothing'? The state you go through before the Kierkegaardian leap? I cannot go. I have no eyes. No guides. Is that what they call 'nothing-never'?

I have a guide now. My guardian angel.

O you mighty Gods!
 This world I do renounce, and in your sights
 Shake patiently my great affliction off

A NEW REFUTATION OF BIRTH

A new birth would not add anything to the number of births I have gone through in the course of my Odysseys, and joining again my last mother's womb cannot be done on the spur of the moment: my ham-fisted approach is often criticised, although none takes the trouble to show me how it should be done most organically, most mathematically. It is not enough to remain in your bed, waiting for your last mother to join you, to protect you from what they called the global village or global warming or global warning. Of course your mother is not as ham-fisted as you are, if only on account of her long experience that taught her how to conceive and prepare her fruit for others and their callousness. In my lucid moments I see her taking out my head, my legs and putting me in my own hands. "It is you and you alone who should nurse yourself, doing your utmost for you education and muscles, tendons. Be tender towards yourself, tender and mother-like." And then my mother usually pulls out of the deal leaving us high and dry; not always dry, I'm afraid. I actually have no idea what number is attributed to this mother or that: after all, we are not in a concentration camp or an Olympic stadium. Mother or

no mother, the question remains: to be or not to be. And this question is not related to a bare bodkin, whatever thought our Hamlet might had when sitting on a rock. I think Hamlet is on the rocks.

To be in your mother's womb or not to be at all: no rocks, no whisky on the rocks, no waters, no sounds. Is it worth our while to be born for the sake of Bach's *Mass in B Minor*? I think it was Sybil (some prophetess or other) who said to Pyrrhus whose victory (one victory) we know by heart: 'You wish to know how to live? Not to be born is the best life one can dream about. Now it's too late. Do anything – on the spur of the moment.' On the other hand, God exists only because He is the most perfect Being one can think of after two glassfuls of whisky. And existence is far more perfect than non-existence, according to St Ambrose and a rose you pick up in your garden, anxious to offer it to the woman you have been in love with since yesterday. Bertrand Russell said he would never understand why existence is better than utter darkness with no light at the end of it. As for myself, I realise that my mother's womb is far better than any tomb, however pyramid-like and beautiful. What do I know about my mother's womb?

What is not and can be done? You have your feet in the grave, but the grave itself has only one foot and so you cannot put your two feet or your two legs, let alone your body into your grave. So you are not in the grave. I am certainly in the grave, but not in death. I envisage another birth – not on account of the immortality I dream about. Or it is rather another kind of birth I envisage as I recall my mother's womb: a birth without birth, as it were. 'An unfinished birth' you might call it; or an eternal birth, which is the unkindest birth of all. They pick up a number of instruments – in Russian they call them *kusachki* or *morders* in French or *nail-biters* in English. Of course they are likely to point out that English nail-biting has nothing in common with a metal instrument that does its utmost to extract your limbs from your mother's womb. Shout as you may, they will never understand what you mean by shouting, 'Don't confuse a nail with a newborn child.'

'That'll teach you to preserve to the aesthetic beauty of your fingers,' they answer.

Everyone knows that Sybil patiently heard Earnest out and said to him, after the very last of his words died down: 'Whether you become Earnest in earnest or in jest, doesn't really matter. You missed the only opportunity to become happy: you should have prevented them from carrying out the ritual known as "The Ritual of Macduff Fame."'

GRAND NARRATIVE

Grand narrative is right here: it is grand because it is grand or rather important or eternal or as big as the Bang we are told about at school. Bangs come and go as if they did not really wish to destroy us altogether, only partly, only the upper parts of our bodies and souls that also have their upper parts, strange as it may seem. All souls are in our bodies but they also reside up there so their parts are always called upper, even if they are down there, somewhere in the mud we have been dragged (our names and all) through three centuries at least. But all this does not matter in the long run: centuries do not run as if they were half-paralysed or suffering from arthritis or degenerative osteoarthritis or from

nuratis, paratis or anything of this kind and unkindness. Or from parasites. And we are our own parasites, as we say to ourselves, when talking from pulpits or standing before blackboards. We always stand before and behind blackboards, and we talk or do not talk at all as if talking were not our job, our vocation, our destination. As if silence...as if milence...