

VALERY ALEFF

ZARINA
(THE PRICE OF HER DEAR BLOOD)

And why should I tell how great is the grace of virginity, which was found worthy to be chosen by Christ, that it might be even the bodily temple of God, in which as we read the fullness of the Godhead dwelt bodily. A Virgin conceived the Salvation of the world, a Virgin brought forth the life of all. Virginity then ought not to be left to itself, seeing that it benefited all in Christ. A Virgin bore Him Whom this world cannot contain or support. And when He was born from His mother's womb, He yet preserved the fence of her chastity and the inviolate seal of her virginity. And so Christ found in the Virgin that which He willed to make His own, that which the Lord of all might take to Himself. Further, our flesh was cast out of Paradise by a man and woman and was joined to God through a Virgin.

St Ambrose, Letter LXIII

The use of words and speech is to express the inwards of the mind, and from thence to draw forth the secret of the thoughts, and to declare the will of the speaker. Now, writing is the last expression of the mind, and is the number of speech and voice, as, also, the collection, state, end, continuing, and iteration, making a habit, which is not perfected with the act of one's voice. And whatsoever is in the mind, in voice, in word, in operation, and in speech, the whole and all of this is in writing also. And as nothing which is conceived in the mind is not expressed by voice, so nothing which is expressed is not also written. And; therefore, magicians command that in every work there be imprecations and inscriptions made, by which the operator may express his affection; that if he gather an herb, or a stone, he declare for what use he doth it; if he make a picture, he say and write to what end he maketh it, with imprecations and inscriptions.

Cornelius Agrippa, *Occult Philosophy or Magic*

7 rue Sainte-Sophie,

Versailles

26 Septembre 1958

I am writing to tell you that I love you very much. It is awkward, isn't it? And stupid. But I can't express myself better. I can express my feelings only when you are in my apartment, in my room, or when we meet in your apartment. I look at you. I hope you understand my feelings when I look at you.

I look at you, I caress you, because I have no choice. I love you too much, my love is so intense, so abundant. I can't repress it. I have tried so often to repress it, to stifle its fire in my heart. Alas, I am too weak. And my love is too strong.

I don't want to bother you. If you shared my feelings I would speak about them all the time. You must be bored to death. Are you? I wish I could see your face, your grey ironic eyes. (Where are you reading my letter? On the beach? In the harbour?) You can't prevent me from feeling what I feel.

How are you? I miss you horribly. Do you miss me? Silly question.

Why are you so far from me? Your face is always telling me the story of your heart. Sometimes I don't need to hear you. I just look at you. And I see your heart. I know more about your heart than any human being, even more than your mother. I am sure your mother doesn't know you as deeply as I do.

I have read many books since your departure. And of course I study *The Kama Sutra*.

What is a woman supposed to do for the purpose of gaining her lover's favours? She must express wonder at his knowledge of sexual intercourse. (I have expressed my wonder many times.) She must learn from him the 64 kinds of pleasure mentioned by *Babhravya*. (I have lost count of our pleasures.)

I never neglect you on the bed when you turn your face towards me. I touch any part of your body, according to your wish. I kiss and embrace you when you are asleep. And when you are wide awake. I listen to all your stories. I keep telling you that the whole object and desire of my life is to be united with you. And I wish to have a child by you.

What are you doing on the Riviera? Have you met any beautiful girls? I am so jealous that I can hardly write the word 'beautiful' without trembling all over. I hope there are only ugly women on the Riviera. Beautiful women are elsewhere. They spend their holidays on Venus.

I know I sound childish, but I can't help it. Love transforms us into naïve, gullible children who are afraid of everything, who believe in everything. I believe that sooner or later you'll fall in love with me. I believe that we'll get married. I am sure your mother would like to have a grandson.

I am afraid of other women. I doubt the constancy of your heart. Beware! Women are dangerous, wicked. They never say what they think. Never! We live in a corrupt society.

In one of your letters you speak about 'high fidelity', as you call it. 'In the matters of religion and love, pluralism is frowned upon and debunked by purists. I am of their number. You can and must devote yourself to one god only. The gods are jealous.' Let me remind you of what Ophelia said to her brother in similar circumstances:

I shall th'effect of this good lesson keep

*As watchman to my heart. But good my brother,
Do not as some ungracious pastors do,
Show me the steep and thorny way to heaven,
Whiles like a puff'd and reckless libertine
Himself the primrose path of dalliance treads,
And recks not his own rede.*

What are you doing on the Riviera? I never go out. Nothing attracts me, nothing appeals to me. I miss you! I see you everywhere! You spoke to me once about the book entitled *The Man in a Landscape*. You are that man. I see you in the landscape of my life. You are my trees and my flowers, you are my cherry blossom and my cascades. I like the book on Japanese poetry that you lent me before your departure. Some of the *haikus* remind me of your poems.

I recall the smell of your skin. All my senses are invaded, usurped by your body. I can't look at other men. They are repulsive. I hate them. I abhor them. I wish there were no one in the whole world, except us.

Yesterday I had a walk in the parc de Versailles. How empty it was! No statues, no flower beds.

*Que me font ces vallons, ces palais, ces chaumières,
Vains objets dont pour moi le charme est envolé?
Fleuves, rochers, forêts, solitudes si chères,
Un seul être vous manque, et tout est dépeuplé!*

I lost my way in the wilderness of the parc. The whole world is a no-man's land. And I am lost. I can't find my way in Versailles, in my own room.

Even my parents and my relatives have dissolved in my love. I don't remember my family any longer. The whole world is you and I am yours. I don't exist. I don't exist.

It is a long letter. You must be bored to death. But I implore you to let me live for another half an hour. Without you I am dead. I live only when I see you or when I write to you. I have the feeling that you are with me now. As long as this letter lasts. I wish I could write it forever. At least until your return to Versailles, to my room.

When are you coming back? Why can't you shorten your stay in Nice? Why is the weather so marvellous on the Riviera? My upbringing doesn't allow me to address the god of rain or any other pagan deity (the god of wind, the god of frost, the god of clouds). How to bring you back?

I saw a lot of wedding rings last Thursday. Some of them were lovely. Japanese poets often describe the moon and its reflections. Those wedding rings sparkled like a nocturnal sea.

What is in store for us? Shall I read our future in the Tarot cards? 'Ten of Swords'. Ruin, the Sun in Gemini. Reason run mad, soulless mechanism, the logic of lunatics and (for the most part) philosophers. Reason divorced from reality. Pain, affliction, tears, sadness, desolation, not especially a card of violent death. Advantage, profit, success, favour, but all of them transient. How dreadful! Cards are always lying, aren't they?

I am dreaming about your body. You have changed my life completely. I wouldn't have dared to write such a letter last year, 10 months ago.

What am I to do? Who can cure me? Nobody. Should I confess my sins? I have no courage. It is too horrible.

Had you touched many women before our first night? How many? I have no wish to know. Please don't tell me anything. Please don't betray your beloved. Don't be unfaithful to your Zarina. I trust you absolutely. Don't ever forget that I love you. I love you, I love you, I love you, I love you. Please respect my love.

I admit that I like our games. I like your inventions, your 'permutations of love'. I recall our crawling under the dinner table towards the oval mirror. Our reflection was poetical and moving. I think that love obliterates perversions and immorality. Love may be likened to a prayer. Love has miraculous powers. Love is God. Everything is permitted because I love you.

I hope that you appreciate my innate purity which prevented me from giving myself to you at the very outset of our relationship. You can't imagine how tempted I was to let you caress my body. From the outside, from the inside. You are so lovely, so charming! But I resisted your erotic and sexual powers. Isn't that a proof of my future fidelity? Nobody is as sexy as you are. And I resisted, I did. How much easier to resist other men!

Why do you obstinately destroy your own happiness? The family is the cornerstone of humanity. Children are far more important than poems and other figments of the human imagination. They are our reason for living. They are all we have to leave behind us. They are our poems and paintings. And films. They are moving pictures of ourselves. They are a tangible token of our immortality.

Let me quote St Ambrose again: 'I encourage marriage and condemn those who are wont to discourage it, so much so, that indeed I am wont to speak of the marriages of Sarah, Rebecca, and Rachel, and other women of old time, as instances of singular virtues. For he who condemns marriage, condemns the birth of children, and condemns the fellowship of the human race, continued by a series of successive generations. For how could generation succeed generation in a continual order, unless the gift of marriage stirred up the desire of offspring?'

Why don't you believe me? Do you believe me? Do you believe St Ambrose? I promise I will make you happy. I will be your obedient mirror, your wife, your sister, your daughter, your mother, your brother. Today I am under the impression that I am your twin brother.

I don't ask you to love me. I ask you to understand my soul. Please be indulgent and patient. Why are you so rude to me sometimes?

How tender you are! How I like your fingers! Why can't I bear you in my womb as if you were my child, my only child? I am your mother and your father.

My mother entered my room without knocking. I managed to hide this dangerous confession under my pillow. Why do we have to fight for our independence? I hope my mother doesn't know I am keeping a diary.

I am your pupil and I do my best to learn whatever you teach me. I will always be your pupil. Please be my teacher, my guru. Haven't I already proven my good will and my capacities? For your sake I have sacrificed my principles, my ideals.

It is a long letter. And it is already 2 in the morning. Another sleepless night. Why should I interrupt my train of thought? I don't want to lose you, not for an instant. Don't throw my letter away! Please don't throw it away! I shall be with you as long as you keep it.

Before going to bed I kiss your picture, the photograph you gave me last summer. Every night I kiss your face, your motionless, cold face. Even in reality you are cold sometimes, as cold as your photograph.

I want you to know that I can't live without you. I would commit suicide on your wedding day. There is no point in living away from you. You are my breath, my earth, my eternity.

Whatever you do, God shall unite us.

I am waiting for you.

PART ONE

When a man is trying to gain over a woman he should examine the state of her mind, and act as follows.

If she meets him once, and again comes to meet him better dressed than before, or comes to him in some lonely place, he should be certain that she is capable of being enjoyed by the use of a little force. A woman who lets a man make up to her, but does not give herself up, even after a long time, should be considered as a trifler in love, but owing to the fickleness of the human mind, even such a woman can be conquered by always keeping up a close acquaintance with her.

The Kama Sutra

1

When did he meet her? Where, how?

Why did he meet *her*? Was Providence short of nice women in October 1957?

He met her in a corridor. He met her at his lycée, in Versailles. The corridor was large enough to enable him to make the acquaintance of a nice, innocent representative of the female species.

They ran into each other several times but he never trod on her feet, which would have induced her to make a splendid show of her vocal cords. Once he heard her laughter; in the customary confusion of a break, he attributed it to another girl whose ugliness was unpardonable.

He hardly paid attention to her comings and goings, smiles and frowns. (When she smiled, her eyes crinkled up at the corners.) She was pretty but not particularly beautiful, and there were many pretty girls at his lycée. There were many pretty girls in France and Italy which he had visited in 1954. He would not have noticed her profile in Italy; he paid no attention to her hair in France, not in October 1957. And her elongated mouth was not as magnificent as Diana's lips.

Had he observed her sunbathing on a beach he might have transferred his things closer to her tanned body; for a while, his head might have lain beside her shoulders, at a suggestive distance; and he might have immortalised her with his camera on which he relied everywhere, even in his dreams. But it is too cold in October, in November, in December. And he hated swimming pools, their arbitrary smells and colours.

So, in the confusion of a break, he would brush against her chest or ribs without stopping, without staring into her eyes. And his apologies sounded fainter and fainter as if he were walking away from her—faster and faster.

2

Why did Providence postpone its chastisement? Or was his guardian angel still trying to protect him from her evil? They lived in the same country, in the same *département*, on the same avenue. They strolled along the same corridors, around the same statues and fountains. Their union was inevitable, unavoidable.

Driven to despair by a blotted copybook or unrequited love, young ladies often take an overdose of sleeping pills or flop over lofty parapets. We read about their deaths in newspapers and novels. Was she never rebuked by her teachers? And what about unrequited love and its scorching pain? And what about accidents? Is there no traffic in Versailles? Are there no cars? Do they never drink in Versailles before driving back home? Did she never go to Paris?

Once, as he crouched on his haunches at the bottom of a staircase which soared up to the somewhat dirty vault-like ceiling, she appeared in a doorway and, a few seconds later, began her ascent—her ascension—to their future sensual bliss. He saw her brownish legs and resolved on the spur of the moment to speak to her in the playground.

He thought he would speak to her during the next break, in the early afternoon. A few days, almost a week elapsed. Finally he waylaid her near a signature-ornamented column and his life took a tragic turn.

Did he think about her during those 124 hours which, if represented in spatial terms, might assume the shape of the cigarette some prisoners enjoy before the fatal stroke of the guillotine? (124. ODN, Eden. The narrow gate between Death and the Devil.) No. But her ascending image had sought refuge from oblivion in the

loft of his memory. Images and words flow out of life; our capacity to incarcerate them depends on their proximity to the soul. And the human soul is not omnipresent.

'In that event I don't think it would pay us to stay here,' he told one of his fellow students. Was he speaking about the corridor where they stood like 2 Hindus unperturbed by the nervousness of crowds? Did he allude to his parents' desire to leave Versailles and settle near the Champs de Mars in Paris? Why didn't they move away?

2 days later he spoke to her in the playground.

3

After all preliminary miscalculations and postponements, the stage seemed set now for their first game. He was a good chess player and often compared the universe to a chessboard with queens, knights and kings gliding back and forth on it—a hackneyed comparison that Cowley develops in his poem *To Destiny*.

'If his own achievements are anything to go by, his ideas on poetry must be of the utmost—' He switched from the English Opening to the French Début, substituting intellectual prattle for amateurish weather-reports. 'So it would be a shame if he didn't hand on his knowledge to us—his potential disciples.' He twitched off the nearest twig and, with an impetuous sweep of his arm, hurled it in the direction of the Petit Trianon. 'Shall we go to the Théâtre des Champs Elysées? Do you like music? You must like music.'

'Why *must*?' She seemed reluctant to commit herself.

'I mean, do you like modern music?'

'Modern music?'

'You do like it, don't you? A Soviet pianist is playing. I'm afraid, his programme is entirely classical. Plus a piece by Prokofiev. But Prokofiev—Do you like Boulez, Stockhausen?'

'Soviet pianists are brilliant.' She tossed her inconspicuous hair back.

'The difference between creative and performing artists is often forgotten or overlooked—a negligence due to the excessive commercialism of our epoch. Interpreters never experience the ecstasy of the absolute freedom which allows creators—composers, writers, some film-directors—to shift elements, to combine heterogeneous substances. Besides, a creator can destroy his work...like God...'

'What film-directors do you like?'

'But interpreters are not utterly useless. They create events. They "locate" an infinite masterpiece in Space and Time.'

'Fellini, Rossellini?'

She did not refuse to accompany him to the Théâtre des Champs Elysées. She worshipped Soviet violinists and pianists.

4

On the first day he reached the ending with a nominal advantage of bishop for knight—to use his chess terminology—but he could make nothing of it the following afternoon; to his bitter disappointment, the game was adjourned once again as the rain set in with its habitual callousness. To use the terminology of romance, he kissed her neither on the second day, nor during the third week.

He talked too much about modern composers instead of making her appreciate the plain sensuality of Chopin's nocturnes. He ought to have taken her more often to the Théâtre des Champs Elysées: Soviet pianists and violinists had been instrumental in bringing together so many people.

Their love story dragged on and on; that slowness was not wholly unpleasant. Her eyes glistened even in the total absence of the sun which had been mislaid somewhere over the English coast; the abyssal tone of her voice was at variance with her non-committal answers.

She would accept his invitations and suggestions but tacitly forbade him to glimpse any lascivious light beyond them—as if all those outings and dinners were encircled with walls.

He grew even more garrulous: 'It's a recondite work where we find a surprising mixture of Oriental lore and Goldsmith's mild humour. Of course critics and readers adore labelling and pigeon-holing—' Did he confuse her mind with her body?

She never laughed him down. Was she clement towards her fellow student? Was she submissive? His intellectual aggressiveness. Did she put it down to his inborn shyness?

He might have forgotten her rather quickly had she stayed by his side, submissive and faithful. Her betrayal was not an oversight on the part of his destiny, a haphazard obstacle on the path to success: an erratic stone, a banana skin, a protuberant root. Her betrayal *was* his destiny.

5

I remember how my father got carried away during one of our family outings. We were driving to Burgundy in order to take part in a wine tasting. A car preceded us, an ordinary-looking car. But it seemed to know where we intended to spend a few hours that afternoon, taking the same turns, overtaking the same cars. My father was irritated at first; and then he reconciled himself to the idea of being guided by someone or something he did not know. And he continued to follow that car even when it began to take 'wrong turns' and stop before 'wrong lights'. We landed up a hundred kilometres away from the town where the owner of a famous Burgundy vineyard awaited us. '*La forza del destino*,' commented my father.

6

A television studio. An ordinary-looking man stands behind a sort of pulpit. A cheery, gregarious, fun-loving man is walking towards him. A few moments later he stops, smiles at the nearest camera, unfolds a sheet of paper, promisingly raises his hand, lowers his eyes and starts reading.

'An unmarried or chaste and pure woman distinguished in the early Christian Church for her piety and steadfast service to her faith.' (*He looks quizzically at the man standing before him.*) No? Okay. I'll help you. 'By virtue of these qualities that particular woman was accorded a special place among the members of the Christian community.' Well, I don't ask you *what* place she was accorded. Just tell me who this woman was. There's a word for her. Do you know what it is? (*The man standing in front of the host and millions of television-viewers knits his brow and shakes his head.*) No? 'An unmarried woman devoted to a deity in a celibate life of service within a religious temple—for instance, within the temple of the Sun.' What would *you* call that lady? Forget about egg-head definitions! What would *you* call her? Relax! (*The man relaxes but is still at a loss to locate that evasive, nebulous woman in the dictionary of Time.*) My God! All right, forget about temples and deities. Try

again. 'A young woman noted for purity, chastity and beauty. A picture of the Madonna. A female animal that has never copulated.' What would you call this animal? Have you never seen such animals? Come on! Haven't you ever seen an animal in your life? Think! Have you got a cat? A dog? A goldfish?

7

For all their verbal and logical lavishness, dictionaries cannot keep pace with reality. They do not hear our new words and bestow upon our old words a different sense—the one we have already forgotten. Only recently did they give men admittance to the Kingdom of virgins: 'Girl or woman (and in recent use, man) who has not experienced sexual union.'

In those days he was still a virgin. His natural curiosity prevented him from fully enjoying the adjournments of their game. But he was prudent enough not to yield to the temptation of premature denouement. He waited and observed the moves of his companion. Her eyes continued to glisten, heralding the end of his torture and the beginning of his manhood; her answers continued to confound his plans, dodging or minimising the issue.

He eventually took her hand in the parc de Versailles, near a statue bundled in brown sackcloth. He even managed to hold it for a few instants. For all the inspiring perspective of the Grand Canal, that timid, almost abortive union of fingers and palms seemed to lead nowhere.

'Did I hurt you?'

'No.' She hid her hands behind her back.

'Are you sure?' He was insistent.

'I'm sure.'

'Did I offend you?' He was stubborn.

'No.'

'Please be frank with me.'

'I *am* frank. What's the trouble?'

He tried to relieve his frustration by kicking an oak tree.

8

I was a virgin in every sense of the word. Like a virgin sheet of paper on which anything could be written. What did she write on it with her blood? I might have kept my soul untouched and unsullied till Doomsday. My indignation and anger would have been like watch-dogs rousing against sins. But I had no idea she was living in a sort of sin-bin. She was the thief, the enemy creeping in to 'plunder the divine treasure-chamber'. Stealing, mangling, destroying. 'Courage and confidence are to be weapons in our hands to baffle any sudden surprise and attack of the wicked who advance.' Too late, too late.

9

Courtship rituals often include considerable pre-copulation investment by the male. The female may refuse to copulate until the male has built her a nest. Or the male may have to feed her quite substantial amounts of food. This, of course, is very good from the female's point of view, but it also suggests another possible version of the domestic-bliss strategy. Could females force males to invest so

heavily in their offspring before they allow copulation that it would no longer pay the males to desert after copulation?
Richard Dawkins, *The Selfish Gene*

Why didn't she refuse to keep him company during his sterile, half-hearted investigations of the nearby woods? Why did she refuse to spend an hour or two in the last row of a local movie-house or, better still, in his apartment, rarely occupied by his socialite parents?

Why were his investigations sterile, fruitless? Why didn't they ensconce themselves behind some hospitable mixture of stems and leaves? It was too cold in the woods. Love was out of season, as it were.

Once he took advantage of the windy, sour-tempered weather to mention the movie *Our Hospitality*.

'Do you like Buster Keaton?'

She shook her head despondently, upset or hurt by the brusque audacity of his suggestions. She freed her hand from his clutch.

'No. Never. How could you?' Her liberated arm was tracing a question mark in the air.

'I beg your—Have you seen *Our*—?'

'I'm not interested in *those* movies,' she said, setting her jaw firmly.

'Which movies? Silent movies?'

'They're not exactly silent, are they? '

'Who?'

'You know what I mean.'

He did. Once again they silently left the parc.

When animus and anima meet, the animus draws his sword of power and the anima ejects her poison of illusion and seduction.

10

Girls aren't allowed to marry until they're eighteen—boys have to wait four years longer. Any boy or girl convicted of pre-marital intercourse is severely punished, and permanently disqualified from marrying, unless this sentence is remitted by the Mayor. The man and woman in charge of the household in which it happens are also publicly disgraced, for not doing their jobs properly. The Utopians are particularly strict about that kind of thing, because they think very few people would want to get married—which means spending one's whole life with the same person, and putting up with all the inconveniences that this involve—if they aren't carefully prevented from having any sexual intercourse otherwise.

Thomas More, *Utopia*

She blushed and refused to investigate the Mondrianesque structure of his apartment. He was prompted to use hers as a playground for his sexual ambitions.

He concocted a pretext which, plausible enough in the atmosphere of scholarship between them, was moreover an eloquent proof of his team spirit. 'We must help each other,' she used to say, overlooking her own penchant for individualism, for love-excluding chastity.

'Let's put our heads together and beat the system,' he said one sunny afternoon. The exam was imminent and he did his best to play down his natural aptitude for maths. 'I'm no good at juggling with equations.' As if to

dramatise his metaphor, he grabbed 3 tennis balls and immediately dropped one of them. He hoisted himself onto a windowsill from which he could preside more easily over her unreliable thoughts. 'We'll invite Robert and Albert.'

'Of course.'

'But where? That's the question.' He leant towards her and almost slid off his pedestal. 'My parents would be delighted—'

'They're never at home. That's out of the question.'

'Maybe so, but the question remains. And Robert's parents are down with flu.'

'Both of them?'

'Just his mother. Isn't that enough? And Albert's father had a heart attack last week.'

'We might meet at Helen's?' she asked uncertainly.

'There's a flu epidemic,' he persisted, 'not to mention heart attacks. Anyway her flat's tiny. And her little brother's always bawling.'

'How old is he?'

'I may pass the physics exam but I'm sure I'll screw chemistry up. Pity that your mother forbids you to have male guests. How's *she* getting on?'

A new onslaught of shyness left her speechless for a moment. He continued in the same vain, unabashed and regardless. Eventually she volunteered that her mother had neither the flu nor a heart problem: 'She'll be happy to meet you.'

'I'd hate to put her out.'

'You won't put anybody out. My mother has to spend the evening in Cabourg with her cousin, as it happens.'

'She's coming back the next day, I suppose. 8 plus 9...17 hours of work.' (17. Useful. Though it symbolises 1, it does so under the form of a thunderbolt. 'Here is a magic disk for me to hurl, and win heaven by violence,' says the Aspirant.)

'I see you know how to add up,' she said.

'Yes. It comes in useful. You should try it some day,' he replied bleakly.

Either she did not understand or pretended not to understand.

No matter how friendly and obliging a woman's Eros may be, no logic on earth can shake her if she is ridden by the animus. Often the man has the feeling—and he is not altogether wrong—that only seduction or a beating or rape would have the necessary power of persuasion. (Jung is right. I should have beaten her with my grandfather's walking stick.)

11

But that man who, out of malice, says of a maiden, 'She is not a maiden,' shall be fined one hundred (panas), if he cannot prove her blemish.

The Laws of Manu

He was also good at subtraction.

Dutifully she invited Robert and Albert. Selfishly he called them off. The mysterious solemnity of his behaviour was destroyed by smirks, repressed titters. They wished him good luck. He thanked them but pointed out they had got him wrong: the exam *was* imminent.

Could he sleep at all on the eve of their tête-à-tête? Did he dream? He recalled too many dreams after their parting.

He saw no beautiful landscapes, no birds of Paradise. He saw her flat, her face, Diana's lips.

They sat down at a table. He began to fiddle with a bottle of champagne which looked like a bottle of beer. She took the fork lying beside her plate and looked him straight in the eye.

'By skilfully opening my legs, from where he was sitting, he could see my white panties nicely framed by my black stockings,' she said.

He dropped his knife and licked his lips. 'Robert?' He was asking questions like a public prosecutor.

'Don't insult my taste!' she answered. And she continued her verbal striptease. 'My pretty little panties embroidered with flowers had hundreds of holes to sieve his gaze. He could see it all, every shade and shape. He'd never seen anything so wonderful. He didn't dare lay a hand on me. So I held him by the wrists and guided his fingers towards the lace which moulded the hills and dales of my flesh.'

She snapped the napkin from his lap and sent it flying across the room. She grabbed him by the hand.

He was thirsty but his dreamy fecklessness prevented him from drinking a glass of champagne or a mug of beer. Even a bottle of coke was inaccessible.

'By now he was mad with desire. His breathing was short and staccato. He was putty in my hands. In fact I was stroking myself with Paul's fingers. I made him run one of them up my thigh and under the silky material, sliding it further forwards. Then I forced his whole hand up and under. The fabric stretched and tore when he got to the top. I kept on pulling. The panties split apart and yawned open.'

He freed his hand. Majestically she pointed to a huge chessboard hanging on the wall opposite. He was clearly perplexed by her strategy, by her last move. 'After a deceptively quiet opening and midgame there suddenly comes an offer of the Black Queen which may neither be accepted nor refused,' he said to himself.

'It wasn't going to be long before he pulled off those charming little panties of mine. Softly and greedily he sank his teeth into my erect nipples and crunched them like chocolate. All at once he brought his weight down onto me and took my head in his 2 hands, possessing me brusquely. A few stray animals in the undergrowth were the only creatures to witness this rare embrace.'

There was a camera within his reach. It lay on the tablecloth. He did not use it. A video camera would have been more appropriate to film his destiny.

'When he staked his claim I hiccuped with transport. The brute maltreated me with increased ferocity. His belly slapped down on mine and little by little my pleasure turned into an atrocious ordeal which was more and more difficult to bear. My flesh was sensitised to such a point that it felt flayed and raw, stretched beyond endurance—so much so that I thought I would rip apart, snap in 2 and die under these unflagging demands.'

The doorbell rang voluptuously. Gérard Philipe and Rudolph Valentino stood on the landing.

'Don't answer the door!' He raised his knife. But she had no wish to answer the door. Everything had happened *already*.

'I nearly lost consciousness when, instead of decelerating, he beat time even more vigorously and for 5 seconds I suffered unthinkable tortures, undreamt of even by the most sadistic preachers of brimstone and Hell

fire. I would have cried out, but he covered my mouth with his lips and sucked up my tongue like a vacuum cleaner.'

'Spring-cleaning your soul, was he? Anyway you'll fail your *baccalauréat*.' He drew his notebook from the briefcase lying on the carpet.

'Vanquished, caressed, sucked, exasperated, hammered, beaten, shaken, stirred, kneaded, contorted, twisted out of shape and back again, stretched, shrunk, blown up and burst, my body capitulated before midnight. I gave up the ghost and sank into a grateful slumber. I passed out in his arms.'

And she added with a grin: 'We were welded together with the hot solder of human flesh!'

12

Thou who art neither alive nor dead, the immortal child of the gods art thou, O Sleep! Varunânî is thy mother, Yama thy father. Araru is thy name.

We know, O Sleep, thy birth. Thou art the son of the divine women-folk, the instrument of Yama! Thou art the ender, the Terminator, thou art death! Thus do we know thee, O Sleep: do thou, O Sleep, protect us from evil dreams!

As one pays off a sixteenth, an eighth, or an entire debt, thus do we transfer every evil dream upon our enemy.

Sexual dreams foretell the dreamer's destiny in social life. They anticipate the role he will play in the theatre of family life, professional endeavour and civic affairs.

He finally managed to get out of her building. He did his best to wake up.

(To be continued.)

PART TWO

*Had I but died an hour before this shame,
I had liv'd a blessed time; for, from this instant,
There's nothing serious in mortality;
All is but toys*

Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, act II, sc. III

*Zeus, whose will has marked for us
The sole way where wisdom lies;
Ordered one eternal path:
Man must suffer to be wise.*

Aeschylus, *Agamemnon*

1

It is a long story. It might have become longer still had the 2 characters treading the same path of history showed less impatience, more sympathy on the day of their last encounter. But the man had waited for 30 years and waiting is not propitious for the growth and blooming of benevolent sentiments which, like odoriferous plants, decorate the souls of the wise and the good. Their souls resemble hot-houses, Gardens of Eden.

His soul was teeming with dangers like the Amazon jungle. Pestered, persecuted by the past, he sought asylum in some equitable future. Human memory furthers the abnormal and pernicious growth of revengeful impulses which are the venomous snakes of our psyche—a malignant tumour revealing the slow eclipse of the soul.

In one of his dreams he saw a man lying in the mud. He bent over him and recognised his own features, his own body which had been mutilated with a knife. He realised that the man lying at his feet was dead; he himself was dead. 'Why is my hair so long?' he wondered. 'Does hair grow after one's death? Of course.' He knelt down before the corpse and put his hands on the hair in which his fingers got entangled after a while. The hair continued to grow under his very eyes and soon reached his penis: like the corpse, he was stark naked. 'I must wind the hair around my penis,' he thought, 'otherwise I won't be able to avenge myself. My bowels must burn with desire to avenge my own murder.' The hair burst into flame and he awoke with a scream.

He recalled her promises, her solemn oaths. 'I'll never deceive my husband.' She cocked her head and pursed her lips.

'Have you ever deceived your only lover?' He did not notice that, by using the word 'only', he had answered his own question. Was he so sure she had never been unfaithful to him? And what about the shuffling and creaking sounds that would reach his ears and subconscious whenever he paid her an unexpected visit? There are so many sounds in the universe. They come from above and from below, from balconies and from pavements. Who can tell where sounds really come from? Who can determine the origin of sounds? Of anything?

Waiting for her to let him in. Was she always out on those occasions? Anyway her door would remain inauspiciously shut.

And what about the solitary eye which looked at him from behind her door? Her eye. He recognised it. He recognises her eyes so often...everywhere...in the distant countries she has never visited, not even in her dreams. Many people have a distinct feeling that somebody is looking at them all the time as if they were either beautiful or famous. Or monstrous.

So he would dismiss his fears and suspicions with a wrathful jerk of his shoulders. (She was far more iniquitous than any liar. She had sunk lower than any deceitful wife or mistress.)

She was still faithful to her husband; not for long, though. Her faithfulness was in his hands now; her family happiness lay within his reach. Not yet, not yet. Killing time, he began to doodle flowers on her precious letter which once again he had restored to life by digging it out from the wastepaper basket, by smoothing out its creases, its wrinkles. Her letter was growing old despite the frivolous aggressiveness of his memory.

'Standing in the doorway. Moaning and preparing her glossy lips. Licking her lips. Stroking my back ever so gently...with her nails. As a token of reconciliation. It would take hours of scratching to bring about a reconciliation between us. A century of scratching. "A peacock's foot". "The leaf of a blue lotus". She is coming, isn't she? She *is* coming.' He had solved the riddle of Time and Space to his advantage, disregarding the

tremendous variety of female moods and the frequency of female whims. Indeed she might have had a minor make-up accident. And what about the glorified migraine exploited so often and with such unscrupulousness by French novelists of the 19th century? And of course he had underestimated her unwavering loyalty to her husband.

There are many examples of women's loyalty to their husbands. A phantom stands in for Helen when Paris is about to carry her off to Troy. In the Rig Veda a woman who cannot bear the sight of her would-be lover goes away, leaving a clone in her place. Tides have many periodic and therefore predictable components, but the atmosphere is a different fluid system; so is a woman. And any physical system that behaves nonperiodically is unpredictable. Even tides may become unpredictable—during a storm. And there are many storms in a woman's life. There are only storms in a woman's life: storms in a teacup, storms in a bowl, storms in a saucepan, storms in a bath, storms in a swimming pool...

He was sure she had not lied to him, not this time. The gigantic monstrosity of her first lie seemed to have left no room in her existence for another abomination. 'Unless she dies at the age of 214,' he thought. (214. RVCh is one of the most seductive numbers to the beginner. Yet its crown is Daath, and later one learns to regard it as the great obstacle. Look at its promise 21, ending in the fearful curse of 4! Calamity!)

She suspected nothing. She had not read any cloak-and-dagger stories for quite a long time. She believed in her immortality. Even hard words would have been more than she anticipated.

Should I punish her now for the fault (or crime) she committed so many years ago? Should I punish her innocent husband who knows nothing of our liaison and its implications? Is he innocent? Do they laugh in unison? Her blood. Like Rothko's *Maroon on Blue*. My favourite blue sheets. Why didn't my memory paint an idyllic pastoral scene on top of that picture?

Had he superimposed a score of different colours and tints upon it, he would have scraped them away to restore the primordial frescoes of her cruelty, of her impiety. Yet he was no masochist; nor was he a misogynist.

The dust of hesitancy quivered down, piling deep on the bottom of his subconscious. 'I've solved the riddle of my future. Leave me in peace.' Was he talking to his guardian angel? No heavenly envoy interfered with his projects and desires; nobody pressed the button of the doorbell at the wrong moment.

There were no more wrong moments in his life. No more wrong moments, no more right moments.

2

He came to his senses in the dead of night, around 5 a.m. 15 hours before—at 2 p.m.—he was still alone in his apartment.

Despite the unusual solemnity of the moment he dwelt on the weather: 'It's been raining since Thursday. Bad for the vines. Her make-up touchingly diluted by a few droplets of rain. She must have cried in the taxi, unmindful of the rear-view mirror.'

Why did he remember her tears? She had cried rather often during their previous encounters dating back to the 50s, to the years of sexual and artistic liberation. But she did not cry now in the taxi, on the way to her former lover. Nor did she cry in his flat.

She cried for the last time 31 years ago. That humid afternoon he made her believe he wanted to deprive her of his tender, sentimental letters. And of his photograph. One year later, during their farewell ceremony, those tears of hers became reflected in the mirror of truth.

Truth is the only *normal* mirror we possess. All other mirrors distort reality beyond recognition, beyond redemption. We learn the truth only on the day of parting when our companions have nothing to lose, nothing to be afraid of. And we have nothing to gain. However immense and demystifying, the truth cannot help us. 'For now we see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face: now I know in part; but then shall I know even as also I am known.' He did not wait until his death, until his instructive sojourn in the Hereafter to learn the truth, to find himself face to face with the absolute truth. On the day of their separation.

3

Zeus ordered Hephaestus to fashion clay and water into a body, to give it vital force and human voice, and to make therefrom a virgin whose dazzling beauty would equal that of the immortal goddesses. All the divinities heaped their especial gifts on this new creature, who received the name of Pandora.

New Larousse Encyclopaedia of Mythology

There are moments when, all of a sudden, we understand everything. The whole universe with all its mysteries and ambiguities seems to be hidden inside us, somewhere in between our heart and our stomach. We read the Book of Life; its pages rustle reassuringly under our fingers. Everything is so distinct, so tame, so tiny, so tidy.

An event of no significance may lead to the all-embracing knowledge associated with the Hereafter, with eternal light, with the eternal absence of terrestrial shadows. A horrible, hair-raising event is more apt, however, to tear the 'veil of ignorance' to shreds. This aptitude of humans to reach a higher plane of regard—the highest plane of regard—can be illustrated by Zen Buddhism and its methods. One of Zen's devotees became enlightened when his master lifted his little finger. Another devotee—a 16-year-old boy—saw the master's trick and light-heartedly imitated the master. The latter cut the boy's finger with a knife. The boy ran away screaming in pain. The master called him back. The boy turned round with displeasure and the master lifted his own finger; whereupon the boy became enlightened. The second enlightenment had a more lasting effect, a deeper perspective.

Upon learning the truth he screamed with horror, ran away and boarded the wrong train that conveyed him to an unfamiliar town where he wandered for a while, crying and wiping away his tears. He did not recognise the people he came across in his wanderings. He could not know those people: by chance, by mistake, he had landed up in an *unfamiliar* town. What amazed him beyond measure was not his inability to place them in his recollection as individuals with different habits, outlooks and so on. He failed to recognise them as human beings; he did not recognise the human race.

Of course the inhabitants of that bizarre town had nothing to do with her falsehood. They had never met his mistress and were in no way responsible for her behaviour, or rather her misbehaviour. In this respect her future husband had something in common with all those people.

He lost his faith in human beings. He lost his faith in the implicit goodness of the universe, in the logic of life. He understood everything. No mysteries, no ambiguities. And this new-found, new-fangled simplicity was astonishing, shattering, disgusting.

He understood the absolute truth of Evil.

4

Life must go on. Why? Nobody knows. But everybody blames suicidal maniacs for their rashness and impatience, for their lack of civic pride, for their neglect of civic duties.

Is it better to come into existence, becoming a living palpitating substance, or to remain forever on the dark side of Creation? Is it better to wait in the wings of the world? Theologians affirm that 'being' is better, more perfect, than 'non-being'. Some hold the opposite view. They think that human life often should remain a potentiality or even an impossibility. In their opinion life is no better than its absence. These people do not hesitate to deduct *something* from the sum of the living world—either by killing themselves or by killing others.

Life goes on, whatever is deducted from its immensity. His life went on too. Perhaps he did not have the nerve to kill himself, for all his knowledge of the ministrations of darkness. Perhaps he had grown indifferent to Time, to the future.

Perhaps he hoped that everything would work out. How? He did not want her to come back, resuming her place in his life. After her confession nothing seemed possible; nothing was desirable, enviable. But he had to desire *something*, being alive and youthful; he had to speak, to act, to dream.

For a while he did not speak at all. Only after the second family reunion did he regain his footing in our three-dimensional world, reluctantly leaving his private realm of apathy and disgust. Once more his thoughts returned to the young lady who had triggered the rebellion of his mind against the injustice of our earthly existence. He had an irresistible impulse to punish her, to insult her, to expose her guilt to the indignation of his friends, her friends, her parents, her past teachers and future employers. Eventually he realised he would not be able to tell their story to anyone: it was too humiliating, too awful.

The more he refrained from disclosing his shameful secret the more he dwelt upon it in his mind. He kept telling their story to himself. The longer the story grew the more he felt his loss, his defeat. He thought about that treacherous young lady day and night.

There is nothing else to think about.

5

He was shocked. He was shattered. And he felt doubly humiliated because he continued to think about her. She was happily married. A high-flying lifestyle and an extensive bank account. Her husband was rich and notorious for his dishonesty. A multimillionaire and a media star. And she had a son, a handsome young man. The pure, sweet joys of motherhood. Young fry of treachery!

Her son, her husband, night, her body, their bed, his own bed. The avalanche of lascivious images would descend upon him swiftly and mercilessly.

What Then Must We Do? Tolstoy's heroes chop a few fingers off and, if *that* does not suffice, they char the remaining fingers in the insidious flames of candles or stoves. And they run away until they fall on snowdrifts, breathless and freed at last from the bondage of desire.

He found Tolstoy's methods obsolete and disproportionately athletic.

He plundered Buddhist treatises:

Shortlived yourself, how can you find that others, quite as fleeting, are worthy of your love?

Thousands of births will pass without a sight of the woman you cherish so.

Thousands of births, thousands of deaths without a sight of that despicable woman! His idea of bliss. By that time she had already outgrown the definition 'young lady'.

Unreliable like happiness, she was *not* worthy of his love—certainly not! In this respect he had nothing to worry about: he maintained with conviction that he did not love her.

Nor did he love her on the woeful day of their farewell. 'Eternity,' he whispered. Their separation was not to be measured through insignificant words. And 'eternity' seems to be the only significant word in Time-vocabulary. Even *kalpa*—a legendary Hindu Time-measure equivalent to 4,752,000,000 human years—is not long enough to do justice to his disgust, to his revulsion.

She was not leading him on: he had heard about her marriage from somebody else, from a number of people. She was not concocting a love potion as a prelude to future raptures. Forsaking him for good. Eternity.

No urge to see her again, not even in a 1,000,000 years. Just once. This afternoon, before her husband comes back from his office.

He sank on the couch as if training himself for their future caresses.

Not even in a million years, not even on another planet. My aversion has spread over the solar system. Her ignominious, blasphemous blood has spurted on the Milky Way, all along the Milky Way. Her blood, her meaningful and meaningless blood.

It was too late to recite excerpts from Buddhist treatises:

*When unable to see your beloved, discontent disturbs our Samadhi;
When you have seen her, your longing, unsated as ever, returns as before.
Then you forfeit the truth of the Real; your fallen condition shocks you no longer;
Burning with grief you yearn for re-union with her whom you cherish.*

Just once. *Einmal ist keinmal. Une fois n'est pas coutume.* What happens but once does not exist. Only repetitions thrive in the memory of humanity. There's no reality without mirrors.

It was too late to read Buddhist precepts in the hope of healing existential maladies. It was too late to call her off: she was on her way already.

*Worries like these consume a brief life—over and over again to no purpose.
You stray from the Dharma eternal, for the sake of a transient friend.*

He ended up memorising these lines. He recited them here and there, whenever in need of psychological strengthening. He recited them every day, 3 times in the morning and 5 times in the evening. He recited them in a loud voice and with an eye to the dramatic effect, imitating professional exorcists.

During his customary walks in the city he used to stop in a more or less desolate place—a cul de sac, for example—and, after looking around to make sure nobody was within earshot, he would optimistically embark upon his recitation. He then continued his walk in peace, especially if there was no telephone box in sight—a not infrequent occurrence in Paris. His own telephone had been cut off because of wilful non-payment.

Every morning he purged his mind of impurities in bed, in the kitchen, while 2 or 3 croissants were losing their stiffness in the oven. Nothing could quell the weird impulses of his heart, influenced and inspired by his

memory—neither croissants nor the wisdom of Buddhist monks. He went out every day as soon as the evening shadows would gather around trees and windows. The trajectory of his walks was whimsical and yet predictable: he would end up in a sleazy nightclub full of middle-aged men. They all leered drunkenly at go-go dancers. She recognised him once, near a famous Russian restaurant; she did not touch his shoulder nor called out his name, as any old acquaintance would have done.

She used to be more than a mere acquaintance, more than a simple friend, more even than a dear long-standing friend who never lets you down and is traditionally asked to say a few words in front of your coffin. She was more than a loyal friend and less than a chance companion or a third cousin; she was as impossible to categorise as a literary masterpiece. And the years he spent without her, far away from her mist-like, almost mystical voice and her apricot-coloured, flawless skin, shed no light on her mysteries, on her ambiguities. Time did not enable him to unravel the threads of her secret which, oddly enough, was no secret at all: at the end of their improvised farewell ceremony she had told him everything.

'The profusion of details clouded the issue of fault and blame,' he wrote on a mirror with her lipstick, hesitant and dumbfounded. Through a glass, darkly? He did his best not to believe her words. For many months he was even unable to remember exactly what she had disclosed to him. Human memory, renowned for its fallibility, needs the support of logic to keep its treasures alive.

Her narrative seemed utterly illogical, if not fantastic—compared with his own feelings, impressions and observations. No wonder she liked Gothic novels, horror movies.

Of course he was quite inexperienced at the time, quite, quite inexperienced. He was too 'gullible', as she put it. On the other hand it was hardly foreseeable that so touching and sincere an adolescent should enmesh her only lover in a dazzling series of illusions and disillusion, making him a plaything of her cruelty and practicality. He was too gullible at the time. And today? He would have found her out; he would have burst into philosophical laughter. Perhaps. When they first met in Versailles, he was 17 years old.

6

He read Buddhist sutras. He prayed to the Christian God despite his innate scepticism. He read the Fathers of the Church:

If we chance upon a place containing a woman, and no other person be there but she only, we do not stop there, nor pray there, nor read the Scriptures there, but we flee as from before the face of a serpent, and as from before the face of sin.

She was much worse than a serpent.

Now we, if God help us, conduct ourselves thus: with maidens we do not dwell, nor have we anything in common with them. With maidens we do not eat, nor drink; and, where a maiden sleeps, we do not sleep.

His hands grasped the edge of the writing desk and, with a grunt of distaste—the weight of his lonely body had filled him with disgust—he pulled himself out of the armchair. 'Where a maiden sleeps, we do not sleep,' he repeated ironically. 'Where do we sleep then? Do we sleep at all?'

What attitude should we have towards women?

Try and avoid their sight.

What if a woman speaks to us?

Shut your eyes and your mouth.

What if she touches us?

Shy off like a frightened horse.

What if she tortures us with her caresses?

Run away.

What if she runs after us?

Take a bus.

What if she pursues us in a taxi?

Take a train or a plane.

What if she pursues us through the air on a broomstick?

Burn her at the stake because she is a witch.

He put his raincoat on, went out, edged his way through the crowd which had inexplicably assembled beneath his balcony and headed for the *Jardin du Luxembourg*. He needed to talk to someone on a bench, near a compassionate tree or shrub. From his painful experience, however, he knew that nobody had enough time to listen to his long, intricate story. Anyway he had no wish to turn those idle strollers into her judges, his judges.

He would have given anything to become a judge *prior* to her confession—a judge, a confessor who is a judge in disguise. (30 years later, during their last encounter, he assumed the role of a supreme judge, of an inquisitor.) What questions could have been put to her in those days?

Do you have impure and dishonest thoughts? When did you have them last? When did you have them first? How long have you been living with these impure thoughts? How long have they been gnawing their way into your mind, your heart and your soul? In which part of your body do they lodge? What are they focused upon? Where do they come from? Do they come from anywhere or are they self-induced? Is it your own body that induces them? Is it someone else's body? Do many bodies have sway over your thoughts? Have your impure thoughts been induced by obscene language? Have they been induced by lewd photographs or porn movies? Have your thoughts ever stirred you into action? What kind of unclean, immoral action have they given rise to? Do your spirits rise when you think your thoughts? Do you often have a sudden impulse to lick and suck your thoughts? Do you often play with yourself? Do you win? Do you often play with others? Do your partners lose? What do they lose? What about the voluptuous sensations you experience in the process? Are they stronger at the end than at the beginning? Do you always reach the end of the road? How many roads are there? Does the end justify the means? Are you still a virgin? When did you lose your virginity first? When did you lose your virginity last? How long did it last? How long did your last act of sexual intercourse last? Do you always look at men with lust in your eyes? Are you driven by the twin lusts for money and sex? How many lovers do you have on your copulation list? Is your copulation list as long as your arm? As long as your lovers' arms? As long as a tobacco-pipe? As long as a clarinet? As long as a stick? As long as an umbrella? Are you tempted to open the

umbrella? As long as a pillar? As long as a tree-trunk? As long and sharp as a pike? As long and sharp as a knife? As long and sharp as a dagger?

7

The ruins of their relationship affected his life so much that he ended up reducing it to one feeling only. Even his childhood was affected by those ruins—in hindsight. 'My mother forsook me as well,' he wrote. 'Didn't her womb expel me ruthlessly and without explanation after 9 months of tender loving care? And my grandmother.'

One sunny afternoon his grandmother softly detached herself from his fingers and began to walk away, implanting in his mind the notion of vacuity, of no-woman's land. He caught up with her; again she grew smaller. His legs were bending from weariness. He shouted and sobbed, but his grandmother was almost deaf. And she refused categorically to use the hearing-aid—a cumbersome apparatus his father had bought for her. So she vanished round a corner and he sat down on the pavement. There were no cars in sight. 2 men advanced upon him with indifferent, mask-like faces. 'I lost my grandmother,' he shouted. They did not hear him. They wore neither hearing-aids nor glasses. They strode by swiftly, as if on stilts. Humanity itself forsook him at that moment. An empty bus thundered past him. After a while his grandmother loomed up in the semi-darkness of the street-perspective. Her right hand was still clutching the void.

She denied her absent-mindedness with amazing perseverance. Till her dying day she did not lose her capacity to deny whatever she heard. And she heard enough to keep herself busy. When she heard nothing her fantasy would come to the fore, generating all sorts of irrelevant sounds.

8

Denying the progressive influence of Time, people do not *become* what they are. Some of them are born forsaken and die in absolute solitude, even if their funeral-services are broadcast throughout the solar system. Being forsaken is not an incident; it is a state of affairs. Loneliness is not a disease so nobody can be cured of it.

The forsaken carry their curse about them like a negative aura, like a dark halo. They are saints of the desert and their sand and dunes stretch before and behind them as they walk through the streets, along the boulevards.

He was of their number. Neither living creatures nor ghosts were in a position to influence his destiny. He kept them all at bay both in the daytime and in the night; and yet he was in no habit of snoring.

He never uttered her name in his sleep.

9

A single experience that is never to repeat itself is biologically irrelevant. Biological value lies only in learning the suitable reaction to a situation that offers itself again and again, in many cases periodically, and always requires the same response if the organism is to hold its ground.

Erwin Schrödinger, *Mind and Matter*

I swear. Just once. Her erotic tyranny will not be multiplied by the mirrors of my longings. Just once, just once.

Man's mind, when it is most intent upon any work, through its passion and effects, is joined with the mind of the stars and intelligences; and, being so joined, is the cause of some wonderful virtue being infused into our

words and things; and this, because there is in the mind an apprehension and power of all things, so all things have a natural obedience to it, and of necessity an efficacy; and more to that which desires them with a strong desire. And according to this is verified the art of characters, images, enchantments, and some speeches, and many other wonderful experiments as to everything which the mind affects. By this means, whatsoever the mind of him that is in vehement love, affects, hath an efficacy to cause love; and whatsoever the mind of him that strongly hates, dictates, hath an efficacy to hurt and destroy.

10

He discovered the haunting feeling of love rather early, at the age of 6. (6. The Hexagram, symbol of the Macrocosm and Microcosm interlaced.) As his world was still mostly confined to the building where he lived with his parents and a nearby garden he fell victim to the immature charms of his neighbour—a girl who was 5 months his senior. She was an excellent short-distance runner, but she knew no poems by heart and was much impressed by his pompous recitations and scholarly digressions. He gesticulated a lot. Once, in the blindness of poetic ardour, he unintentionally hit her in the face. She screamed and ran over to her mother. In other circumstances he might have compared her to a gazelle.

The incident tempered his longing for rhymes and verbal rhythms: he allowed her to burn *Elizabethan and Jacobean Poets* which, in obedience to her orders, he had stolen from his mother's library. (Zarina did not order him to burn anything, but his soul burst into flames on the day of her ruthless disclosure. And there was no one to put out the blaze: they were all at the fireman's ball, courtesy of Milos Forman.) As the flames encroached upon Christopher Marlowe she twisted her innocent mouth triumphantly and ran away. Forever. He never saw her again; yet she lived next door.

The sacrificial fire must also have burnt a part of his stock of love, for he paid no attention to girls until 67 months later. (67. BINH, the Great Mother. $6+7=13$ unites the ideas of Binah and Kether. A number of the aspiration.)

11

Was the feeling of love different from the onslaughts of sexual desire he began to experience around that time in connection with the female of the species? Or did he blend the 2 phenomena into one intoxicating *élan* of all senses, all thoughts, all instincts? He rubbed his body against mattresses and carpets. As he did so, some girl or other would tantalisingly emerge from the turbulent sea of his psyche. He loved those sea-born Venus-like girls both in his dreams and in real life so that everything—fancy, reality, love, desire—was constantly merging into one feeling, into a sort of sterile happiness. Differentiation came 5 years later.

He was approaching his twelfth year. Both his grey matter and his red corpuscles were charged with polymorphous perversity.

12

12. Useless. Mere symbol of the Goal.

One morning he found himself in the company of a beautiful girl—just another neighbour of his. In the meantime his world had grown considerably larger; he could have chosen his beloved not only on the Champs Elysées or on the Champs de Mars but also on the Riviera. And in the city of Toulon.

The lift got stuck; they were alone in the lift. He took no advantage of the classical situation that movie-stars re-create with elegance and dignity by pressing invisible buttons. He remained in his corner, silent and trembling. He had no wish to recite his favourite poems. Was the amplitude of his trepidation erotic enough to shake her out of her stupor? She did nothing to find a way out of the romantic situation. Their saviours seemed to be lurking behind the microphone incorporated into the wall of the immobile lift, but she kept silent. Nor did she attempt to get out through the ceiling, superwoman style. (Zarina acted otherwise: in her flight from his covetous body she squeezed into a great many chinks and crannies.) And when their invisible saviours did come to their rescue, releasing them from the prison of love, she cast an ambiguous glance at him—so ambiguous, in fact, that he read too many contradictory things into its moon-like glimmer.

3 months later he yielded at last to the sweeping rhythm of his desire and when they met again in the same lift—which did not get stuck, contrary to his calculations—he spasmodically pulled her into his corner. She freed herself and the doors started to glide apart, disclosing a tall old woman whose severity was greatly emphasised by a pair of gold-rimmed glasses.

He developed an inordinate liking for corners that seemed to beckon to him in a sensual penumbra. His dreams abounded in lifts and walls. He floated up and down; the Great Wall of China was closing in on him to suggest an ardent embrace.

At home he spent a lot of time in corners. His parents conjectured that he was punishing himself for some unknown misdemeanour. They admired his moral strength but wondered whether they should not participate in that self-reproach to preserve their godlike superiority. Indeed only *they* could judge their son with the requisite detachment—the fruit of experience and parental omniscience.

For all their questioning, they elicited no pertinent remarks from their taciturn boy who kept frowning and biting his lips. A few drops of blood appeared on his lips one rainy afternoon. It was a meaningful sign: like a crystal ball, those drops contained his future. His mother removed them with her handkerchief—a staunch accomplice of disappearances.

13

He continued to devote his spare time to the enigma of his movements which obstinately led him to a cluster of walls—not to open spaces, not to the courtyard swarming with boisterous children.

His beloved would push him away; her chastity or squeamishness did not put him off; he still hoped to achieve a tangible result. He had no idea what the word 'tangible' might mean in the context, but he knew it had to be tangible, extremely tangible.

He was innocent and untutored in the complex mechanisms of human procreation. Whenever questioned on the subject, his father quoted Genesis: 'Be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth, and subdue it.' His mother would raise her arms in a helpless gesture. One day that blank space of ignorance grew black. A robust boy who was 5 years his senior asked him a few indiscreet questions in the school playground. Having received a few incorrect answers, he generously expounded the laws of gravity. 'You should have dragged her down onto the floor,' he rounded off.

Gravity acts within and between stars, planets and humans. Gravity makes something fall if you drop it.

His dreams now acquired a horizontal shape. Endless floors unfolded before him; he rolled on them from one infinity to another. An infinite number of hostile hands kept him away from female bodies.

Nobody was falling in his overpopulated, counterpane landscapes; everybody was flying around him. As he rolled on and on towards a new infinity numberless females skimmed gracefully above his head, often brushing against his hair and shoulders. Insensitive to his gravitational attraction, they pushed him away whenever he tried to catch their bodies. They wriggled out of his clumsy embrace and slipped through his butter fingers. They died away like the notes of a flute.

14

He had quite a number of sex tutors. They would give their lascivious lectures on the step of a shadowy porch, on spiral staircases; desperately he grasped the sticky banisters for fear of losing his balance.

Each of his tutors had his own inimitable style. Jérôme kept bending his knees to illustrate some tricky aspect of lovemaking, but only succeeded in imitating a horse-rider. (One of Zarina's favourite postures.) Antoine's explanations were so abstruse that unconsciously his numberless pupils leant forward to get a better look at the object and method of his discourse. Gérard's glasses slid off his perspiring nose and turned into a few iridescent splinters on the marble pedestal of the grand Trianon. During the second lecture Jérôme went down on his knees and, having produced a series of suggestive sounds, crawled all the way to the adjacent room where he remained for quite a long time, breathing profusely. Another example of appropriate breathing was supplied by Michel who, in the heat of the demonstration, looked and sounded like a horror-movie monster advancing upon his future victims.

Horse-riders, monsters, goats and monkeys constituted the frame into which he would insert his imaginary love stories, his improbable happy endings, his life.

15

'So I taught an old dog—'

'I'm not a dog. Or old, for that matter.'

St Peter Damian regarded women as 'tigresses' and 'vipers'.

'The horse-rider.'

Well, I slipped up. Our farewell ceremony was to last only 15 minutes longer. Zarina would have married me had I sworn she was the love of my life.

'I had to spur you on. I couldn't just lie in bed, doing nothing.'

'I'm not a horse either, am I?'

'But you're a man, aren't you?'

'I loved you. Wasn't that enough?'

That was *not* enough. I ought to have asked for her hand.

'You didn't. Why are you lying?'

'Why did *you* lie?'

'If I'd known about your love, I would never have—'

'You betrayed humanity,' he said.

She smiled sardonically. How could she smile that afternoon? 'I betrayed a few men.' She was good at subtraction.

'I loved you. Didn't you feel it?'

'Why didn't you say so? You said just the opposite, as a matter of fact.'

'When?'

'Many times.'

'Many times? I didn't want—'

'—to admit it to yourself? Another quote? Let me guess—Cary Grant?' Again she smiled. No wonder. Even God was smiling that afternoon.

'I thought you'd leave me if I played things straight. Most women love a cad.'

He *was* lying. He was longing to make her pity him. He strove to augment the quantity of pity in the world.

16

Young ladies were strutting around and he followed them with his moist glance. He would address the nearest beauty, asking her a most innocent question. The answers he received were as foggy as the opening of *Bleak House*.

Suddenly Last Summer. Torn Curtain.

She was prettier than Baby Jane in the old movie.

He suggested that they talk for half an hour. She agreed. He began to talk, stopped, caught a glimpse of her clandestine smile and ascribed it to his innate sense of humour.

'Shall we go somewhere?' he asked, stroking the nearest wall. He was practising assiduously for their future ecstasies.

She suggested a little stroll along the capricious, meandering alley that was to enrich his geometry-dominated studies with a non-Euclidian curve.

As they reached a huge American car he began to search for a new joke. He looked around, scoured despondently through the archives of his memory and finally got lost in a disorder of trivialities.

'It's windy today, isn't it?' Inspired by the sinister copse in *Blow-Up*, the parc de Versailles seemed to repulse them with negative vibes.

5 hours later he did his best to imitate Buster Keaton. At the end of *The Cameraman*, Buster Keaton imitates a movie star on whose elegant love-labours he is spying from the projection-room. Woody Allen takes over by imitating Humphrey Bogart's behaviour in *Casablanca*. A relay-race of kisses, no less!

17

They met 2 days later but did not walk as far as the cars and trees. They talked for 5 minutes only; the weight of untold jokes oppressed him for a whole week. He tasted her lips so many times his tongue went numb as if after a dentist's vile injection. And he imitated so many movies that, for almost a week, he completely lost *his* voice, *his* natural gait, *his* vocabulary.

Those Hollywood-sanctioned professionals were far better versed in the science of love than his former sex tutors, but the impossibility of getting a relevant, timely piece of advice turned him into a mirror-like disciple. He simply repeated his models' actions without developing them into something organically alive and suitable to his temperament, his successive moods. Their distant and temporal presence was no help in the ever-changing texture of the world he had to face day and night—under the chestnut trees, in the last row of numerous

movie-houses. No parental hand was lying on his shoulder; no unwritten word issued from those spectral lips that gradually melted away into the dusty greyness of the television screen, into the darkness of nights.

Some words and songs were out of place, out of tune with his age and surroundings:

*Why didn't I meet you before, my darling,
In those days when I was younger and stronger*

And he never uttered the sentence he had heard so often both on the radio and on television: 'Just think of all the years we haven't had together.'

Once he gave her a juicy slap on the bottom—in imitation of Gary Cooper's fury. (In *The Eighth Wife of Bluebeard* Gary Cooper reads *The Taming of the Shrew* and enthusiastically adopts Petruchio's methods.) She slammed the door like Rita Hayworth.

He walked back and forth with a human-like motion but, at the same time, he neither walked nor squatted nor slept. James Stuart did.

He converted his life into a huge repository for phantoms. *He* did.

18

Then something went wrong. He did not find out what it was; he bombarded her with questions. At the time the female custom of eluding questions, either direct or indirect, was unfamiliar to him. (At their last meeting Zarina answered the questions he had never asked.) He suspected foul play—a slanderous tongue, a plot; she was merely walking away from him.

That deaf-and-mute episode of his past life is in no way comparable to the movie-world where all motives, all hints are brought to a satisfying or unsatisfying conclusion, a happy or unhappy end. However obscure, the beginning acquires a logical outline, a realistic tint as the film progresses, unfolding its all-over pattern. The final stroke of screen-fate explains and justifies everything—even the phenomena that can never be justified, accounted for, explained scientifically.

Their end was an unhappy one. (There were no happy endings in his life.) Its utter absurdity seemed to be borrowed from another film, another galaxy.

She invariably made for an exit—the nearest one—as soon as he would utter a syllable. The slightest movement of air was liable to irritate her, increasing the distance between them. So many walls interposed between her conduct and his utter bewilderment that he would automatically open every door in his apartment, making his father shrink with displeasure.

Sometimes he would do the opposite and shut all the doors in his apartment, even the invisible ones—to keep her in. The lordly aside he had heard in *Gilda* was a neat little solution to his problem: 'She didn't know then what was happening to her. She didn't know then that what she heard was the door closing on her own cage.'

A haunting refrain of my life. Shall I put her in a cage? In my room? In a pumpkin shell? Without food, without air. How long can one live without water, without a drop of water? 'The dew of heaven and severe fasting quench in a girl the flame of passion and enable her soul even in its earthly tenement to live the angelic life.' I'll read St Jerome's letters to her. And she'll meditate upon them while licking the dew from the flowers on

my balcony. 'For you must act against nature or rather above nature if you are to forswear your natural function, to cut off your own root, to cull no fruit but that of virginity, to abjure the marriage-bed, to shun intercourse with men, and while in the body to live as though out of it.'

Besides the virtues of words and names, there is also a greater virtue found in sentences, from the truth contained in them, which hath a very great power of impressing, changing, binding and establishing, so that being used it doth shine the more, and being resisted is more confirmed and consolidated; which virtue is not in simple words, but in sentences, by which anything is affirmed or denied; of which sort are verses, enchantments, imprecations, deprecations, orations, invocations, obtestations, adjurations, conjurations, and such like.

19

The earth looks like a screen on which our movie is permanently projected. Where from? Who knows. From another planet perhaps, not too remote, not too desolate. Who dwells on that planet? A cameraman, a film producer? Who is he? Who are they? God, gods, demons, supermen, superwomen? Where did they get the money to finance the film that ramifies over the continents and oceans and stretches as far as the moon? Where did they find so many actors? How did they form our multinational cast which, on account of its dazzling variety, reproduces every nuance of the earthly existence?

Is the film a commercial success? Is it a flop? Who is watching it day and night? Where are the cinema-goers for whom the film has been made? Is it really commercial?

Do they call it a horror-movie or a western—an earthen? Do they laugh often or seldom or never? Do they cry like old ladies who keep a score of handkerchiefs in the sleeves of their dresses and blouses?

Do they criticise us? Do they laugh at us or do they think we are not worth wasting their breath upon? Do they switch off the projector, from time to time? No. Life goes on. Life must go on for some obscure extraterrestrial reason.

Are they not bored to death? Do they go through the endless tedium of their projection to draw important lessons from our errors and crimes? Might these errors be avoided or are they part and parcel of the script? Is her crime in the script? In Holy Writ? Not in any writ of habeas corpus, alas.

Why didn't they shoot another movie? Was it possible? Is it their first movie or is it already *another* movie—the second, the third or the fifth? How many movies have they made? Are they all alike, those movies—not worthy of respect or discussion? Are they all tedious?

Why don't they choose a more discriminating pastime? Why do they love cinema so much? Do they? Are they forced to fiddle with reels, cameras, make-up and costumes? There are so many engrossing hobbies apart from film-making! Are there? Is it their profession rather than a hobby? Are they professionals? Certainly not.

They are not even amateurs. Nor are they sorcerer's apprentices. Not even sorcerer's apprentices.

20

Many of us hold newspapers in high esteem and believe that history is created by journalists and photographers. Television is commonly regarded as a living newspaper—the quintessence of our time, the meeting place of its heroes. A human life that has never been squeezed into the magic rectangle fades out, fades away, merging anonymously into the darkness of oblivion. Television is our glimmering memory.

What do we remember? Smiling people talk to us as if they were our dearest friends, our brides and bridegrooms. They tell us that life is beautiful and, to preclude any objection, they demonstrate how beautiful it is. Then their faces grow mournful and a dozen nuclear explosions bloom into evil flowers upon the desert air. Then the flowers fade and they smile once more. They invite us to play with them. We accept the invitation and a glistening car glides towards us from the wings. We are given the key and drive away—straight into the realm of happiness; and into the darkness of oblivion. Some women cry in a jungle but they are soon replaced by a new smile baring its wonderful teeth. A hand is raised—a gesture of assurance. Another hand is shown, a tube of toothpaste lying on its huge, generous palm. 2 rows of teeth sparkle like diamonds. 4 rows of teeth sparkle like diamonds. And a row of diamonds sparkles like Hollywood-sanctioned teeth. Nothing can tarnish that reassuring image. A dozen great men greet us from their pedestals; within half an hour they become their own monuments. A thunderous applause suggests invisible, admiring crowds. All over the world men and women rise from their chairs and applaud their idols—louder and louder and louder. The number of decibels does not reach the required level; the sound engineer frowns and millions of people burst into a hymn-like song. They sing and applaud, they applaud and sing; and they smile. A hand is raised again. They stop singing and burst into laughter. All over the world men and women laugh with such disarming sincerity that they contaminate other planets, far-off galaxies. The universe trembles and swerves off its orbit.

And then the universe is switched off.

21

The universe is switched off. You look around and see a black rectangle. You press all the buttons you can lay your hands on, but nothing happens, nothing lightens. You draw all the curtains aside; there are no windows. There are only doors leading nowhere. And when somebody raps at your door, you cannot open it: the key is gone. And you double-locked your door before turning in. Somebody talks beyond your door. Somebody talks to you from behind your door.

22

Zarina was open-hearted. She was quite explicit about whatever entered the sphere of their union. With an astonishing lack of discretion she told him everything *spontaneously*: he was too polite to ask that kind of question. And suddenly she announced:

'If you promise to marry me I'll leave my fiancé.' Perhaps her charitable suggestion was prompted by his tears.

He said, bewildered, 'You don't love him, do you?'

Another blunder. I ought to have promised her the earth. Our vineyard in Burgundy, a *château* in the Loire Valley.

She answered, unabashed, 'I do. But I love you more.'

'Why?'

'Because I met him only 5 days ago.'

He did his utmost to fight back his unmanly tears, but with no success. There was nothing pathologically exceptional in his weakness; even Hercules (or his modern double—Batman) could not have done better in the circumstances.

No face-saving manoeuvre was conceivable that sunny afternoon. So he continued to cry and talk to her as if words still had the same meaning and might convey anything to anybody; as if sounds could make up words.

'You're not a woman! You've betrayed human history. You've excluded yourself from humankind.'

'I loved you. Is that a crime?'

'It's a symbol of the human soul. One of our most precious symbols.'

'But you didn't care at the time. You recited an excerpt from Marlowe's poem. You told me about that boy in Versailles who dreamt of pure innocent girls and talked about their blood on his sheets, on his blanket. He was the laughing stock of his fellow students. They thought purity led to neurasthenia, didn't they? "Beware of virgins" was your motto, wasn't it?'

'A horrible blasphemy. How could you?'

'I wish you'd do something to help yourself instead of just wallowing in self-pity!'

I ought to have done *something*.

'One must draw the line somewhere.'

Nowhere. There are no lines to be drawn.

'It's hard to know where to draw the line.' She gently pulled him towards her.

'Don't!' he vociferated and calmly she let him go. She no longer needed him.

'I just wanted to kiss you. Is it a crime?'

'Against humanity...*Judgement at Nuremberg*.' He was crying and spoke in a choked voice.

'What are you talking about?'

'Deportations, genocide. Do you remember—'

'Of course. Why?'

'Why did you tell me the truth? You didn't have to. No real woman would ever have confessed to such a sin. Better to die.'

'You've killed my love. Murderer!'

'How can you live after that?'

'How can *you* live after that?'

He never recovered. 10 years later, 30 years later, he was still in a state of shock, in the grip of her enigma.

22. The number of letters in the Hebrew Alphabet; and of the paths on the Tree. Hence suggests completion of imperfection. Finality, and fatal finality.

23

There are a great many enigmas in this world of ours and some of them are insoluble. There are big and small enigmas; they exist side by side and often interpenetrate, intermingle, creating all sorts of hybrids that often turn out to be even more enigmatic than their 'simple' components.

The biggest enigma is Time. We cannot single it out from the other phenomena of our existence and fix it somewhere for the sake of our telescopes and microscopes. Like God, Time worms itself into every fissure of the universe. Fluid and elusive, Time is everywhere and nowhere. (Some theologians affirm that God is Time.) Time pervades even its own 'substance': the past overlaps the present and the future, the future overlaps the present and

the past. Human consciousness is like a newspaper magnate's office. There is a row of clocks and each tells a different time: Paris, Tokyo, London, Los Angeles, Chernobyl...

Measurement of Time differs radically from our handling of Space: a minute is sometimes bigger than an hour and so on. '30 years have elapsed between my tearful breakdown and my last phone call. I'll never ever call anyone. 30 years. They seem as vast as human history with all its wars, droughts and maladies.'

Those 30 years approached the frontiers of eternity, overflowing the receptacle of his own life. In comparison with their vastness his ancestors were just caterpillars crawling up and down a baobab-tree. Yet his grandfather died at the age of 98. And the history of Rome lasted no longer than a movie featuring Roman Emperors and Christian martyrs—2 and a half hours approximately.

He was waiting for her now. His impatience had abolished Ancient Greece and the history of China. And she was late, she was late. Her lack of punctuality threatened Neanderthal man.

What delayed her? She used to be so punctual. 'Those 30 years might have changed her habits,' he thought. What else did he think about? Did he think at all?

Our streets are crammed with people, cars and prams. Once she showed up at a quarter to 5. The bus driver had a fainting fit. He couldn't drive because he suffered from epilepsy. 3 years of happiness. Is that enough to feel happy *always*? Till Doomsday? Why did she decide to marry *him*? He wasn't the first. Money, I suppose. A golden goose, the Golden Calf. The way she talked to me last time. She knew she would never need me again. Never. Imprudent and impudent. The calculated move of an ambitious woman. In a film she would be depicted as a very cold and calculating character. We're going to be married. You had no intention of marrying me, did you? Of course I didn't, out of the question. She used to come every week, twice a week. What a wonderful father I had. And my mother followed him like a faithful wife. They left me in peace. Dinners, beaches, mountains. And we owned a vineyard in Burgundy. I had a second key cut and gave it to her. And she gave me her key. Once I didn't hear her come in. She appeared in the doorway of my room...naked...stark naked...like a phantom. I didn't dare touch her. Did I say anything? What did I say? What did my words impart to her? Did *she* understand me? Words are dead and buried. But silence is even more treacherous than words. And silence is unbearably boring. 30 years. Of course I had no intention of marrying her. I didn't love her. The only woman I wished to marry. Was I in love with *her*? I was. I wish she could come now, instead of Zarina. I didn't love Zarina but I loved women in general. I loved female bodies and dark-blue female souls. I loved their mysteries, their exits and entrances. I pitied my former tutors. Their straightforwardness, influenced no doubt by the sound-breaking, sense-destroying velocity of our epoch, deprived their relationship with women of an enticing, Proustian perspective. Proust, Choderlos de Laclos. *Le charme des long combats*, as vicomte de Valmont put it in his letter to the marquise de Merteuil. *Le charme des long combats*.

His mental life was far more disorderly, tumultuous: no amount of suspension points might render the hustle and jostle of his doubts, presentiments and philosophical conclusions. The total absence of punctuation is of no help either. But the longer he waited, the more his thoughts crystallised into the geometrical pattern of inevitability.

I wasn't particularly fond of Zarina's body. What did I use to tell her? How I liked teasing her! Your body presents a number of easily detectable flaws. Delectable flaws. And I would strip her clothes off. And I would ask her to lean against a wall or a table. Why did she put up with all this? Money? My social milieu? Her shoulders...her breasts...flawless. I wasn't in love with her. Did I know what I felt? Did I understand the

chattering fibrillations of my heart, the *bel canto* of my soul? Her voice. And what about my caresses? Were *they* ambiguous? As ambiguous as silence? Did she understand me? The main thing is not to die. Not to die now, before she comes. Before she presses the button of the doorbell. Before she saunters into my room. Before she pulls her gloves off. The sluggishness of Time. Stand-offish. Can't wait to accomplish my purifying ritual. Time never co-operates with my impatience. Her melodious breasts, her rebellious heart. Purifying ritual indeed! Come, come! Help me! Help me forget this slut!

The last entreaty was addressed to the only woman he 'officially' loved—his former fiancée. For all her efficiency and kindness, she would not have saved him.

24

Why he, who had no children, would presume to appear among those who had? Adding, that his offerings could never be acceptable to God, who was judged by him unworthy to have children; the Scripture having said, Cursed is every one who shall not beget a male in Israel.

The Gospel of the Birth of Mary

One day he decided to fall in love with a beautiful and trustful woman: there is no better remedy for love than another love. He hoped he would love his son, relying on the Pygmalion-complex to wall up the gloomy catacombs of his memory; he aspired to raise his son in accordance with his ideals.

With a few exceptions, all representatives of the human species endeavour to become immortal. Some write poems or paint pictures in the hope that the future might borrow its atmosphere and style from their craftsmanship. Others, incapable of giving artistic or scientific expression to the *perpetuum mobile* of their brains, limit their 'immortal' activities to their family, to the material prolongation of human history.

Unlike inspiration and metaphors, human flesh is solid, trustworthy. His pride, however, had to be nourished by something more spiritual than human flesh. 'Besides,' he reflected, 'anybody can beget children, those belated fruits of our leisure and desires. No particular talent is needed for the multiplication of human flesh.' Health is no talent, no genius—just a normal state of affairs.

Through his child he was determined to immortalise his thoughts, his mentality, handing down his *brain* to future generations. His brain seemed to lie in his virtual son's hands like a ready-made sculpture exhibited by one of Duchamp's followers.

He intended to talk to his son about 'windy poetry', about a kind of Neapolitan song that bursts upon our ears at the end of the first movement of Brahms' *String Quintet* op. 111. 'I'll mention this pleasant anomaly in my lecture on inspiration and its detours. And I'll devote 5 days to rhythm and its deviations, making him listen to Stravinsky's neo-classical works, showing him *The Battleship Potemkin* and some Hartung paintings.'

25

He fell in love with a beautiful brunette to whom he immediately offered an engagement ring that she accepted with delight. She moved to his flat and assumed control of his everyday life. One morning the doorbell jarred the silence, interrupting their breakfast ritual. Ignoring his protestations, she opened the door and announced triumphantly: '*Une lettre recommandée.*'

'Show him in, show him in. Have you ever seen this postman?'

'Never,' she replied truthfully.

'The symbol of my business trips. "Sign", as Roland Barthes might put it. I was supposed to mix with those strangers, with those foreigners. I was supposed to *decipher* them. They were hiding and I was looking for them. Everywhere! That's what my job was about. Just fancy! Looking for them, looking for them. They weren't hiding in closets, like your future lovers. They were hiding in the air.'

His fiancée said something to the effect that other people had to work. The postman asked him to sign the register.

'The sign,' he approved. 'They play cat and mouse with their adversary. They do their best to thwart the plans of their adversary. *I* am their adversary. I'm supposed to have plans.' He stopped for breath and gave a hiccup. 'They shorten my words. They eliminate their curves and tints. They wrench my meaning until it bends and turns into a monstrosity. They wring my words' necks!' He gave another hiccup. 'Those sidelong looks, those watchful eyes, those inquiring eyebrows.' He shifted his gaze to the postman.

'That's how they looked at me. That's how they looked for me. And they found me, they did. I was everywhere. *Das Verfallen!*'

He held out his hand. They shook hands and the postman shrank back in horror, as Don Juan did after shaking hands with the stone-cold Commander.

'That's how they shake hands with me. There's a lot of similarity between this man and those men...despite the tremendous diversity of the universe. It's a small world. But there's a world of difference between my style of life and theirs, between my mentality and their mercenary schemes. A *big* world!'

'Why don't you try and get the best of both worlds?' she asked playfully.

'I don't enjoy parties where I have to make small talk with complete strangers,' he continued, unperturbed and unabashed. 'I'm not going to contribute towards the creation of small worlds. How many hands have I shaken over the last ten years? *Enchanté!* Nice to meet you! And those accents: British, American, Javanese, Tunisian, Tyrolian, Tartar, Thessalonian. Nice to meet you! Welcome! One of my pet hates is people who use your name all the while when they're speaking to you. I still hear their voices. I used to hear only my voice, my monologue, my brook of consciousness. Talking to myself day and night. Now I hear a sort of chorus whose members roam around my flat and accost me in the streets. And those hands touching me from above, from below...those hands that squeeze my hands, tap on my shoulders...those fingers that drum on tables and armchairs. And those mouths floating around hotel suites. And around my room. And those teeth, those dentitions. *Die alltäglichsste und hartnäckigste Realität!* Why didn't I cram cheque books and banknotes into their mouths? Why didn't I make them crawl to a rubbish bin or a sewer, using St Francis' method? He considered it improper to touch money with his hands. Accordingly his followers would kneel down, pick coins up with their teeth and run to the nearest dunghill in order to bury them in it. But they should crawl on all fours, our businessmen. On all fours, for hours and hours. Still they realise...sometimes...even them. They become aware...in a Japanese garden. One of them buried his face in his hands and murmured, "Peace, peace, peace." Do you recall that businessman who draws a flower in Antonioni's *L'eclisse*...just before blowing his brains out? Purity. The virginal sense of beauty!'

He denounced the false simplicity of contemporary novels, their true stupidity. 'The film-industry, painting, the whole gamut of contemporary life!' He gave her the thumbs down. 'Rambo is already in our midst!'

After the postman's departure his thoughts switched to music—to Beethoven of all composers. 'A strain of Schopenhauerian pessimism runs through his music. All his life Beethoven must have regarded himself as an outcast—even before the advent of deafness. And he must have resented this state of affairs, his own moods and

feelings. And he did his best to become a kind of Schopenhauerian, Hindu sage rejoicing in the immortality of the species and contemplating with equanimity the sufferings of an individual—his own sufferings. His *Ode to Joy* is an outcome of the deep-rooted longing to mingle with the crowd, abolishing the will-to-live and becoming everybody and nobody. Many of Haydn's works are "odes to joy" in their own right. The finale of Beethoven's *Ninth* is rather hysterical in comparison with those natural-sounding hymns to life and humankind. This *Ode to Joy* reminds me of Marco Bellocchio's film *I pugni in tasca*, of its final sequence. Just another finale, you know. An epileptic puts on a recording of Violetta's famous aria. Just another "ode to joy". He listens and sings—out of tune, out of tempo. He listens and sings and dances. The longer he sings the further he gets from the tune and the tempo. And from life. He dances out of life, so to speak. That's the *Ode to Joy* for you. *An die Freude*.'

'Should he have listened to Beethoven's *Ninth*, in your opinion? Or do you wish to imply that Beethoven was an epileptic himself, like Dostoevsky?' She continued to parade her playful disposition.

'The first and second movements reflect the effort he had to make in order to overcome his aversion to gregarious feelings. And then he realises that some respite from 2 movements of inner struggle is indispensable. He luxuriates in a hot bath, giving free rein to experiment with new themes and techniques. Why didn't he compose an unfinished symphony? Why didn't he remain in a hot bath, leaving humanity to its own devices? After all, he'd been left out in the cold. Instead he resumes the struggle in the finale that sounds like an *Ode to Doubt* at first. Or like an *Ode to Vacillation*. Or an *Ode to Irresolution*. Why didn't he stop after the introduction? It wasn't too late, was it? Even in his last quartet that was written *after* the *Ode to Joy* he asked himself the same question: "*Muss es sein?*" Why did he answer "*Es muss sein*"? He could have repudiated the *Ode to Joy*, composing a sort of postscript—a symmetrical echo to the introduction. Even in the middle of the *Ode* proper there's a weird moment when the victory seems to hang in the balance. The choir stammers as if horrified by Schiller's text, by the desire to embrace the millions.'

26

At that time he began to paint landscapes, sometimes giving a human touch to their blurry perspectives with a vertical stroke.

'Are they human beings?' wondered his fiancée, staring at those strangers from afar as if afraid of them. Indeed they seemed to have been catapulted into the landscapes from another galaxy.

'Don't you recognise me?' he asked her at last. 'I've lived in my paintings for many years.'

'But you began to paint only several months ago.'

He shrugged her commentary off and broke into a perplexing soliloquy: 'Better to live in a painting, isn't it? Better than in a city.'

'Don't you like Versailles?'

'The same houses and puddles, the same poodles kept on leads by the same pedestrians. And the same gloomy sky multiplied to no purpose—in the puddles, in the pedestrians' eyes. I know Versailles like the back of my hand or rather like the palm of my hand. Haven't you noticed I often study the palm of my left hand, hoping to read my future in it? I also hope to find an exhaustive, clear-cut explanation of the past. My past is in Versailles, my future in Paris. And it's in Paris that I'll cut the Gordian knot of the past. The only way to deal with it is by cutting the knot. Do you know that my parents were planning to leave Versailles? They dilly-dallied for several years but just before the accident—'

'It's so dangerous to drive in the rain!' she said.

'Even singing in the rain is dangerous—you can get a sore throat. Do you know that my mother dabbled in poetry? Picking up a pen whenever a sad piece of news was announced on the radio or television. The sheets of paper to which she confided the "murmur of her heart" always bore some vestiges of her tears. But she never cried "off-duty"—when deprived of her pen and secretaire. As if her lachrymal glands could only be activated by rhymes and iambic pentameter. She wrote in English, you know. She was half-English, on her mother's side. It's she who instilled a love for poetry into your obedient servant.'

And suddenly he recited an excerpt from Marlowe's *Hero and Leander*:

*And with smooth speech her fancie to assay,
Till in his twining armes he lockt her fast,
And then he woo'd with kisses, and at last,
As sheap-heards do, her on the ground hee layd,
And tumbling in the grasse, he often strayd
Beyond the bounds of shame, in being bold
To eie those parts, which no eie should behold.
And like an insolent commaunding lover,
Boasting his parentage, would needs discover
The way to new Elisium: but she,
Whose only dower was her chastitie,
Having striv'ne in vaine, was now about to crie,
And crave the helpe of sheap-heards that were nie.*

27

Once his fiancée awakened him at a quarter to 7 and brought the alarm clock to his half-opened eyes.

'6.45?' He closed his eyes.

'You'll be late,' she said. 'As usual.'

'As usual' was quite superfluous and therefore provocative. They had not shared the same apartment long enough to allow her to draw a *general* conclusion from his moods and whims. He was not *usually* late; she could not know for sure he was *always* loath to exchange his apartment for a hotel room.

She went to the bathroom and he heard a cascade-like humming which, in other circumstances, would have been quite pleasant to his ears and his mind.

'Today water is unrecognisable.' He reached for a box of *boules Quiès* earplugs and closed his eyes once again.

'Did you put on your dressing gown?' she cried from the bathroom. He did not hear her. 'What are you waiting for?' she cried, leaning over his blanket. He sat up with a start and then, after resuming his former position, began to roll from one half of the bed to the other.

'Do you know what time it is now?' Once again she showed him the alarm clock. She touched his temples, threatening to remove the ear-plugs.

With the help of his arms and shoulders he explained that his aversion to airports was no harbinger of his senility. 'You can embark on a round-the-world trip without leaving your bed, the fraternal warmth of your sheets. You only have to pile a sufficient number of timetables on your blanket. Their down-to-earth preciseness will endow the fairy-tale flight of your fantasy with the semblance of truth, with a Flaubertian touch.' He pointed out that even in his cradle he had preferred immobility to movement, postcards to real-life views, old engravings to photographs—like Proust's grandmother. 'Anyway both heaven and earth fit into the palm of my left hand. This doesn't mean, however, that I'm on friendly terms with God or my fellow creatures. The question "Does God exist?" is not on my agenda for the simple reason that there's nothing on my agenda. And my fellow creatures do not exist—at least in my landscapes.'

She went to the adjacent room and he heard the beginning of *Stars and Stripes Forever*. Or was it *Hands Across the Sea*? He confused these military marches, especially in the morning. He could not bear the triumphant, buoyant, tuba-consolidated rhythm rushing into his room from the wide-open door.

She went to the bathroom and a few seconds later deposited a tube of toothpaste and his toothbrush on the pillow, in proximity to his mouth.

She tried to sing a cheerful, pick-me-up song. She sang out of tune for 5 minutes.

'Albert told me last week—' she began.

'Albert doesn't realise that empty spaces are full of ecstasies. He locks himself in his appointment book, in his cheque book. He's a virgin, your Albert. He has never made love to life. Do you appreciate virgins?'

*Virginitie, albeit some highly prize it,
Compar'd with marriage, had you tried them both,
Differs as much as wine and water doth.*

28

She kept on walking around the room. She talked and smoked. He was lying in his bed.

'You must have a goal,' she said.

'A goal? But I'm not a goalkeeper. What's more, I hate football and, generally speaking, all gregarious games. Of course I'm aware that you're a gregarious, outgoing sort of person. Pigeons are gregarious birds. And blackbirds tend to be solitary. I'm a blackbird, you see. Baked in a pie.'

'So you're not as solitary as all that,' she cut in. 'There are 23 blackbirds around you, in the same pie.'

'A goal indeed! You want me to trudge from one goal to another, from third floor to fifth floor, from fifth floor to twentieth floor. And if I don't climb the stairs *immediately* I may lose the advantage of the floor I'm standing on *now*. You're caring for me splendidly, aren't you? Never, never, never, never, never! Every minute is a supreme goal. And I am a keeper of minutes. My brothers. I am not a tourist travelling from one monument to another. Besides, I cannot travel. I'm baked in a pie—don't forget that!'

'Why don't you let me open the pie?' she inquired in all innocence.

'Every inch is a monument. We shouldn't live from one *important* event to another. There's nothing unimportant in our life. Everything is important. Everything is an event, an ecstasy. We should explore the *texture* of life. You shouldn't say to yourself, "I'll live in 5 minutes, in 5 months, in 55 months." If you don't live *now*, you'll never live, never! Most people skim over Time. They're content with abstract values, with numbers,

with other people's notions of happiness. Which floor is it? Which floor is it? Their favourite question. The only question they ask themselves and others.'

'And the Philosophers' Way? Don't you want to see it again?'

'Hypocrisy,' he answered. 'Those cherry trees are black.'

She raised her eyebrows.

'A trivial manifestation of surprise,' he commented. 'Are you really surprised, amazed? Have I never spoken to you about colours before? Have I never told you about the hypocrisy of Japanese gardens? In Kyoto tourists must carry about lie detectors.' She seemed alarmed by an all-too-familiar expression in his face. 'Why don't you blush? Why don't you play games with me? Cherry trees are always blushing.'

'Not always,' she corrected.

'Always. Even in wintertime they're red. And black. Their souls are black. Do you think they have souls? Cherry trees? Why don't you leave me? You've been planning to move away for some time, haven't you? You can do so whenever you please. At once. Do we need a farewell ceremony?'

She went to her room and began to pack, occasionally dropping heavy family heirlooms. Soon her suitcases formed a pyramid at the vanishing point of the corridor.

Slowly he pulled the blanket over his head.

29

Humanity is possessed by the idea of progress. (Perhaps our history-permeated, Paradise-oriented religion is the chief contributor to that upward verve.) Some people rush ahead as if immobility or backward movement were incompatible with the very idea of human life. Their cars skid and plunge headlong over the cliff of the present. They fall into the chasm of the future, leaving chaos in their wake. They think that tomorrow will be far better than today; and yet today is no better than yesterday. They permanently put finishing touches to their self-portraits, failing to notice the thick layer of dust that covers those self-portraits from top to bottom. They regard Time as a terrace on which the Garden of Eden will one day grow. Unfortunately Time is uniform. Contrary to our expectations and conclusions, human life does not undulate in a passionate pattern of failures and achievements.

According to Leibniz, our soul contains in its substance the embryo of what is to happen in our lifetime. In other words we are always lugging around the cumbersome suitcase of our future—every single moment of it. Our final, irrevocable failure—death—casts a shadow over our so-called triumphs; their utter sterility is evident to anyone who takes the trouble to smash through the looking glass of everyday events.

If we could see our lives from the outside—from a window of the house opposite, for instance—we would not rejoice at our subtleties and talents; nor would we deplore our blunders.

We might have avoided many errors, many crimes.

30

Humanity has been going downhill ever since Adam's birth. (Downcliff.) Some have the courage to condemn that downward drift, that *Weltverdüsterung*, denigrating the present moment and praising the one which is no longer on the dial of life. 'I don't know what we're coming to' may be heard even in prosperous countries, even

when the weather is magnificent. Somebody looks up and, taking no notice of the virgin-like blueness, says with a frown: 'It's a pity' or 'What a tragedy'.

The first decade of our century might have become the last decade of human history had my opinion been as influential as earthquakes and hydrogen bombs.

The examples of human degeneration are eloquent and ruthless. A renowned American physicist decides to spend his vacation on the European continent. He communicates this laudable plan to his wife and children; several weeks later they all take a Pan Am flight to Rome. During their kaleidoscopic trip they also visit France and Portugal. They return to the States and tell their relatives that they are happy to be back at last. 'Plumbing is much better in New York,' they scream from their immaculate bathrooms. 'We wouldn't survive in Paris. We wouldn't survive in Venice. We'll never go to Sicily again. It's so far away, that Europe!' And the sound of running water, its deep and solemn harmony, pervades the living room, the dining room, the landing, the comfortable geometry of New York streets.

The only daughter of the most original composer of the 20th century is questioned by a curious taxi driver:

'Who's your father? What does he do?'

'My father is the best composer in the world.'

'Congratulations. You must be very rich.'

'We are not.'

'Sorry. You must be extremely unhappy.'

An Italian leaves his native Tuscany for the United States of America. He needs dollars and he thinks that dollars are more common in the United States of America than in Italy. He boards a plane in tears and gets off the plane with a radiant smile. He eats a few pizzas, which are more tasty in New York than in San Gimignano, hears a number of authentic Italian curses and writes to his cousin: 'I feel at home in America.'

The Golden Age, the Silver Age, the Bronze Age, the Iron Age. Our age is the last one, the last and the least. The Iron Age. *Kali-yuga*. The Hindus maintain that our ancestors—the happy inhabitants of the distant, precious-metal *yugas*—were far superior to us in terms of longevity, height and ethics. In the Golden Age every man was a Brahman. In the Iron Age every man is a child. The Screen Age, the Scream Age, the Space Age. But in space no one can hear you scream.

The multitude is always right. The man in the street is always right. (The Street Age.) Why? Who is that proverbial man? What pavement does he so stubbornly cover with the imprints of his shoes?

Montaigne and Kafka were also in the habit of walking up and down the streets.

31

He remained in bed for some time without changing his position. Lying on his stomach, he allowed the grandfather clock to gauge the depth of his solitude. His ever-moving memory ended up stumbling upon the image of the train he had boarded in his attempt to escape from Zarina's cynicism. They had both left him: Zarina and his fiancée.

He did not like the repetition itself; nor did he enjoy the train of thought that his fiancée had created by leaving him alone. But he revelled in the otherworldly calm of his solitude. No one sought to pull him out of bed; no one answered the telephone. Those unanswered calls reverberated in his room like an aeolian harp.

Alcibiades realised he must care for himself if he wanted to care for others. And St Augustine? I should learn his *Soliloquies* by heart. At least the passages pertaining to women. 'I perceive that nothing more saps the citadel of manly strength, whether of mind or body, than female blandishments and familiarities.' There was a beautiful sunrise this morning. The dawn of a new era in my life. A new era, an old era. *Das Rheingold*, Scene Two. Wotan is gazing in admiration at Valhalla. The castle I'll have in Paris. (There was some music in the background of his stream of consciousness, but it had nothing to do with Wagner and his cyclopean epic. He vaguely, almost unconsciously heard Brahms' *Trio* op. 114. He heard the same music during his wanderings in the unrecognisable city—the episode subsequent to his pusillanimous escape.) How many red suns should I add to this picture? (Zarina's influence was also manifest in his penchant for reddish tints. Any psychoanalyst would have drawn such a conclusion from those red suns. Hitchcock might have used them in one of his movies.) We have no time to explore our ideas, a single idea of ours. We begin. We never end. How to cover the distance separating us from our closest friend, from our next-of-kin? And those who stop halfway breed misunderstandings. It's better not to go away. It's better to wait for other people to go. We have no time to raise our head. People climb the Tower of Babel. Life should look like the Ranakpur temple, like Valhalla or a Swiss landscape. I'll move to Paris tomorrow.'

Our thinking is three-dimensional, four-dimensional—smells are also our 'ingredients'—so that, to represent our minds more or less faithfully, pages should acquire the shape of cubes, of unknown super-geometrical figures. (His thoughts were wasp-waisted, like Zarina at the age of 21.)

He turned on his back and gazed at the ceiling for a while. All of a sudden he saw a dagger suspended in midair. 'The whole future of the project is still up in the air,' somebody whispered into his ear. 'But don't you worry—we have supremacy in the air.' The dagger began to fly around first like an aeroplane, then like a planet, like Venus. Presently it deviated from its orbit and landed on his penis as if to emphasise *their* affinities. 'Whose affinities?' he asked. 'Things that have affinity in their nature seek one another,' was the answer.

When he woke in the same bed, tightly enveloped by the same pair of sheets, the window was as black as his life. As if he had already thrown himself out of it, radiating his ugly mood all around the universe and even beyond it.

32

And such poisoning of the moon happens for this reason: it is the naked eye of the spirit and of the sidereal body and it often grows new and young as you can see. Just as a young child who looks into a mirror which was looked at by a menstruating woman will become long-sighted and cross-eyes and his eyes will be poisoned, stained, and ruined, as the mirror was stained by the menstruating woman; and so also the moon, and also the human being, is poisoned.

Paracelsus, *De pestilitate*

He had a bad dream one night. One night. When was it? (What date is it today? What day is it?) He had lost his sense of time, his sense of direction in the realm of Time. But for their gruesome anniversary, he might never have recalled his whereabouts in history.

His dream was strange and awesome. He felt relieved: it was all over and done with.

He was brought before a wig-capped judge who motioned him to a chair. He sat down. The judge pounded on the table that had completely lost its shape, groaning as it was under heaps of files and a veritable Black Museum of blood-stained exhibits.

The public prosecutor was swaying to and fro with gallows humour. He cleared his throat and uttered a sentence, some squashy, pulpy words. They slopped about in the porridge-like air. Some sheets of paper slowly dropped onto the floor. The public prosecutor went down on his knees.

The counsel for the defence took advantage of his colleague's short-sightedness and sprang to his feet with such nimbleness that he might have made a hole in the roof, but for the heavy attaché case he was holding level with his shoulders. 'Women *may* be wicked! Can't you hear the rhyme: women, wicked, women, wicked? Ladies and gentlemen of the jury! Have you heard about the Hungarian countess Erzsébet von Bathory? At the age of 15 she married an officer and went with that military aristocrat to his castle in the Carpathians. Let me remind you of Pascal's words pertaining to the situation our countess found herself in: 'The most arduous task is to remain alone in a room.' Her husband was on various military campaigns. She had to kill Time. How did she kill it? By killing virgins! Her beauty was withering away, so she decided to restore it by bathing in virginal blood. Whenever maiden blood dripped on her naked body—I'll spare you the nuances, dear members of the jury. In short, on those occasions her skin would look *younger*. She used a kitchen knife. She scoured the countryside for appropriate victims. What would have become of Erzsébet von Bathory had she bathed in Zarina's blood? She might have grown 10 years older, 20 years older. She might have died of old age on the spot! Let me ask you another question, dearest ladies of the jury: Would *you* bathe in Zarina's blood?'

The public prosecutor got on his feet again. They were both standing now: his lawyer and the public prosecutor. The former resembled the Statue of Liberty, the latter a Statue of Nemesis.

'Your honour, may I ask my learned rival a question?' said the public prosecutor to the judge.

'By all means!'

'Is the prisoner a great-grandson of the countess?'

'Zarina Lenoir desecrated the symbol of virginity,' cried the counsel for the defence, disregarding the curiosity of the public prosecutor. 'We love and venerate Christian symbols. We don't want to see them desecrated, despised, disavowed, discredited. Zarina Lenoir trampled on our taboos and thus jeopardised the sacredness of our future.'

'Are you sure she wasn't a virgin?' The public prosecutor fixed his eyes on the counsel for the defence. 'Which test did you opt for? The French one or the Greek one?'

The judge asked the public prosecutor to describe both tests.

'The French peasantry think that if a girl can blow a smouldering candle into flame she is a virgin, but that if she fails to do so, she is not.' The audience burst into laughter. 'In Ancient Greece, girls used to be pushed towards a cave renowned for its occupant—a gigantic serpent. If they were bitten, it was a sign that they could no longer be considered pure and virtuous.'

A member of the jury stood up and said in a squeaky voice, 'Give the party you suspect the quantity of a spoonful of the water in the glass M, which upon her that is a maid makes 3 several effects: 'twill make her incontinently gape, then fall into a sudden sneezing, last into a violent laughing; else dull, heavy and lumpish.'

'I'm sure she laughed her head off,' said the public prosecutor. 'Or did she laugh *his* head off?' he asked, eyeing the prisoner from neck to foot.

'She confessed her crime,' said the counsel for the defence.

'Will Madame Lenoir testify for the defence?' asked the judge. 'She shouldn't get lost because I gave her very explicit directions how to come here.'

'She did get lost,' said the prisoner.

'Did *she* commit a crime?' asked the public prosecutor.

'Blasphemy is a crime,' said the counsel for the defence. He unfolded a sheet of paper and started reading:

'I am bewailing the sting of the real death, the grievousness of sin and the fiery darts of the wicked one, which have savagely set on fire souls as well as bodies. Truly God's laws would groan aloud on seeing so great a pollution on the earth. You have been deceived by the serpent more bitterly than Eve; and not only your mind but also your body has been defiled. Even that last horror has come to pass which I shrink from saying, and yet cannot leave unsaid, for it is as a burning and blazing fire in my bones, and I am undone and cannot endure. You have taken the members of Christ and made them the members of a harlot.'

'A harlot?' exclaimed the public prosecutor.

'Upon her forehead was a name written, Mystery, Babylon the Great, the mother of harlots and abominations of the earth. And I saw the woman drunken with the blood of the saints, and with the blood of the martyrs of Jesus, and with the blood of the virgins. I will tell thee the mystery of the woman, and of the beast that carrieth her, which hath the 7 heads and 10 horns.'

'Please tell us the mystery of the woman and the beast,' said the judge.

'The 7 heads of the beast denote the period during which my client courted Zarina—7 months. And the 10 horns are the number of the lovers she had while carrying on an affair with my client.'

'You mean that the prisoner had 10 horns? Pluck off the bull's horns, and set them in his forehead.' The public prosecutor headed for the bar and applied his fingers to the prisoner's forehead, one by one.

'He may go horn-mad so easy does it,' said the judge.

'And the woman was arrayed in purple and scarlet colour, and decked with gold and precious stones and pearls, having a golden cup in her hand full of abominations and filthiness of her fornication.' The counsel for the defence opened a bottle of red wine and poured some quantity of it into a glass he had produced from his attaché case. 'Here's a cup of Zarina's abominations,' he said.

'Why isn't it golden?' asked the public prosecutor.

'And the woman was arrayed in purpled and scarlet colour,' said the counsel for the defence, ignoring the question of the public prosecutor. 'Why are there 2 colours in her garments? These are the colours of blood, of human blood. But there are 2 bloods St John refers to in his Apocalypse. One blood is virginal, the other foul, filthy, unclean.'

'Foul words and frowns must not repel a lover,' said the public prosecutor, stroking the prisoner's cheek.

'And the 10 horns which thou sawest upon the beast, these shall hate the whore, and shall make her desolate and naked, and shall eat her flesh, and burn her with fire. For God hath put in their hearts to fulfil his will—'

'Only the prisoner ate her flesh and burnt her with fire,' said the public prosecutor. 'Where are the other lovers?'

At that point Gérard Philipe and Rudolph Valentino came out of the blue, plonked themselves down on a sofa that stood in the middle of the courtroom and announced their presence.

'They didn't care about Zarina,' said the counsel for the defence, pointing to the newcomers. 'My client loved her. That's why he devoured her flesh. Every lover aspires to devour his beloved. During Mass bread and wine are changed into the body and blood of Jesus Christ.'

'What does Mass have to do with it?' asked the public prosecutor. 'What you describe has more in common with Black Mass.'

'Red Mass,' said the counsel for the defence. He folded the sheet of paper, put it in his pocket, lifted his eyes and looked at the jury. 'Ladies and gentlemen! I now leave the floor to my client.'

'The foundations of the world are rotten. Can we build the future on her blood? Zarina is everywhere! Everywhere! Can't you see?!'

At last he told his story, bringing out all the smears and smudges of that dreadful and delightful period of his youth. The audience burst into laughter. In Versailles and Paris people laughed heartily, contagiously, resoundingly. A thousand policemen were rolling on the pavements.

A woman stood up and declared in a gravelly voice: 'We're fed up with high-minded men telling us what we should and shouldn't do.'

'Women must be free to decide their own careers and life patterns,' said the public prosecutor. 'Do they exist only to please men? Surely not. The prisoner adopted a sexist attitude towards Zarina, stripping her clothes off, turning her naked body this way and that to assuage his sexual appetite—as if she were a mere object, a statuette, a puppet. By the way, I think it's extremely sexist having all these photographs of naked women in newspapers and magazines. But treating a woman like a photograph, like a scrap of paper that can be torn or burnt, is doubly sexist. Are you aware of the rhyme: sexist, rapist, sexist, rapist? The prisoner's overriding aim in life was to rape Zarina's body. He talked to her about porn movies and eventually forced his way into her apartment. And he would have killed her if she hadn't yielded to his brutal request. Are you aware of the rhyme: to kill, to yield, to kill, to yield? Zarina signed the contract under coercion—with her blood. But not with her virginal blood, mind you! The prisoner didn't succeed in raping her soul, for all his brutality and cupidity. Women needn't be satisfied with their traditional virginal, maternal and housekeeping functions. They can and should participate equally with men in every sphere of life.'

'Should *men* be satisfied with their traditional functions?' asked the counsel for the defence. 'Are they allowed to participate equally with women in every sphere of life? Are they allowed to shed their virginal blood whenever they feel like it? Men's blood is always virginal.'

33

The wisdom, the energy, the strength, the sight, and the vitality of a man who approaches a woman covered with menstrual excretions, utterly perish. If he avoids her, while she is in that condition, his wisdom, energy, strength, sight and vitality will increase. The natives of the Murray River lock menstruous women up in huts to prevent them from going near water, lest they frighten the fish. The Dieri of Central Australia know that if menstruous women were to eat fish or bathe in a river, the fish would all die and the river would dry up. A menstruous woman must not step over her husband or he will become fatally ill. At the glance of a menstruous woman's eye, men become transfixed by whatever they hold in their hands. On catching that glance men are changed into talking trees. Unmarried girls and widows are supposed to paint their heads and the upper parts of their bodies red—as a danger signal.

Through music, poetry and love he aspired to elevate his life to a higher plane of regard, getting rid of memories and predicaments, of misanthropy and depressive disorders. But every time, even in the middle of sexual intercourse, he would find himself right back where he had started—a worthy reminder of M.C. Escher's Strange Loops (*Waterfall, Ascending and Descending*). In his remarkable book *Gödel, Escher, Bach: an Eternal Golden Braid*, Douglas R. Hofstadter describes the Strange Loop as follows: 'The "Strange Loop" phenomenon occurs whenever, by moving upwards (or downwards) through the levels of some hierarchical system, we unexpectedly find ourselves right back where we started.' One of the examples of Strange Loops in music is Bach's *Canon per Tonos* in 3 voices—a piece from the *Musical Offering*.

I always return to Zarina, to her past crime and my future punishment. In a continuous loop she ascends and descends the staircase on which I once saw her brownish legs. And her blood cascades down and flow up again.

And *my* blood cascades down and flow up again. I am a living example of a Strange Loop. And of a vicious circle.

Once upon a time we died and melted into a being with two heads. The hermaphrodite. The *nigredo* state of blackness. The Soul departed from the Spirit and Body of King and Queen in great distress. Then the dew descended—the *aqua sapientiae*—portending the divine birth, washing away the *nigredo* by an *albedo*. The union of opposites. The Soul dived from heaven to breathe life into the hermaphrodite.

I loved so many women in my youth. Trembling and blinking, I spied on their bodies outdoors and indoors: a dozen 'forbidden' magazines awaited me under my mattress. I loved both real and unreal females who, for all their differences, belonged to the same biological spectrum—the rainbow of unquenchable desires.

What is left now of my love for the female body? The pattern of circumstances she has formed through her monstrous callousness makes other women uninteresting, insipid—whatever their physical qualities. They are not so artistically talented, so cruel as to form a similar set of circumstances, sharpening their pictures on the screen of my desires. Their pictures are out of focus, as it were.

How many times did she murder me? 175. A mystic number of Venus. 206. DBR, Speech, 'the Word of Power'. Killing me endlessly with her words, with her thoughts, with her secrets, with her smiles.

We embroider upon the black-and-white themes of life, endowing them with the colours of our torments. These themes are unchangeable. The generations to come will embroider upon the same themes in a different environment. They will not alter the themes of our forefathers, of the cave man, of those paleolithic dupes who carved their 'Venuses' in bone or schist 3,000 centuries ago.

She is not alone. Dozens of women, thousands of women are doing at this very moment what she did in Versailles, in Rome, in Jerusalem, in Brassempouy, in Willendorf, in Dolni Vestonice, in the Garden of Eden. She repeats and enacts her lie before generations of youths who, in the course of the same farewell ceremony, rediscover moral philosophy and curse humankind.

What is left now of my love for women? Her cruelty perhaps. And her books.

The never-never realm of her virginity was so distant, so inaccessible to the overflow of his desire that the eyes of Amundsen whose photograph he kept on his bedside cabinet seemed to have lost their lustre, the glow of their

glory: Amundsen would have been unable to travel as far as her chastity. Her purity and innocence were located beyond the South Pole, beyond the furthestmost bounds of our galaxy.

'The Soviet government's decision to use nuclear weapons obviated the need for an invasion of the United States of America,' he read in a science-fiction novel. What weapons could *he* use? 'They defended Moscow with that "final trump card".' 'Nobody would have defended Moscow better than Zarina,' he thought. 'She should have been appointed Marshal of the Soviet Union.'

The image of love as a cornucopia was relentlessly undercut by the fruitlessness of their relationship. Did she really love him or were her words located beyond all dictionaries?

On Thursday she allowed him at last to smuggle his desire through the frontier of her purity. Laboriously he reached the realm of her womanhood, of his manhood, of their mutual bliss. She was pale; she was speechless with shock and horror.

He was jubilant. He knew that his invasion of her body (and soul) had been messy and unprofessional, but he had nothing to worry about: a virgin was not likely to have noticed his unbearable clumsiness. (He *was* naïve.)

They both had a long way to go. (He *was* gullible.) Not until 2 years later did she master the criss-cross technique of love-making.

35

Revenge, too, is pleasant; it is pleasant to get anything that it is painful to fail to get, and angry people suffer extreme pain when they fail to get their revenge; but they enjoy the prospect of getting it.

Aristotle, *Rhetoric*, Bk. I: Ch. 11

Thomas said, 'A persistent blasphemer, what is his chastisement?'

She was fooling me long enough to come under the head of 'persistent blasphemers'.

Jesus said, 'If the time of such a one is completed through the sphere, the receivers of Yaldabaoth come after him and bind him by his tongue to a great demon with a horse's face; they spend 3 days travelling round with him in the world, and take vengeance on him.'

Should I cut out her tongue? That's what they usually do with liars and blasphemers!

'Thereafter they lead him into the region of the cold and of the snow, and take vengeance on him there 11 years.'

11 hours. Deep-freezer? Snowwoman.

'Thereafter they lead him down into the chaos before Yaldabaoth and his 49 demons, and every one of his demons taketh vengeance on him another 11 years.

'Thereafter they lead him into the outer darkness until the day when the great ruler with the dragon's face who encircleth the darkness, shall be judged. And that soul becometh frozen up and destroyed and dissolved.'

36

For since nobody aims at what he thinks he cannot attain, the angry man is aiming at what he can attain and the belief that you will attain your aim is pleasant. Hence it has been well said about wrath,

*Sweeter it is by far than the honeycomb dripping with
sweetness,
And spreads through the hearts of men.*

*It is also attended by a certain pleasure because the thoughts
dwell upon the act of vengeance, and the images then called up
cause pleasure, like the images called up in dreams.*

Aristotle, *Rhetoric*, Bk. II: Ch.2

I might avenge myself like that Italian slave. Jeremy Taylor touched upon the incident in one of his sermons. I might climb with her son onto the roof of the Château de Versailles and promise her to spare his life on condition that she cuts her nose off. I might mutilate her from a distance by pushing her son towards the edge of the roof. Could she cut her own hand off? Her own arm? Not both her arms, unfortunately. What about her legs? And her eyes? And her ears? And her internal organs?

She must do her utmost to save her son. Doesn't Julie save hers by jumping into a lake? Or is it a river? Anyway she rescues him from drowning and dies of pneumonia. Rousseau would have been delighted. *La Nouvelle Héloïse*, a new Julie. Everyone is impressed with Zarina's increasingly saintly demeanour. Women are designed by nature to be virtuous wives and mothers and not mistresses. Rousseau glorifies the joys of domestic contentment.

I wish she had a daughter instead. I might deflower her daughter in the parc de Versailles. In her presence. And of course I would get her to cut her nose off.

She comes and strips her clothes off. I look at her, I just look at her. Then I pick her dress up. 'You'd better put it on,' I say. 'Aren't you faithful to your husband? You should divorce him first.' The best punishment.

37

Can we blush at will, whenever in need of feigned emotions? Can we change the colours of our face, ignoring and defying the depth of our true, authentic feelings? Zarina's fine performance hid the shallowness of the play's script.

In his childhood he was sure that the tears trickling down a comedian's face were drops of water. Where did the water come from? Was the tear-decorated face sprinkled with it in the wings, just before the tragic occurrence? He watched those faces closely, trying to make out the vestiges of a subterfuge. He never noticed anything except real tears that welled obediently in gloomy eyes. Disciplined tears. Her salt tears fell from her which soften'd the stones—

He persisted in his disbelief until the moment he saw those tears at close range, in the wings, on the sad face of a famous actress. She *was* crying as she ran away from the stage and sank into her husband's arms, distressed and exhausted. She remained in that semi-horizontal posture for what seemed an hour—within the time-context of the play—and then rushed back to bow to the audience.

Some people train themselves in the art of illusion; they play a game of make-believe whenever their self-interest is at stake. Men guffaw and assure their colleagues they have never heard anything so funny in their lives. Women cry or faint, anxious to synchronise their appearance with their words. Can they paint their faces in accordance with their projects? Perhaps the trick is done by substituting one emotion for another: blushing reflects not only chastity, purity, but also wrath, indignation. So, to create a colourful semblance of chastity, a

woman may merely conjure up a scandalous image liable to irritate her to the point of reddening her cheeks. It must be easier to imitate wrath than chastity or timidity, as far as colours go.

Spurred on by the thunderous applause of the public, a clown steps gingerly onto a tightrope. He draws his foot back, terrified by his own intrepidity, but the public applaud and scream, boo and whistle, rise up and sit down. He steps onto the rope again and pretends to lose his balance. The public stop breathing. Miraculously the clown recovers his balance and continues his dance in the air, far from the earth and critical eyes.

For 2 years Zarina danced on that tightrope without once missing her step.

38

After their farewell ceremony he embarked upon a quest for purity, chastity, innocence.

He found them only in nature, in its eternal immobility. Nature never lies despite the incompatibility of seasons and the fickleness of weather. Nature does not blush artificially. Sunsets *are* sincere.

The cherry blossom *is* innocent, chaste, fragile. The cherry blossom never loses its virginity, however often you may stick your features in front of it for the sake of the family snapshot album.

The Philosophers' Way in Kyoto. The arbour of natural purity. He would stroll alongside the endless succession of cherry-trees for hours and hours. He left Kyoto before the end of the cherry blossom period. 'Cherry-trees are still in bloom,' he wrote in a letter to Zarina. 'They will not lose their blossom until my next visit to Japan.'

He tore the letter up. He did not know her new address.

In Tokyo he met a beautiful girl from whom, on his return to France, he received a letter:

*Dear Sir,
How have you been? We had a warmer winter than usual in Tokyo. I don't like winter, so I'm very happy about weather.
Today is Valentine's Day. So I want to say, 'I love you!'
I've been lovesickness since last April. I got thin a little. Because I forget to eat for thinking about you everyday. You don't know how much I love you, how I long to wait your reply!
Am I disappointed in love?
Is it vain for me to wait?
If there isn't a hope, please tell me frankly!
But, the truth is that I'm waiting for your good reply. I want to see you as soon as possible.
All my love,
Yumi.*

He met that Japanese girl during the last week of March—before his memorable visit to Kyoto. Her purity seemed to anticipate the cherry blossom of Sambo-in and Nijo Castle. Was she really pure, innocent, artless, spontaneous?

She withstood the pressure of his hands and lips throughout the night they spent together in his room at the New Otani Hotel, fighting her virginal battle with every weapon at her disposal. He showed her out and returned to the writing desk.

'You help me "recognise" Japan, my perfidious darling, my melodious Zarina. This manifold recognition seems to shed a new light on Plato's theory of knowledge. I am sure I was once born in Japan—in the Heian Period, in the Edo Period. How many amongst the living do I know as well as Issa, Utamaro, Yoshida Kenkô, Sei Shônagon? I recognise you in Japan, in ancient Japan. You were also born here—in the 9th century. I courted

you in those days under the name of Fukakusa no Shôshô. At the beginning of autumn you said I should sleep one hundred consecutive nights before your house, on a bench used to support the shafts of your carriage. And every night I was to cut a notch on a shaft of your carriage as a proof of my obedience to your command. "Then I would yield my body to your desire," you whispered into my ear. Every night before the dawn I would set out in my carriage again and again, under cover of darkness. But you bade me draw my carriage blinds—one cover was not enough for you. Under cover of decorum you bade me hide my face from passers-by and your neighbours. My cover girl. From then onwards I desisted from using my palanquin or carriage which might have been recognised by the curious. Don't forget that Japan is the country of recognition and recollection. I would set off on my journey barefoot, walking in the dread of demons who had a knack of swallowing humans alive. Wiping raindrops off my eyes, brushing snowflakes from my sleeve, I walked and walked towards your house.'

He put the pen down on the writing desk, took out his handkerchief and blew his nose loudly. A few minutes later he picked up the pen once again.

'I know only your telephone number. If I knew your address I would haunt you day and night. A routine case of haunting. I would kill you. A routine case of vengeance, a routine case of retribution. Retribution for evil does not always come in this life. There will be a day of retribution.'

He tore up the tear-burdened sheets of paper and flung the mutilated words into the river. 9 months later he received the first letter from his Japanese Zarina. 11 months later he received her second letter:

Dear Sir,
Well, I wish to ask a favor of you. Please send me a picture of yourself, and then I'll be able to speak to and kiss it everyday. I'll keep it as long as I live. It wasn't until you left Japan that I realized I loved you. And the love grows on me day by day!
I'll be waiting for your reply.
Yours own,
Yumi

Her English, its unaffected clumsiness, moved him so profoundly that he began to doubt the chastity of grammar and spelling. Would she have sounded pure in elegant English? Languages thrive on artifice and untruth. The longer we polish our words the darker our soul becomes. Only screams, sighs and grammatical errors can adequately express our innermost feelings.

He promptly answered her second letter. His English was perfect.

2 weeks later he received her third letter:

Dear Sir,
I was surprised to have received your reply so soon. I was so happy that I couldn't sleep little that night. I read it over and over again. It's my treasure!
My letter was very childish and selfish, wasn't it? Maybe you were at a loss for an answer. But I couldn't stop unbosoming myself to you. You are very gentle, and your voice too!! I like your soft voice. I want to hear your voice. Can't we meet till next April? It's more than I can bear! Because, I miss you!
Well, May 19 is my birthday. Please say, 'Happy birthday, Yumi.' And when is your birthday? I want to send kiss to you on your birthday. Anyway, I've been in a good humor since receiving your reply. How simple I am!
Yours own,
Yumi

Simple, very simple. He analysed her letter instead of letting it penetrate his heart like a soft knife, like a gentle arrow of Cupid.

Beautiful Japanese paper, her childish handwriting. Her letter *was* childish. She did it on purpose perhaps. Was she really simple? Or was she so sophisticated as to feign chastity through linguistic inaccuracy? Was her English perfect, elegant, like her native tongue? Was she chaste in Japanese?

'It's more than I can bear.' 'To unbosom oneself to somebody.' He visualised her face in the shadow of a dictionary. Wasn't that borrowed love too idiomatic?

She left a message at the hotel: 'I really, really love you. Don't break my heart.' He gave her a telephone call on the following day. 'Could you come to the hotel?' he asked. 2 hours later she was standing in the middle of his room—between the television set and the pillows. He realised that the struggle was over.

'Not at this minute,' she said. 'I am hungry.' Her English was not perfect.

He dialled room service and ordered their dinner.

She ate slowly, anticipating the tempo of her striptease. 'Slowly but surely,' he murmured. She did not understand his breeze-like words.

He unbuttoned everything on her body—even the clothes that had no buttons—and, with a groan of resignation, she wrapped herself up in his sheets. Then she yielded to the weight of his desire.

Her screams and convulsions brought him back. How far in Time had he travelled?

'What's the matter?' he inquired ironically. 'I'm not your first man, am I?'

'Too much pain,' she said. 'Too much pain.'

He seldom smiled in those days and even the cheerful, laughter-resounding atmosphere of Japanese restaurants could not console him. This time, however, he roared with laughter.

She screamed again. She kept pounding her head on his pillow with wild, unladylike force.

'If you want to smash your face in, I recommend concrete. The window's over there.'

'Too much pain, too much pain,' she repeated.

'Another lie,' he whispered. She did not understand his Time-muffled words.

In accordance with a secret tradition, several minutes elapsed in absolute silence. 5 minutes. He hesitated and ruminated on his new predicament. She did not want to disturb him. She thought he was gathering his energies for another 'union'. Was 'union' the word she might have used under the circumstances? Unfortunately her Japanese-English dictionary was in her handbag; and her handbag was on the windowsill. And the Queen was in the parlour, in the distant parlour...eating *foie gras* and caviar, drinking champagne. And the King was in his counting house. And the maid was in her bed.

'What are you doing?' she asked in her turn.

'I won't do anything.'

'What?'

'Too much pain.' He even adopted her timbre and tone to make her understand his meaning. By way of visual explanation, he slid onto the floor, got up and headed for the bathroom.

Suddenly he came to a standstill, swung round and, without looking at her face, shouted in his own voice:

'Do you expect me to believe it?'

'What?'

For want of relevant gesticulation, he shouted once again:

'Do you expect me to believe it?'

'What?'

'Do you expect me to believe it?'

'What?'

Had they been playing a game of chess, the judge would have announced a draw: they had created the same 'position' 3 times in a row.

He thought she had been defeated. She got the same impression as she gradually realised he would no longer hurt her *physically*.

'I'll help you, I'll help you,' she said. 'Why don't you understand my mind?'

'Do you expect me to believe *that* too?'

Their game seemed to have ended up in perpetual check. Nothing protruded from the indifferent surface of Time except a few non-committal movements and words, except a few entreaties and tears.

'Please give me satisfaction!' She rose her head from the pillow.

'Satisfaction?!' And he recited an excerpt from Marlowe's *Hero and Leander*:

*This idoll which you terme Virginitie,
Is neither essence subject to the eie,
No, nor to any one exterior sence,
Nor hath it any place of residence,
Nor is't of earth or mold celestiall,
Or capable of any forme at all.
Of that which hath no being doe not boast,
Things that are not at all are never lost.*

He reached the bathroom, turned all the taps on and locked the door. Presently he unlocked the door and walked out, carrying a glass of water. 'Are you thirsty?' he asked.

'No.'

'Empty this glass—it will do you a world of good.' She obeyed his command and took several sips of the water. 'Drink up! You must empty this glass. You're gaping already. That's a good girl. Go on, go on. Keep up with the Joneses. Keep up with Zarina. I'd like to hear you sneeze, dearest chuck. You often gape at me, but I've never heard you sneeze.'

'What is "sneeze"?' she asked.

'In the past centuries people sneezed a lot. They all carried snuff boxes in their pockets. Even old men were virgins in those times. Drink up! A spoonful of water must be enough, though. Or is it the wrong glass? Could I borrow your lipstick for a moment?' She reached for her handbag and drew a lipstick from it. 'Thank you. There. Now we've got the glass M, Mademoiselle. Drink up! Why don't you sneeze? Why don't you sneeze?'

39

Japanese poetry, Greek sculpture and Buddhist aspirations might lead us to the conclusion that purity is a natural condition of the human species. Should we spend our lives in the British Museum, in the Library of Congress?

There are people for whom our earthly incarnation is a path winding through hospitable woods or a boat rocked by maternal waves. They neither crawl like serpents nor fly like eagles or vultures. They dawdle through

their woods. They walk suspended on the meniscus of their lakes and drift aimlessly down their rivers. They seem to be modelled upon Bellini's paintings. (Zarina was a valuable fake of Luca Della Robbia's Madonnas.)

By ignoring those people, by mistrusting or misjudging their actions, we betray Rublev and Gesualdo.

He did not recognise Japan. He betrayed the cherry blossom and the Silver Pavilion.

He tore up the letter he had received a fortnight after his return to France:

*Dear Sir,
How do you feel? Cherry blossoms have fallen by now.
I dreamed of you last night. Everything was in confusion. I know it's natural that it's a dream. But, I was
unhappy in my dream too! Because we couldn't even talk together.
I want to see you by all means. I'm sick and tired of weeping everyday.
Yours photo says nothing!! I'm so lonely.
Waiting for your early reply,
Yours ever,
Yumi*

Her English was steadily improving.

40

*Des femmes adroites font de la virginité une fleur qui périt et renaît
tous les jours, et se cueille la centième fois plus douloureusement que
la première.*

Montesquieu, *Lettres persanes*

'But if this thing be true, and the tokens of virginity be not found for the damsel:

'Then they shall bring out the damsel to the door of her father's house, and the men of her city shall stone her with stones that she die: because she hath wrought folly in Israel, to play the whore in her father's house: so shalt thou put evil away from among you.'

He would not have killed her for *that* offence.

'You may see many women widows before wedded, who try to conceal their miserable fall by a lying garb. Unless they are betrayed by swelling wombs or by the crying of their infants, they walk abroad with tripping feet and heads in the air.'

Even nowadays, some former virgins restore their purity, innocence and chastity with threads and needles, darning their flesh like a worn-out stocking. This form of ethical surgery is widespread in Sicily, in some regions of the Soviet Union.

'Such may have eulogisers of their own, and may fetch a higher price in the market of perdition, merely because they are called virgins.'

What Zarina did was far worse than any mending, any sowing or darning.

*5 drops of blood on the snow.
Rooted to the spot,
Parsifal remembered his wife.*

He found the tokens of virginity.

41

Emperor Lucifer, master of the rebellious spirits, I beg you to be favourable to me, when now I call for your minister, the great Lucifuge Rofocale, as I desire to sign a contract with him. I beg also that Prince Beelzebub may protect my enterprise. O Astaroth, great count, be favourable likewise, and make it possible for the great Lucifuge to appear to me in human form and force, without bad odour, and that he grant me, by the agreement which I am ready to sign with him, my vengeance upon her. O great Lucifuge, I pray that you leave your dwelling wherever it may be to come here and speak to me. If you are not willing to come, I will compel you to do so by the power of the great living God, of the Son and the Spirit. Come promptly, otherwise I will torment you eternally by the power of my mighty words and by the great Key of Solomon, which he used when compelling the rebellious spirits to accept a pact. Thus appear as quickly as possible, or else I will torment you continuously by the powerful words: Aglon Tetagram Vaycheon Stimulamathon Erohares Retragsammathon Clyoran Icion Esition Existien Eryona Onera Erasyn Moyn Meffias Soter Emmanuel Sabaoth Adomai, I call you, Amen.

42

One does not have to believe in a Christian God or any other gods and deities. But making a mockery of sacred books denotes a dangerous streak in the human mind. These books are the record of our ancestors' ways and wisdom; they are the pillars of our society and the columns of our palaces. Those who mock our sacred books and rituals should leave us, move to another planet and write their own history. Will their history be better than ours?

43

43. A number that signifies orgasm—especially the male's.

He was pure and innocent. In the matter of sex and love-making he was even more naïve and gullible than any village idiot. He was a city idiot, as it were.

Domestic and wild animals do not take refuge beyond heavy curtains and Chinese screens. They immerse themselves in the sea of love with disarming frankness—often in front of children who observe their movements, learn their ways. Nature is still our best sex tutor.

He perused the pages of erotic magazines and occasionally listened to his schoolmates. He never doubted the practicality of their ruses and technical diagrams. And he imitated them as best he could. And he read *The Kama Sutra* day and night.

At the beginning of their fourth sexual rendezvous he asked her the following question:

'Are you a Deer-woman?'

'I'm sorry?'

'You're not an Elephant, are you?'

She looked at her reflection in the oval mirror.

'Take off your stockings, will you? Turn this way please.' She obeyed the command of his imperative gesture. 'Just what I thought. You're a typical Deer-woman. Well, lower your head and raise your middle parts.'

'Middle—'

'Don't you know what the "widely opened position" means and how it is executed?'

'In these matters—'

'There are 3 positions: the widely opened position, the yawning position and the position of the wife of Indra.'

'Do you think I should learn them by heart?'

'You should practise them regularly. Theory is nothing without daily practice.'

'How can I practise those things?'

'Put your thighs with your legs doubled on them—'

'How?'

'Let's just forget it, all right? It'll come about in due course. Shall we embrace now?' She held him to her in a warm-hearted embrace. 'No! No! We're not sumo wrestlers, are we? Look, I do realise you're making your debut—' She shrank away from him and 2 artificial tears welled up in her eyes. 'I'm sorry I've hurt your feelings. As I told you last Friday, I respect your purity and admire your chastity. But it's so frustrating to make love to someone who lacks experience and knowledge. I tried not to pay attention to your clumsiness last week—'

'You must understand—'

'I do, my darling.'

'You were the first, I swear!'

'I know I was the first man in your life. Now bend down, as if to pick something up, and pierce me with your breasts.' She submissively bent down. 'Lower! Lower! You should be able to pick something up. This pen, for instance—'

She feigned clumsiness for almost 2 years. But, on the whole, she was a good pupil. He eventually taught her to relish the ins and outs of love-making.

He was naïve and innocent.

She was wicked and unscrupulous.

If a woman offends a harmless, pure and innocent man, the evil falls back upon that woman, like light dust thrown up against the wind.

44

Primitive people think that wine serves only as an aphrodisiac or a psychological sweetener. Saturated with the golden light of alcohol, the revolting images of everyday life become as harmless and entertaining as a strip-cartoon—even connoisseurs do not question this aspect of wine-drinking. But their fondness for wine lies chiefly in its poetical and metaphysical qualities. They never drink to get drunk or, worse still, to throw a golden veil over reality. They drink because they cannot live without the infinity of wine, which does not prevent them from occasionally enjoying the sensation of dignified carelessness known as a side-effect of gustatory avalanches.

Love has no rivals in the realm of human ecstasies. Its privileged position on the list of our priorities is due to our total involvement in it. We contemplate our beloved; we smell her, touch her, listen to her incessant murmur, taste her lips and her skin and her tongue. All our senses take part in the process.

Some people give preference to money, although money has no smell. They make up for this deficiency by touching their cheque books and credit cards with voluptuous pleasure. Cheque books and credit cards are modern *mandalas*.

Is wine a good substitute for love?

We hear the cork being extracted from the bottle into which it was introduced. We smell the cork, touch the bottle and our glass, pouring a small quantity of wine into it. We stir the wine to release its stored-up energy. The wine deepens as if its field of consciousness were dilated by the air.

Wine is a living substance and its existence monopolises all our senses. But can it replace human beings?

Our union with wine is of a more intimate nature than whatever we experience in the presence of our partners in love. Only in common parlance do they become one with ourselves—part and parcel of our body, of our soul. Wine dies in us; wine resurrects us through its death.

Wine was his religion. But religion is of no help to those who cannot keep their own memory on a tight rein.

45

Once they went to the parc de Versailles that seemed to have never belonged either to Louis XIV or to the French revolutionaries. It was *their* parc now; among other things, love invests its fabulous power in real estate.

The fountains welcomed their shadows with omniscient placidity: they had already absolved Zarina from her betrayals and skilful substitutions.

Once more autumnal colours prophesied the decay of their relationship. He did not heed the warning. He thought he still had enough time to tease her, indulging in the luxury of tragic beauty.

He was more sensitive to her features than ever. And he sought to endow them with an artistic touch, with the sadness of Mizoguchi's film where a princess had taken her own life by jumping into a lake.

He said to her that he had fallen in love with another woman. 'We'll get married by the end of winter.' Were fairy-tales her monopoly?

He paused and took out a handkerchief. He pressed it twice against his lips as if to remove the vestiges of his lie from them.

She stroked his hair.

'I touch you now for the last time.' She removed her wrist-watch and resolutely threw it into the Fountain of Apollo. 'I don't need Time. No more. Never.'

He said nothing for a while and she continued to caress him, to kiss his hands.

'All my friends seem to be pairing off and getting married,' he said at last. By way of excuse.

She screamed and ran away towards the Grand Canal.

46

Once he brought a prostitute to Zarina's apartment. (Another artistic touch. Zarina and her mother were in Biarritz for a few days.) She was not beautiful but her body seemed to propagate erotic waves over long distances.

She did not partake of the meal which was supposed to introduce a ritual note into their informal encounter.

She undressed too quickly, deducting impatience and curiosity from the formula of his lust. Half an hour, 41 minutes elapsed before he was able to resign himself to the temporary loss of potency. (41. AM, the Mother, unfertilised and unenlightened.) The *putain* seemed to *leaf* through the book which should have been studied with attention and tenderness.

He derived no pleasure from their encounter. Was Zarina's ghost in any way responsible for that failure? How many needles had she driven into their waxworks?

They left Zarina's apartment around 2 in the morning; her neighbours seemed to be spying on their shadowy forms through peepholes and fissures.

He recounted his adventure to a fellow student whom he had already entrusted with many compromising episodes of his life. Soon he forgot the last episode, confirming its banality by that inordinate lapse of memory.

A few months later Zarina underwent a metamorphosis, becoming a sort of insect whose speed was enviable and dumbness unbearable. She reduced his telephone calls to one question—*his* question; she passed by with only a distant nod. Once or twice she ran away, obliterating his insistence and increasing his exasperation.

'I know everything,' she said at last. And she reminded him of the adventure he had forgotten so easily, with such nonchalance.

'Who betrayed me?'

Perfidy, treason, betrayal. Why did he instantly judge the situation in these terms? Because of Zarina? Had his unconscious already measured her heart? Did she attract treasons like a magnet? He was not on intimate terms with her neighbours who, consequently, could not *betray* him. They might have *denounced* him, though.

'One of my neighbours saw you.'

'You're lying. You've never lied to me before!'

'One of my neighbours saw you.'

'What's his name?'

Suddenly, as if goaded by the absurdity of his question, she told him the truth: 'Cyril'.

Cyril. His fellow student, his friend. Someone in whom he had placed an absolute trust. (He did not notice that Zarina had betrayed the informer by naming him. Her disclosure ought to have put him on the right track.)

The best way to witness his friend's reactions was to pay him a visit. Three-dimensional encounters also enable us to punch our friends and enemies on the nose, if the circumstances call for it.

'Why did you betray me? *You*?'

'How *could* you? In her own apartment? Zarina needs protection. She's so pure, so honest—'

47

Paracelsus says that the menstruations of women beget phantoms in the air, and from this standpoint convents would be seminaries for nightmares, while the devils might be compared to those heads of the hydra of Lerna which were reproduced eternally and propagated in the very blood from their wounds.

Eliphas Levi, *Transcendental Magic* (trans. by A.E.Waite)

He could not help seeing her, hearing her, cursing her. He could not help smelling her perfume.

One starry night he overheard a conversation. He was alone. For once, he was not tempted by telephone boxes. Why call that infamous woman? He was rewarded for his patience and sangfroid.

'Turn on the lights, please. Darling, what are you doing?'

'Turning on the lights.'

He heard his own voice. And then her voice. Unmistakably. *Her* voice. He was strolling alongside a plane of unrecognisable, hostile façades. All of a sudden, he heard her voice, their voices.

A light went on at their window. Their shadows wriggled on the screen of a curtain. He tried to embrace her. She wrenched herself free. He ran his fingers through her hair. 'My darling! Do you realise—'

There were no ladders around, no trees.

'How long do I have to wait?' Her fury.

'Wait for what?'

'I'd like to change for dinner. Please—'

The wind rose and reached their dimly-lit window. From behind their curtains, their gently blowing curtains, they contemplated the deserted street. They did not see him.

'Allow me to feast my eyes—'

'You haven't deserved it.'

'A kind of esthetical strengthening—'

'Look for it elsewhere.' She was formidable.

'Where?'

'Diana—'

'Diana?'

He stalked out, came back and approached her from behind. She turned round swiftly. She stood in front of him, rearranging her hair. He spoke first.

'Let's not quarrel tonight.'

'Why not? We have plenty of time. They won't come before half past eight.'

'So we have exactly...51 minutes. You like a good drawn-out quarrel, don't you?' (51. AN, pain. NA, failure. ADVm, Edom, the country of the demon kings.)

She called him names. He said, '49 minutes.' (49. A mystic number of Venus.) She threatened to call off their guests. He said, 'They've left already.' She asked him for his watch. He obediently removed it. She threw his watch out of the window. 'They won't come,' he said. Languorously she yielded to his caresses. The curtain was gently flapping against their shadows. His watch was ticking on the pavement—louder and louder.

'Why did you invite those boring people?' she asked in an unexpectedly raucous voice.

'I thought you liked them.' He kissed her bare shoulder.

'I thought you didn't want to stay with me.'

'With *you*?'

'Alone.'

He covered her face and her hands with kisses. She was moaning lustfully. He knelt down before her; she knelt down too. They were caressing each other with the frenzy of days gone by.

'Wasn't it wonderful?' she asked.

'You mean—'

'Our honeymoon. We were soaked through.'

'It was charming,' he agreed.

'A peasant dance...that small restaurant near Vienna...in the woods...'

'On a glade...'

'How they danced!' She rose to her feet.

Phantoms are keen on reality but, being far less dependent on its three-dimensional rules than their mortal counterparts, they often deviate from it. He had never been to the Vienna woods with Zarina. The phantoms he saw imposed their conditions and sanctions on his past. With a smile on his lips he was dancing a waltz.

48

How much she hath glorified herself, and lived deliciously, so much torment and sorrow give her; for she saith in her heart, I sit a queen, and am no widow, and shall see no sorrow.

The Revelations of St John the Divine

He wandered the streets like a homeless child. The buses and motorcars thundered past him; they were full of people. But those people went their ways, their lives leading them to some abstract, distant Statue of Happiness. They did not hear his monologues.

He saw the beauty of Paris but ignored it. Had he let this beauty run down the metronome of his heart, he would not have done what he finally did. His memory might have merged into façades, dissolved in fountains.

For hours and hours he expostulated with his emotions, instincts, ideas and impulses:

Do you realise what you're doing? Nothing. That's what you're doing. And nothingness, wool-gathering has been the undoing of so many Hamlets. I'm fed up with your nothingness, with your dreams and memories. Come on you lazy things, let's see some action around here! Do you think I'm short of actions? Do you know me at all? Can't you see my mind? Can't you see at least one action on the screen of my mind? On the screen of my will? All along my muscles? Just dial her number and my actions will loom ahead of you, all aglow in the evening sunlight—the most propitious time for the birth of tragedies. My sentimental journey through life was interrupted by her betrayal. She derided my ideals and corrupted my thoughts. Why haven't you brought her up to my flat? Why haven't you poisoned her husband? No, don't assassinate him. She would be in mourning for quite a long time. I've got a better idea. Can't you see it? Can't you see my new idea? Are you idea-blind? Look, you should send somebody to her husband. A beautiful woman, straightaway. When this woman comes to her husband—Are you paying attention? You should make Zarina call her husband. And that woman will answer the call. Do you catch my meaning? Trap my meaning, lay a snare for my thoughts. Zarina went to Biarritz last night and her husband took advantage of her absence to invite a girl to their cosy nest. A call girl or his secretary. So Zarina calls her husband and the call girl answers the call. And she says something along the lines of, 'No, you've dialled your own number, but your husband is busy. He's just putting a bottle of champagne in the ice bucket. I'm his secretary. I hope you won't get back until the day after tomorrow.' Zarina hangs up and bursts into hysterical sobs. Not only music can move us to tears. I hear her sobs and fly to her rescue. We drink some champagne of course. 'Not only your husband's secretaries are lucky enough to drink champagne in the dead of night.'

Anyway he knew that somebody or something—his doppelgänger, his will, his fate—had to dial her number in his presence. Many people dial her number in his absence. Many people must have dialled her number and rung her doorbell over those 30 years, 33 years.

His *fingers* had to dial the number, his fingers activated by his will. But first a discharge of neurones had to activate the pyramidal cells in the correct motor cortical area so as to bring about the required movement. How long did it take to build up his readiness potential?

434 26 72. On the day of their anniversary he dialled this number at last. He was lucky: *she* answered the phone. (Her maid was in the kitchen; the King was in his office. A counting out his money.) He reminded her of the occasion and invited her for tea. Gracefully she accepted the invitation. He said he would be waiting for her.

'In an hour and a half,' she said.

'As soon as possible!'

He bought no cake on his way home. Did he intend to offer her biscuits? He had none left, but he had got some tea. Was it enough? He forgot about their forthcoming tea ceremony long before crossing the street that separated him from his flat.

434 26 72. Her telephone number.

434. Daleth, the holy letter of the Mother in her glory as Queen. She saves the 4 by the 7 (D=4=Venus=7), connecting it with 28. Mystic number of Netzach (Venus), Victory. The 3 sunders the two fours. This is the feminine victory; she is the Delilah to the divine Samson. Hence we worship the ground they walk on. But the 4 is not so evil when it has ceased to oppress us.

26. Accursed. As bad as 4. Only useful when it is a weapon in your hand. 'If Satan be divided against Satan—'

72. Almost as bad as 4 and 26. Yet it is more assailable, being further from 1. Moreover, it spells ChSD—Mercy. The number of the Shemhamphorasch. God is merciful.

49

Why didn't he kill himself, obliterating once and for all his temptations, his sufferings? Why didn't he kill himself 10 years ago, 15 years ago, 18 years ago? There are no telephones in the Hereafter, otherwise we could communicate with the dead. He gave her a telephone call and so it was too late now. Suicide was out of time, out of place, out of space.

Why didn't he swallow some poison, painless and colourless? 13 years ago? He knew a chemist whose kindness was proverbial. (13. Helpful. If we can reduce our formula to 13, it becomes 1 without further trouble.)

What saved him from this outward journey was not the momentary and momentous poetry of human existence but his revengeful projects and sinful fancies. His stream of consciousness was a deep river carrying him down to the ocean of his death. According to the Roman poets, the river of life is Fatum.

50

50. The number of the Gates of Binah, whose name is Death.

In the early eighties there was a man who, to avenge himself upon a woman, contracted AIDS and made it the common scourge and anathema of a divided bed. In point of fact every sorcerer poisons himself in order to poison others. He inhales the sulphurous air of Hell and then expels it from his lungs. He poisons and slays by the mere projection of his will.

Why didn't he commit long-distance murder?

51

Her husband was a multimillionaire. What precluded her from slipping a poisonous tablet into his mouth?

*Oh, 'twill be glorious
To kill 'em doubled, when they're heaped*

Was her husband easily impressed by virgins? Was he respectful of virginity?

52

The Taoist philosophers say that the Perfect Man should leave no traces of his conduct, however minute and graceful. They say that he should diminish his doing until he arrives at doing nothing: 'Having arrived at this non-action, there is nothing that he does not do.'

The Perfect Man leaves no traces. So does the Perfect Murderer. (He left Zarina's traces almost *everywhere*.) No blood on his sheets, no remorse in his eyes. Coldly he puts *les pièces à conviction* in a washing machine which makes its habitual, matter-of-fact noise. Nothing has happened, nobody has been murdered.

53

He had an overwhelming desire to pour out his heart and his soul to another human being—a friend or a stranger. Only in dreams did he have an opportunity to do so without exposing himself to the mockery of his countrymen.

Once he was invited to dinner. As the flounder was served he overheard the remark which made him forget for 5 minutes his favourite fish and his favourite white wine—Montrachet.

'Nowadays we can attend our own funerals,' said a man.

'How so?' inquired a woman.

'You buy a video camera—'

'My funeral?'

'I was thinking about funeral orations—'

'How awful,' said the woman.

'You know your life better than anybody, don't you? You'll describe your achievements and failures—'

'Why do you keep alluding to *my* death?' asked the woman.

'I don't,' said the man. 'I only thought we could disclose our secrets—'

'Do speak for yourself!' said the woman.

The bottle of Montrachet was floating around the table.

He bought a video camera. For 2 months he worked on his funeral oration. From the Hanging Gardens of the Hereafter he recounted everything.

54

A room. A window in the left wall, hidden by curtains. A video camera on a tripod in the middle of the room. A Louis XV secretaire to the right of the window. A door to the left of the window. A bed along the right wall. A broad armchair in front of the bed. A chandelier. He opens the door and saunters into the room, wearing a tail-coat, a bow tie. He is tall and has a proud, distinguished bearing. And yet tonight he looks rather uncomfortable—like a self-conscious adolescent who has gate-crashed an outlandish party. Even his moustache seems to have been hastily glued on for the sake of the film. White bristles stick out from his unshaven chin. He consults his watch.

I still have time, plenty of time. Enough to make a million speeches. Shall I become an orator...late in the day? (*Good-natured laugh. He stops abruptly, tampers for a while with the camera and finally clears his throat.*) My friends, ladies and gentlemen! Ladies and gentlemen, my friends and colleagues! (*He shakes his head, draws a folded sheet of paper from the inner pocket of his jacket, unfolds it and reads for a while. Desperately*) Never mind! (*He folds the paper, puts it in the same pocket, straightens his tie and touches his hair.*) Ladies and gentlemen, my colleagues and their...I salute everybody...you who have come here...paying a last tribute...(*He touches his hair.*) Professional speakers are supposed to look amiable and cheerful. Do I look cheerful tonight? Am I too pale? Well, let's skip...the occasion is sad enough...Is it? I'm not dead yet. Am I? (*He laughs hysterically.*) My talking to you now has nothing to do with my health. I might have postponed my mournful speech until the beginning of the 21st century. Until 2021. But I've yielded to the temptation. So I'm talking to you now. From the Garden of Eden. (*He laughs and looks around.*) My flat is lovely, isn't it? At least I'm happy here. Paradise is inside us, so is Hell. The Mind is its own place. (*Pause.*) I decided to deliver my speech tonight. To clarify 2 or 3 points. To clarify 5 points. (*His monologue is interrupted by a coughing fit.*) Sorry. (*He continues to cough.*) Terribly sorry. (*He stops coughing.*) Shall I erase that bit? Why should I? It's a *live* performance after all. (*Pause.*) Many people have an irresistible desire to attend their own funerals. (*Pause.*) Are my friends loyal? Are my mistresses faithful? Are my relatives mercenary? These are the questions they want answers to. They die twice...some of them three times. (*Pause.*) I'll describe my life, just a part of it. The most important part. I know that particular episode of my life better than any of you. Much better. You don't know anything about it. And modern technology allows the dead to communicate with the land of the living. So I decided to do it myself. I hope you'll enjoy my film. This is my last opportunity...the only opportunity to be frank...to say what I had to keep to myself in my lifetime. Discretion, you know. False pride. Had no wish to become the laughing stock of Paris, of France, of Europe. (*Pause.*) You cannot choose but hear! Out of consideration for my memory! (*Pause.*) I haven't talked enough in my lifetime. My head is brimming with untold thoughts. (*Pause.*) I've got stage fright. Even my life eludes me when I look at the camera. When the camera looks at me. (*Pause.*) You used to turn your heads away, to look elsewhere. Look at my corpse and hear me speak! Humanity is stupid. The inhabitants of our planet are approaching the point of no return, the final triumph of animalism. (*He draws a sheet of paper from the right pocket of his trousers and starts reading out loud.*) But there are unusual landscapes overhead, up in the mountains. There are smiles and tears and footfalls on the stairs. Inanimate objects are full of mysteries that counterpoise the shallowness of human glances and deepen the meaning of everyday space. (*He puts the paper back in his pocket.*) In my oration I'll disclose a few hidden facets of my past existence. (*He walks around nervously, stops in his tracks.*) Sorry. (*He walks back to the camera.*) Can you see me? (*Mournfully*) It's no longer me. What is it, then? Nothing perhaps. Or something. What am I? Just a stone? Or...(looking around)...a tree? Let's not anticipate. I haven't caught flu since 1974...1975...1979. My health is above suspicion. (*Crossing his fingers*) And I keep my fingers crossed. (*He approaches his crossed fingers to the eye of the camera, holds them at close range for half a minute, lowers his hand and uncrosses his fingers.*) So I'm perfectly calm. My powers are at their peak. (*Pause.*) My paleness doesn't mean anything. I've always been like that, ever since my childhood. I have a romantic touch, you know. And it's a black-and-white film. So I am white. Not black, not yet. (*Pause.*) How romantic I was. You must remember, Charles. We courted the same young ladies. You were far more experienced. When you finally managed to lure her into the lift...I thought the lift had got stuck. How beautiful she was! How lovely! Very

young too! *(Pause.)* She didn't die last year, did she? Who did? Somebody did. Not you, Charles, I hope. You're still alive, aren't you? If you are, you'll remember the lift. *(Pause.)* What do you remember? How many lapses of memory did you have last month? *(Pause.)* The lift has got stuck but there's nobody in it. *(Pause.)* I'm alone. *(He takes a step towards the camera.)* Do you still remember me? Or am I obliterated by...a huge idea? *(Pause.)* I haven't lived. Not a single day...not a single minute. The anniversary of our...adieu. 30 years. *(Pause.)* A stone flung upward. It rises and then plummets down. Such is life. Jung says something along these lines. We strive upward before middle age, attain maturity and descend, returning to a state of repose. She was holding my life tightly in her hand. And she dropped it with a crash. I attained maturity at the age of 20. Ever since I've been living with death. *(Pause.)* Transform yourselves into living Philosophical Stones! *(He touches his mouth with suspicion, makes a face and produces a few meaningless sounds.)* Do you understand me? Charles...ladies and gentlemen...do you understand or not? *(With resignation)* You've never understood me anyway. You used to shorten my words, reducing my brain to a speck of dust. I'm a dustcloud blown by the wind. I've never been otherwise, neither have you. We live because our globe is dusty. There are no dusters in our universe, no vacuum cleaners. No cleaning ladies. *(Pause. Furiously)* Why am I talking to you? You've never...Why should you change now? A speck of dust will always be a speck of dust, whatever happens. Is nothing sacred? Just money and technological progress? Can you die for an idea? Or kill for an idea, an ideal? For a symbol? For an old-fashioned, outdated symbol? *(Pause.)* Symbols need updating from time to time.

55

The discussion he had overheard the other day inspired the shooting of *The Funeral Oration*. He undertook this uncustomary task with a view to purifying himself. He ended up making a laudable attempt to purify the entire population of our globe.

He could not rely on his gift for improvisation: his design required a solid framework. So he took the trouble to write down his ideas, his indictments. His pockets were bulging with notebooks, sheets of paper, handkerchiefs.

He stigmatised newspapers and television. He touched upon the eternal problem of generations succeeding each other like sea-waves, like seagulls. 'The younger generation ignores the post-war generation and vice versa,' he said. He also spoke about the pre-war generation. He mentioned the pre-glacial period.

The shooting of the film went on and on. His funeral oration exceeded the modest structure of one-reelers. He could not bring himself to tell his listeners and spectators the only truth that counted in his life—the only lie he had never forgiven and forgotten. And he could not bring himself to write it down, which might have made things easier for him. Zarina was still inaccessible to public opinion.

But he was warming up, getting into his stride. Soon he forgot the world and its great insoluble problems. He forgot the degeneration of mankind, the deterioration of the human brain.

56

Mais on peut relever tout de même la présence, dans ces longs récits aux péripéties innombrables, de quelques-uns des thèmes qui marqueront par la suite l'Érotique aussi bien religieuse que profane : l'existence d'une relation « hétérosexuelle » et marquée par un pôle masculin et un pôle féminin, l'exigence d'une abstention qui se modèle beaucoup plus sur l'intégrité virginale que sur la domination politique

et virile des désirs ; enfin l'accomplissement et la récompense de cette pureté dans une union qui a la forme et la valeur d'un mariage spirituel.

Michel Foucault, *Le souci de soi*

Those mournful faces...individuals seeking guides and teachers...trying to get out...Exits, loopholes, solutions. Can *you* offer any solutions to their problems? And what about exits? No exit. Did *you* invent this sign? 'No exit'. Wherever one might go. A luminous sign above every door. At least there are doors somewhere, not only your signs. *(Pause.)* Only mirrors understood me. *(Looking at the secrétaire)* But they're so fragile. *(He shifts his gaze to the floor, kneels down, looks around without lifting his head, scrambles up.)* Not a splinter! Not a splinter! *(Pause.)* It's a shame that such a beautiful, reliable object has also been defiled by her crime. *(He resumes his position in front of the camera. His left hand is smeared with blood. Looking at his hand)* Blood proves nothing. Nothing! I can assure you! Nothing at all!! It's an illusion, a mirage. *(With his right hand he draws a handkerchief from the left pocket of his trousers but changes his mind.)* No. Let it flow. *(Pause.)* Too long, too long. My funeral oration is too long. So is her letter. 'It is a long letter. You must be bored to death. But I implore you to let me live for another half an hour. Without you I am dead. I live only when I see you or when I write to you.' And I live only when I talk about my sorrow, my distress, my mistress. Why should she outlive her only lover? *(He puts the handkerchief back in his pocket, draws a sheet of paper from the same pocket and starts reading out loud.)* I have an old score to settle with my former mistress. My bitterness stems from a common feeling known to mankind from time immemorial. Commingled with the gloom of eternal repugnance, my resentment has endured through many years, defying my forgiving, placid nature. *(He puts the paper back in his pocket.)* 30 years. In a few days I'll celebrate our anniversary. I'll ask her to join in the festivities. The main adornment of my Garden of Eden, the fountain of tenderness. Some of you saw her. *(Bitterly)* More than that. *(He looks at the blood that continues to trickle from the palm of his left hand. He kneels down and examines the floor thoroughly.)* My blood doesn't stain, like champagne. As translucent as champagne. Her blood wasn't translucent. I checked...as soon as she got up and put on...She looked so embarrassed and so...proud. She took a mirror out of her bag to make sure she hadn't become somebody else. *(Ironically)* A woman, womanhood. A teenage girl's journey towards womanhood. I thought I was her travel agent. Or at least her travelling companion. I wasn't even on the train, if you see what I mean. I wasn't in her carriage. I was in another *département*, in another country. I might have been in Japan, for all I know. *(Pause.)* Why was she so eager to play this old-fashioned, mythical part? In those days I never spoke about purity, chastity and innocence. I never said to her: 'I'd marry you if you were—' *(Pause.)* Only Bernard was interested in virgins. *(He laughs hysterically.)* But there were none in Versailles except Zarina. *(Pause.)* Everybody laughed at him. And he spoke about Natasha Rostova and other heroines of Russian novels. Actually Anatole Kuragin was also keen on virgins—on *petites filles*, as he put it in a conversation with Dolokhov. He meant virgins of course, not Lolitas. Lolita wasn't a virgin. And Natasha Rostova was. And it's her virginity he appreciated most, I suppose. Her innocence and naturalness. Why don't our cynics understand the eternal allure of virginity, its glamour and glory? Are they more cynical than the cynics of the past? Of course Kuragin was determined to take advantage of Natasha's purity. But at least he knew there was something to take advantage of. *(Pause.)* I saw a virgin on television the other day. They'd found one somewhere. Not in Versailles, not in Paris. The host asked her if she didn't regret the time she had wasted. *Love's Labour's Lost*. A poll was conducted to gauge the viewers' attitudes. *(Pause.)* Ever since that instructive interview she must have been enjoying herself with a vengeance to make up for lost

time. Vengeance. *(Pause.)* Those virgins who withstand onslaughts in Greek novels. She never talked about them, our Zarina. *(Pause.)* She asked me if she had been equal to the...occasion...if she had been inferior to other women...*(He laughs hysterically.)* I said to her, 'You were sublime.' *(Pause.)* Perhaps she wished to usurp my name, to become a member of our old family. Hers is the oldest profession in the world. And I'm one of the oldest men in France. *(Pause.)* She spent a lot of time staring at our family tree, scrutinising its golden boughs. *(Pause.)* Then she met *him*, a golden bough, a real one. Once we listened together to *Das Rheingold*. 'I wouldn't guard the Rheingold,' she said. 'I care neither for money nor for power. My gold is inside me.' Well, I wrenched the gold from her and, like Alberich, cursed love forever. *(Pause.)* Did *she* curse love? She didn't, otherwise she wouldn't have fallen in love with Pierre Lenoir. With him or his money? What *did* she fall in love with? Anyway, she no longer needed *me*, her sex tutor. Her crime. She was rather outspoken during our farewell ceremony. She said I'd been very clumsy. She said, 'I was your first woman.' *(Pause.)* 'If there's such a thing as masculine virginity, I've preserved it too,' says one of those Greek or Roman dupes. *(Looking up)* Virgo, our celestial virgin. She had to escape from this planet in order to safeguard her virginity. On the one side she is protected by a Lion, on the other by a Scorpion. Poor little thing! On earth she would have been sullied—even in her mother's womb. Women would have sullied her. Their lewd and lascivious behaviour. *Le rouge et le noir*. *(Pause.)* Virgin indeed! How did she do it? Elementary, my dear Charles. Just have a guess. Thursday. 5 days later. Perfect timing! She didn't need her lipstick. *(He draws the lipstick from the right pocket of his trousers and holds it up to the eye of the camera.)* She pouts her lips when she's putting on lipstick. *(He puts the lipstick back in his pocket.)* And I fell for her ruse despite my hope of being taken for a seasoned, saucy lover. *(Pause.)* And she had an affair with you. Before! First come, first served. And with Richard. And with Rudolph. You all provided the groundwork for my sexual ecstasy and aesthetic enjoyment. But she didn't love you. She loved *me*. I've waited all these years to tell you the story of my incredible naïveté. The Hereafter has its advantages. *(Pause.)* You know her, don't you Charles? You know who I'm speaking about. Zarina of course! Now I can name her. From here, from the vantage point of death. She loved *me*. Love has its drawbacks. *(He draws the sheet of paper from the inner pocket of his jacket and starts reading out loud.)* In the days of the Holy Inquisition, Zarina would have known the glory of going up in flames. She would have died many times. Many women would have been burnt at the stake in expiation of her immeasurable sin. Chastity, purity. Our generation discredited these words, relegating them to the stiffness and staleness of Victorian England. In the 50s we began to undermine, to ridicule the moral foundations of our society. In the 60s we seemed to have reached the point of no return. And then a reaction set in—a sort of Counter-Reformation—which brought some colour back to the washed-out frescoes of the past. To our surprise we are realising now our unwavering adherence to the doctrines of our ancestors. We are re-discovering moral philosophy and its eternal values. Young ladies have grown romantic again. As in days of yore, tenderness is listed first in the catalogue of their longings and demands. Chastity, purity. The individuals who don't recognise these words and their history-certified eternity go against the grain. They don't recognise themselves in the mirror of humanity, losing their reflections. Without purity and chastity our life may become a curious blend of uselessness and pomposity. *(He pockets the paper.)* There was nothing she treasured so much as my letters. I wanted to tear them up. She bit me. She bit my hands, she sobbed like a neurasthenic child. And after...after...when I asked her...She agreed, she nodded. She brought them, so easily. We exchanged our letters. I kept the longest one. She didn't notice its absence from the archives of her discarded lovers. *(Pause.)* Despite the overwhelming evidence I still ingenuously believe that she was never

unfaithful to me. Never. And I was her first lover. And last. *(Pause.)* I have nothing to lose. The dead *are* the laughing stock of the living. Now you know. I don't mind. Now I don't mind. Now everything seems ridiculous and useless. *(He presses his hands against his temples. Desperately)* Why didn't I marry her?! False pride? Did I fear her future betrayals? *(He lowers his hands. Pause.)* I was away. When I came back...I ran into Robert. 'Don't you know? Zarina and Pierre Lenoir are engaged to be married in January.' I didn't know. I didn't believe him. 'You go around with your eyes shut half the time, so I'm not surprised you're the last to hear the news.' At least my ears weren't shut on that occasion. I called her mother. Nobody answered at Zarina's office and I called her mother. She said that her daughter had run out of patience. Too long. I ought to have made up my mind earlier. Faster. I ought to have pressed the fast-forward. Too long, too long. And what about me? What about *my* time? 30 years! *(He goes to the bed, fingers the blanket and the sheets, bends over the pillow, smells the pillow.)*

57

He went on and on, unmindful of Time, unmindful of Space. He had quite a number of cassettes in his drawers—enough to make a soap opera. The dead are very loquacious about their experiences.

The film bore his flesh-and-blood signature. *Witness for the Prosecution*. He was guilty.

58

He disappears from the screen. His resounding steps are heard as he paces up and down the room. Suddenly his face looms up in the middle of the screen.

Did she have an accident, a road accident? The Queen was in a taxi, the Queen was in a mortuary. There have been several fatalities on the roads. Shall I phone her again? *(Pause.)* Taxi-drivers are slow nowadays, very slow. They stop at traffic lights. They stop in the middle of the street to speak to bus-drivers, pedestrians. They drink beer, vodka. But they can't drink vodka for an hour and a half. Nobody can except the Russians. So it's *her* fault. She's dragging her feet because I didn't smack her face 30 years ago. Because I didn't beat her to death 20 years ago. She despises me. She's right, absolutely right. She's laughing at me. *(He shifts his gaze towards the camera. Ironically)* Would you be so kind as to let me know the name of the director? *(Furiously)* I've given no permission! *(He starts making faces before the eye of the camera.)* What do they want to know? I've nothing to hide, nothing at all! *(Pause.)* In my childhood I had an enormous case with a false bottom.

59

How to punish Zarina? By calling her names? (Old hag! Old witch! Old virgin!) By smacking her face? Too late, unfortunately. He ought to have done so when she began to indulge in her theatricals—in the late 50s. His punishment would have added a finishing touch to her red-tinted purity, to her colourful chastity.

He should have smacked her face twice a week. He might have cured that femme fatale of her bad habits, of her horrendous vices.

The punishment was to be brought up to date. *Dial M for Murder*.

He backs out of the room. A few moments later the doorbell is heard. It rings for a while. Silence. A knock at the door. Silence. He glides slowly onto the screen.

Perhaps I didn't hear the doorbell. She thought I was out and went back home. *(Pause.)* I've been out for 30 years. *(Pause.)* I've been in. Baked in a pie. *(He turns the lights off. Muffled steps, slight tinkling of the chandelier, sound of curtains violently drawn aside. No light penetrates the window. Steps recede. After a while steps approach.)* Another minute and everything will be all right. *(He strikes a match and lights 2 candles.)* Tosca, *finalmente mia!*...

61

5 minutes elapsed in silence. The doorbell rang once more. That day was repetitious. The lights went on in the room, as might have been expected. Slowly he rose from his armchair and came up to the screen. What did he do it for? He had already immortalised his face. Wasn't he in a hurry to see his long-lost companion in misfortune?

A triumphant grin flashed like a scimitar across his face. He *was* happy. For the first time in his life he was really happy.

He headed for the door. 5 minutes later she rustled into the room. Her profile was silhouetted against the curtains. She removed her gloves lazily and threw them on the secretaire. He came up to the screen and switched the camera off.

The screen was black once more.

PART ONE
(Continuation)

What say you to this, O virgin who are proud? Mary forgets her virginity and dwells only upon her humility, and you think only of flattering yourself about your virginity, while neglecting humility. 'The Lord,' said she, 'has had regard to the humility of His handmaid.' Who was she who speaks this? A virgin holy, prudent, and pious. Would you claim to be more chaste, more pious than she? Or do you think that your modesty is more acceptable than the purity of Mary, since you think that you are able by it to please God without humility, whilst she was not able? The more honourable you are by the singular gift of chastity, the greater is the injury you do to yourself by staining it with an admixture of pride. It was better for you not to be a virgin, than to grow haughty about virginity. It is not granted to all to live in virginity, but to many fewer to do so with humility.'

St Bernard, *Homily I on the Annunciation*

13

As he walked into her apartment he muttered an incantation which had a double or triple purpose. He carried a briefcase and that briefcase was almost full. He hoped he would have no opportunity, no time to open it. Indeed he almost flung that mathematical briefcase under the piano that stood beside a large and seemingly comfortable sofa.

It was dark already. She kept offering him coffee. He refused it once, twice—5 times. He wondered what she really meant by the word 'coffee'. What did she intend to put in his cup?

'Why don't you open your briefcase?'

He complied with her wish and, after a few moments, said apologetically, 'There's nothing inside.'

'Let me have a look.' She bent down and they began to struggle awkwardly. 'How often have you behaved like this?'

What would she have done had he taken hold of her breasts, squeezing them gently to accomplish a 'pulp-like touch'?

Sexual liberation was gaining ground. The famous magazine *Paris-Hollywood* flaunted a new type of photography—*déshabillage en relief*. Chance couples would kiss and make love in the *Jardin du Luxembourg*. He could not kiss her in the privacy of her apartment.

He kissed a mirror. 'When a person kisses the reflection of the person he loves in a mirror, in water, or on a wall, it is called a "kiss showing the intention",' he murmured.

'I know what your intentions are.' She knew everything.

Outside her apartment millions of fingers steadily edged their way through raincoats, capes and umbrellas.

Outside her apartment millions of women were peeling off their raincoats and dressing gowns. They posed before unblinking eyes at every angle and in every position. They danced around, bent over, leant back.

Outside her apartment millions of men were pulled down onto couches and sofas. He kissed her photograph standing on the piano. There was a pack of Tarot cards on the piano, beside her photograph. When a person kisses a child sitting on his lap, or a picture, or an image, or a figure, in the presence of the person beloved by him, it is called a 'transferred kiss'.

He wandered around her apartment, touching the piano, her photographs, the pack of Tarot cards. She stood in a corner of her room, inaccessible and innocent. He could have spanked her. Spanking is a pleasure in its own right.

He recalled that any part of the female body might be struck in the heat of an amorous game: with the back of the hand, with the fingers a little contracted, with the fist, with the open palm of the hand, with a cane, with a folded sheet of paper bearing the man's signature and declaration of love, with a lewd photograph...

He remained in a corner—a symbolic one—and he was unable to move out of it unaided.

She did not help him. Her memory was besieged by concomitant images and sounds. She did her best to hold them at bay so as to resist the temptation to which she was exposed. Once she ran into her former boyfriend near a bus stop. It was raining heavily and she covered his head with the nether part of her raincoat. She closed her eyes, pulled the umbrella down around them and came very quickly. The few passers-by did not give them a second look. The innocent passers-by thought she was merely pregnant. Once Robert confessed: 'I wonder what your legs are like.' She immediately went to the bedroom and slipped into the shortest skirt she could lay her

hands on. She also put on her flimsiest panties, removed her bra and changed her blouse for a very thin one that she did not even bother to do up. She laid out a condom by the bed, on the book entitled *The Crimes of Love*.

'I'll just top up the water in the vases.' Zarina walked out of her room and sat down on the sofa.

He sat down beside her. The only image *he* was anxious to hold at bay was his abortive sexual intercourse with a prostitute. Weary of self-supporting, self-sufficient ecstasies, he followed the best advice of his conceited tutors and, in the course of a purposeful walk in Paris, chose a more or less clean *putain*—an automatic purveyor of love. After a short financial discussion she took him to her headquarters the topography of which was scanty and bed-oriented. She drew the curtains and began to remove her clothes without paying any attention to her client who remained in the doorway, paralysed and enthralled by her gradual approach to nakedness. Her bra and girdle landed on the windowsill. His heart was pounding feverishly as if to demonstrate that something in his body was able to move, to act, to function. His mouth was as dry as an infinite desert.

She had a marvellous body. A dusky Bermuda triangle of fur—

She eyed him up and down.

'What?' he asked.

'You're dragging things out. Everything except the essential.'

He frenziedly undid the Windsor knot of his tie. When he was down to his trousers, pants and socks, he suddenly interrupted his striptease, ashamed and alarmed.

'Come on, you're doing *so* well.'

He turned round and cast a timorous look at the door. 'Well, you seem to be all there—you just need to be shown how to use what you've got.'

As he was considering how to depart without hurting her feelings she lit a cigarette and beckoned him to join her. He tottered towards the dim rectangle where her magnificent body was lying spread-eagled.

Her skin was as smooth and cool as—He had no time for comparisons. Engrossed in the problems of female geography, he could hardly co-ordinate his inner and outer movements. As her belly brushed his body he abandoned the scenic route to sexual gratification in favour of a convenient short-cut and climaxed in a shuddering rush, sobbing and wriggling. For 5 minutes he let it all come out, thinking of those ancient Romans who used to die by emptying their veins.

'I love you.' He touched her neck with his lips.

'Bye-bye, Romeo.'

'Did you read the play? Zarina! Zarina!' He broke the silence to find out if they were still on speaking terms.

'What play?' She answered him to show she was interested in art, in literature, in theatre, in playwrights and actors. She even turned her eyes towards his half-open mouth.

'Do you recall the garden and the balcony? Juliet would have jumped down if her parents—'

'I love Shakespeare. I love theatre in general.'

'Romeo might have joined his beloved in her room—'

'I love Romeo—'

'And what about me?' He touched her with the back of his palm. She did not shrink away.

'I love you too,' she said. 'But it's against my principles.'

'Against—'

'The times they are a-changing. Don't laugh at me.'

'I'm not laughing.'

'Your family must respect traditions. Do your parents believe in God? I think I saw them in church the other day. Do *you* believe in God? I didn't see *you*.'

He had no time for spirituality, but words seemed much more promising than silence and streams of consciousness. '*Mein Liebchen, wer darfsagen: Ich glaub' an Gott?*'

'Do you go to Mass? Regularly?'

'What does it—'

'Your parents would have understood me.'

'How beautiful you are!' He stroked her hair with the tips of his fingers.

'It's useless.' With a show of frustration and disappointment she stood up, touched the book lying on the piano and heaved a sigh. 'I'm sure you haven't read it.'

'What's the title of the book? Titles *are* important.' He also stood up; and yet he had sworn an oath to stick to horizontality until the final victory.

'There's no title,' she said. 'Literary titles are of no importance. It's the message that counts.'

'What is it?' He was near the piano but could not see the binding of the book.

'It's a letter.'

'An epistolary novel? The 18th century?'

She opened the book and read aloud:

"It were better for him that a mill-stone had been hanged about his neck, and that he had been cast into the sea, than that he should have offended the virgin of the Lord. What slave ever reached such a pitch of mad audacity as to fling himself upon his master's bed? What robber ever attained such a height of folly as to lay hands upon the very offerings of God, not dead vessels, but bodies living and enshrining a soul made after the image of God?"

'When was it written?' he asked.

On this occasion silence was definitely more promising than words.

"The virgin has changed her glory, and her glory is in her shame. The heavens are astonished at this, and the earth is horribly afraid, saith the Lord, for the virgin has committed 2 evils; she has forsaken Me, the true and holy Bridegroom of holy souls, and has betaken herself to an impious and lawless destroyer of body and soul alike. She has revolted from God, her Saviour, and yielded her members servants to uncleanness and to iniquity. She forgot me and went after her lover from whom she will get no good."

'Her lover?'

'Do you wish to become a destroyer of my soul?'

'The soul is indestructible. Do you believe in metempsychosis?' A dreadful blunder! He should not have deviated from Catholicism which had so far provided the basis for their dialogue. She arched up and squirmed under his fingers. He continued in the same vein, 'Virginity, virginity. Why make use of this pompous and phoney term, putting it forth as a symbol of human claims, yearnings and sufferings? Why do you treasure it so much? Love is not a treasure hunt, is it? And virginity is scarcely Kafka's Law before which stands a guard. Anyway the Law must be accessible to everyone. Montaigne didn't set great store by virginity.'

'You're talking like the Marquis de Sade.'

'Of course I realise it's an allegory, a multi-level, more or less abstract symbol. So the entire set-up mustn't be taken at face value. But why kick up a fuss about it, about so-called virginity?'

'Is nothing sacred to you? Let me read a few entries from my diary.' A notebook was lying on the piano. She picked it up and read in a confidential tone of voice:

'Even the man I am in love with shouldn't touch me. To him I deny the possession of my body with more firmness and vigour than to other men.'

'Let's forget everything.' He snatched the notebook from her hands and dropped it on the floor. 'Love is forgetfulness, absent-mindedness, oblivion, the void.' He touched her again and again. 65 minutes elapsed in silence.

'No,' she said quietly. 'I can't.' She paused for a few instants. 'Not here. Not in this apartment.'

'Where?' It was too cold in the woods. *Nous n'irons plus aux bois...*

'Nowhere! I'm sorry. I love you too much.'

'Where? Show me your legs, I beg of you. I won't touch you!'

'The male population of the globe could be divided into 2 categories,' she thought. 'Lovers of legs and lovers of boobs.' Boris was a notorious lover of boobs.

'Just your legs. And I'll stay here. I'll sit down.'

'Only my legs? Do you promise? Swear!'

He made the sign of the cross.

'And your opinion?' She crossed her hands, shielding the upper half of her body from his glance as if she were already half-naked. 'What will you think of my moral standards?' She overdid her show of purity but he did not notice her mistake: the greater part of his consciousness was benumbed with pain and lassitude.

The remaining part of his brain could no longer probe into human conundrums. However, it was big enough to supplicate: 'Please! Please! Please!'

'Let's pretend we're going to take a swim,' she said. 'I'll put on my bathing suit.' He was aching all over. He would have drowned immediately had he dared plunge into a sea or a lake.

9 minutes later the show was over. (9. Most Evil, because of its stability. AVB, witchcraft, the false moon of the sorceress.) How many shows did he see that night?

She woke him at half past eight. He saw 3 croissants, a knob of butter and a huge cup of coffee. She was fully dressed and contrite; he was still aching all over.

'Where shall we do it?' he asked.

The woods were too cold at this time of year.

'In 5 days, on Thursday. I love you. I'll do anything for you.' She blushed and turned away.

He had not asked her, 'When shall we do it?'

'My parents are leaving on Monday. Why not meet on Monday?'

'I can't.'

'Can't you?'

She shook her head and said, 'No'.

5 days.

Numbers, numbers, numbers. Supposing a vision that purports to proceed from God is granted to you. The Angel declares his name. You add it up. It comes to 65. An excellent number! A blessed angel! Not

necessarily. What if he is of a Mercurial appearance? 65 is a number of Mars. A false spirit. The Devil does not understand the Kabbalah well enough to clothe his symbols in harmony.

(To be continued.)

PART THREE

I was afraid because of the sprinkled blood, which Moses sprinkled on every door; for though the blood of the slain, it was that which saved the living. Blood from of old I feared not, save that blood that was on the doors, and this moreover that was on the Tree. The blood of the slain is a delight, and is as sweet perfume: but the blood of Jesus is to me a terror; for whenever I come and smell His blood, the savour of life that lurks therein terrifies me.

Ephraim Syrus, *Nisibene Hymns*

And that the blood is the Word, is testified by the blood of Abel, the righteous interceding with God. For the blood would never have uttered a voice, had it not been regarded as the Word: for the righteous man of old is the type of the new righteous one; and the blood of old that interceded, intercedes in the place of the new blood. And the blood that is the Word cries to God, since it intimated that the Word was to suffer.

Clement of Alexandria, *The Instructor*

1

We are not allowed to kill human beings except in self-defence or during a war.

Would you have killed Adolf Hitler if you had met him in his youth—in 1907? At the time the future dictator mooned around Linz, dreaming of art and Vienna. Would you have killed that pitiful lad who was bound to fail his entrance examination in the Academy of Fine Arts? Would you have destroyed him now—from the height of history?

Hitler belonged to life. A certain amount of human blood was flowing through his veins, proving conclusively his chemical affinity with Charles de Gaulle or Mr Smith. Had you shot him three times in the head he would have fallen like an ordinary human being. His blood would have spurted from his wound, like your own blood.

'She's no princess. Her blood isn't blue,' shouts an envious courtier in the well-known fairy tale. Hitler's blood was neither black nor violet.

Why is it harder to kill a man than an insect, a domestic animal? Aren't *they* made in God's image?

Followers of Jainism sweep the ground as they advance through a city or a landscape; they wear a veil to avoid inhaling mosquitoes. They are loath to destroy any particle of life, however small and unconscious. They cannot help it: 'The world is filled with creatures which are not seen by the eye, though inferred by logic; when we move our eyelids, their limbs break and fall.'

Every instant we commit a murder without repentance or fear of divine retribution. Are those insects less important than Man? Don't they palpitate with terrors and desires?

Followers of Jainism do not kill *intentionally*. We kill mosquitoes, dogs, Moby Dick's grandchildren, lions, tigers, panthers, wolves. Why do we have dominion over the fish of the sea, over the birds of the air?

'Animals are poor in spirit and their grasp of the world (*weltarm*). Unlike Man, they have no foreknowledge of death.' So we teach them death. Why not give the same lesson to humans? They know they will die sooner or later. They may die within a few hours.

Hitler might have died in Vienna or Linz. Why did we let him go to Munich?

2

Why did Raskolnikov murder a decrepit woman? (He also murdered her sister: there was an error in his calculus.) He wanted to prove to himself that he was a giant like Napoleon.

Napoleon trifled with his soldiers and his enemies in an appropriate context—in the context of wars. He fought his battles to serve and honour his native country. Patriotism was the springboard, the primeval mover of his military campaigns. And Patriotism, whatever its negative aspects, created an appropriate context for killing in past centuries.

The decrepit woman was a money-lender. She was cruel to her poverty-stricken clients, but her insignificance was not liable to create an appropriate context for killing. And the benefit one could draw from her death was no match for the history-sanctioned magnificence of Patriotism. Do we still belong to the history that used to favour patriotic massacres?

How much evil is required to create a rationale for murder? The decrepit woman's evil amounted to 4% or 5%. Hitler's evil amounted to a 100,000,000%. He did create an appropriate context for his own execution—10 appropriate contexts, 20 appropriate contexts. Why didn't we kill him?

3

Murder has not yet become a natural reflex. Black-and-scarlet photographs represent only one aspect of our many-sided, many-coloured earthly existence. There are other photographs in the same publications; there are other colours on our palette. We are still living, aren't we? Shortage of assassins. The circumference of the human clockface is measureless.

Are we supposed to venerate Time? Shouldn't we stop before it is too late? When read aloud, the history of mankind *already* sounds like a closing speech for the prosecution. Our interiors resemble courtrooms despite the reassuring intimacy of furniture.

We should have stopped before Lenin, Stalin and Hitler were conceived by their otherwise innocent mothers. Now it is too late perhaps. Too late.

4

*Not in the sky, not in the midst of the sea, not if we enter into the clefts
of the mountains, is there known a spot in the whole world where a
man might be freed from an evil deed.*

Dhammapada

30 years have elapsed without her being permanently disabled or, better still, abandoned by her husband. She is not begging for her bread from door to door. Her dresses and mink coats have not grown threadbare, outmoded, pitiful.

No Hell can expunge from her soul those 30 years of happiness, those marks of earthly bliss. She lives and laughs. In vain do I curse her round the clock.

She should be punished by her victim, not by anonymous imps or boiling mud. She should be punished in France, not in the City of Satan. Hyperrealistic crimes are not met by surrealistic or abstract punishments.

Must I kill her? Of course I must. What else am I supposed to do? To give her a medal? She slapped me on the other cheek too! Several times!

Shall I dig up the trial-honoured term 'temporal insanity'? Shall I go insane in the course of the killing? Shall I *pretend* to be insane in the course of the killing? I'm not insane now, am I? I suppose my tying her to the bedposts may be considered bizarre except that it's done in virtually every X-rated movie. But do my bizarre ideas indicate any lurid pathological shift in my brain, in the way my mental processes form my existence out of the transparent immensity of Time, out of the cumbersome bulk of Space?

Or shall I vindicate myself by using the expression I heard in one of Preminger's movies: 'irresistible impulse'? I do feel an irresistible impulse to kill Zarina Lenoir.

I don't really need to bother about how my defence should be conducted: the members of the jury will be appalled and moved to tears. I hope their moral standards are high enough to make them appreciate the horror of my tale, of my fate. Zarina! Zarina! *You* will be my lawyer, my defender. *Witness for the Defence*. Dead and buried, you will save my life. You will rise from your tomb to protect me from my detractors, from my executioners. I'll tell them everything. They will shudder, shake and shriek with horror.

I must tell the story to my lawyer, to the court, to the members of the jury, to my former fiancée sitting in the court-room, flinging her arms upwards—higher and higher. I must go over the facts again and again.

'Vengeance is mine and I will repay.' The famous epigraph to *Anna Karenina* prompts me to interfere with the natural flow of history which, in its moral neutrality, may allow her to live a happy, cloudless life. I must trouble the pulse of fate because my disloyal mistress is not as remorseful as Madame de Tourvel and the heroine of Tolstoy. And one cannot rely on the Supreme Being: His legendary indulgence is bound to minimise the scope and significance of her offence. Vengeance is *mine* and *I* will repay!

Compared with earth, Hell is the Garden of Eden.

5

The genetic code is in fact literally identical in all animals, plants and bacteria that have ever been looked at. All earthly living things are certainly descended from a single ancestor.

Richard Dawkins, *River Out of Eden*

Modern science compares man to a book based on 4 letters only. This theory has a great deal in common with the Kabbalah. There are a 100,000,000 pages in our book. All these pages, all our novels and poems, are based on only 4 letters. (The greater part of *his* book was based on the number 5.) And our book differs from the chimpanzee-book by 1%. Not by 300% or 400%, as many of us believe, but by 1% only. And an ordinary child-loving, Bible-reading individual, who goes to Mass every Sunday, differs from another individual—Stalin, for instance—by an infinitesimal particle. By 5 sentences lost in our 100,000,000-page book. Are we all Stalin's brothers and sisters?

We have killed neither Hitler nor Stalin. Why do we kill animals who *are* our brothers and sisters?

Even plants feel pain and fear death, according to the polygraph or 'lie detector' (or 'pain detector') that Cleve Backster connected one day to a potted rubber plant growing in his office. After dipping one of its leaves into a cup of hot coffee, which had elicited no psychological response on the part of the 'guinea plant', he decided to get a box of matches and burn the leaf properly, in earnest. 'At the instant of this decision, at 13 minutes and 55 seconds of chart time, there was a dramatic change in the PGR tracing pattern in the form of an abrupt and prolonged upward sweep of the recording pen. I had not moved, or touched the plant, so the timing of the PGR pen activity suggested to me that the tracing might have been triggered by the mere thought of the harm I intended to inflict on the plant.' Cleve Backster went on with his research and found out that the long-suffering plant also responded in sympathy to the harm he inflicted on other living creatures—the shrimps he would drop one by one into boiling water. What a pity the plant could not avenge itself by pushing its torturer into the boiling water he appreciated so much as an instrument of doom or at least by knocking out his teeth. A tooth for a leaf.

When did Zarina begin to suspect he would kill her? When did she know it for certain? To what heights would the recording pen have soared at those climactic moments had her body been connected to a 'death detector'? What kind of curve would her soul have inspired had *her* torturer committed suicide in her presence? Would she have pitied her former lover, her gullible tutor? Would she have asked her husband for compassionate leave? Compassionate leaf.

6

Though aware of death, of its impenetrable curtain, many people deny accidents, shipwrecks, machine-guns. They expect to die at home, in their own beds, in deep sleep—in full accordance with their mental arrangements. They die in a car crash, in a back street.

Accidents happen to other people! Don't go out after midnight and you'll live forever! These exclamation marks misguide our instincts, paralyse the protective tentacles of our foresight.

Under some circumstances the urge to kill gains its illegitimate ends. Our moral standards are fragile; their supposed permanence can scarcely match the fickle essence of our world.

Today we bear no grudge against our neighbour; tomorrow we quarrel with him and we kill him the day after tomorrow. Our neighbours change every minute, so does our attitude towards them. Our habits change quicker than autumnal hues. What seemed impossible an hour ago has suddenly become a commonplace, a widespread custom.

His neighbours did not move away from the sinister building; nor did they go to the police. They noticed nothing—not the faintest outline of the forthcoming tragedy. As the news reached their ears and minds they began to remember. They said, 'We knew—' Their belated prophecies sounded hollow like an old dying tree.

7

'Did you see him smile?'

'You smile too.'

'Not always.'

'You're smiling now.'

'Am I?'

'Murderers don't smile. They grin and snigger.'

'The murderer had been captured and stood trial for his life. '

'Did you see his nose?'

'I knew his father.'

'It runs in the family.'

'Bad behaviour is controlled by genes and something must be done about it!'

'Did his father kill anybody?'

'His own father—'

'He couldn't help it.'

'His grandfather?'

'Like grandfather like—'

'Certainly there's one gene which is shared by most criminals—and its complete DNA sequence is known!'

'Did you see his upper lip?'

'It looks as if he's licking blood.'

'His great-grandfather was Gilles de Retz. He collected the blood of his victims in a goblet.'

'Gilles de Retz was a homosexual maniac.'

'Blood is the same everywhere. My dog—'

'He used to cut off his lovers' heads, hearts, right arms and left feet.'

'Was he an ogre?'

'An offering to Satan. In a vase.'

'And he made love with his favourite corpses.'

'Did *they* make love?'

'Before the murder?'

'He was simply jealous. He couldn't reconcile himself to the idea of her being in the arms of somebody else.'

'He treated her as an object that could be thrown out of the window in a moment of displeasure.'

'He treated her *virginity* as an object. That cork-ritual—'

'Women are not wine bottles!'

'She was supposed to carry the cork in her *mouth*.'

'On the few times I've met Zarina she struck me as a windbag.'

'All women are windbags.'

'You shut your mouth!'

'He looks like Gilles de Retz.'

'His forehead—'

These people merely glide through the festive hum of Paris. They glissade over the uneasy swell of hours and minutes. Whatever they do seems to bear the stamp of their sluggishness, of their jellyfish essence. I wonder if they have ever been born.

8

In his closing speech the public prosecutor compared the murderer to Gilles de Retz. Another doppelgänger, another impalpable shadow.

Gilles de Retz. Some think he was a kind of Bluebeard who assassinated as many as 25 women. Others affirm that he was a companion in arms of Saint Joan and also her companion in misfortune; in short, he handed her over to the English and received 30,000 pounds for his ignominious labours.

What do historians think or know? Gilles de Retz killed a lot of people—too many perhaps. His victims were not ladies, contrary to the insinuations of the public prosecutor. He used to bleed little boys as if they were ill. (Bleeding was a panacea in the 15th century.) They were not ill, not at all. Usually they were healthier than their playmates, their fellow students. And they were prettier than those who walked and ran beside them, around them.

At some point in his ritual he would make love to them—when they were half-dead or half-alive. He drank their blood as if it were old claret.

There were many discrepancies between the prisoner's and Gilles de Retz's lifestyles (deathstyles). The former did not collect the blood of his victim in a goblet; nor did he cut off Zarina's members, her tiny head, her ears.

Both Gilles de Retz and the prisoner watched their victims pass away in a welter of blood—for hours on end. But the prisoner indulged in this extreme form of voyeurism with no artistic purpose in mind. He was just avenging himself and the purity of humanity, our traditions and symbols.

Gilles de Retz had poetry in his soul and whatever he did or devised was firmly rooted in aestheticism. After hanging his victims on poles or hooks, after incising their skin in many places, he contemplated their cheeks, their twitching mouths. 'If I don't like their design of agony, I unhook them and stroke their faces until a glimmer of hope kindles their half-extinguished glances. The loss of hope is beautiful.'

9

Prone to hasty conclusions and inadequate comparisons, the public prosecutor would often forget the prisoner and his unique, uncommon life. Of course he never forgot the prisoner's death. Confident of his forthcoming triumph, he did not bother to flesh out his accusation with details of the prisoner's attitude towards the assassinated woman. He mainly confined his eloquence to the murder itself that seemed so self-supporting as to exclude any need for biographical investigation.

So, apart from its final episode, the prisoner's life remained more or less private as if the whole affair had been conducted in the best English traditions. His life was his castle; and his murder was a village fair, a Disneyland.

10

Only presumptuous individuals believe that a human action can be traced back to its origin, that everything has its foundation and explanation. There are inexplicable events in our life; there are rootless trees in human woods. Now and then something is done on the spur of the moment and, however illuminating and detailed, our analyses leave us stranded in the desert of uncertainty. We cast around for a while, hoping to pick up a trail in the infinite network of sand and, utterly exhausted, let the veil of darkness envelop our minds.

Some crimes have no origin. A gun falls into your hand from nowhere. Your fingers tremble; you fire and shoot a passer-by dead. The police arrive on the scene of the murder; you are arrested and conveyed to the nearest prison. The door of your cell is shut and locked with the clatter of invisible chains. You look around—nothing is to be seen save your death—and sink down on a cot. Why was the crime committed? Because the gun had fallen into your hand from nowhere and your fingers begun to tremble violently, irresistibly.

A knife lies on a dinner table. You search for a spoon but your hand, misguided by the crinkled topography of the tablecloth, finds and grasps the knife, turning it into a medieval weapon. Incredulous and dumbfounded, you raise the knife to make sure it is not the spoon you have been searching for, and the man sitting next to you interrupts the trajectory of your hand. How did he get in the way? Did he want to leave the house? Lunch was still in progress and there were no newcomers to greet. Somehow he straightened up awkwardly, lurched sideways.

And now a crowd of strangers presses upon you, asking you the questions you cannot answer. You are taken away; you float through the days and nights without living and, for a while, without dying. They let you live to ask you questions. You feel neither your thoughts nor your tongue. They do not stop. They go on and on, like human history. But they are bound to stop.

They are bound to stop because trials do not last forever. Judges must be given an opportunity to recite death sentences. The shorter the verdict the broader the smile they endeavour to hide from the audience. No poem is so enchanting as a death sentence.

Fate's guided-missile system is never off-target. Air-to-ground.

11

There is no single, definitive 'stream of consciousness', because there is no central Headquarters, no Cartesian Theatre where 'it all comes together' for the perusal of a Central Meaner. Instead of such a single stream (however wide), there are multiple channels in which specialist circuits try, in parallel pandemoniums, to do their various things, creating Multiple Drafts as they go.

Daniel C. Dennett, *Consciousness Explained*

The number of victims is never predictable. Even on a desert island one must reckon with the secrecy of mists delaying the appearance of masts, periscopes and eyeglasses.

His thoughts, even if troubled by a sudden emotion, were arrayed like an army on a military parade. And they were marching towards the murders.

The ball of his meditation was rolling like the proverbial stone. But, unlike the stone, it did gather moss: every day he added a new component to the menacing mass which, if transformed into nuclear energy, would have annihilated our planet. (And, oddly enough, he killed 5 birds with one stone.) In the language of conventional warfare his repulsion would have wiped out Europe.

Had he recalled the film *Seven Chances*, where Buster Keaton is pursued by a number of boulders and an infinite number of women, he would have run away from his obsessions.

His mind resembled both an army's headquarters and a Shakespearean theatre where he played and re-played the tragedy of his life, mainly focusing his attention and energy on the fifth act. There was only one channel in his consciousness, a huge irrigation channel. And no parallel pandemoniums distracted him from his duty—the typical narrow-mindedness of a single-minded person.

But during the forth act of their second and last farewell ceremony he did not yet know how the murder would be committed. (Multiple Drafts.)

12

Their first farewell ceremony.

'And what about that blood on the sheets? Where did it come from?'

'Where does blood come from?' Zarina burst into laughter.

'How did you do it?'

'I just...cut myself. With a knife. A pocket-knife. I cut my forefinger and pressed it—'

'Where...where did you hide it?'

'The knife? Let me see. Under the pillow. Under the mattress. *Under the Volcano. Under Western Eyes.*'

Again she burst into laughter.

'The knife—'

'You were so clumsy. You inflicted a wound...'

'The knife—'

'My virginal body was delicate...such a fragile thing...'

'You said—'

'What did I say?'

'You *were* a virgin. Why did you—'

She stopped laughing and gave him a sardonic stare. 'Idiot.'

'Where did the blood come from?' he asked.

'Young Virgin Autosodomised by her own Chastity. Do you know that Gala Dali was a virgin until 23? And then she married Paul Eluard.'

'Where did the blood come from?'

When?

The monthly flux of women. Turning new wine sour. Tarnishing the bright surface of mirrors. Crops become barren, grafts die, the fruit of trees falls off.

The monthly flux of women. Ants throw away the grains of corn that taste of it.

13

She belongs to the human species. So anybody can do it. That deleterious seed has been planted in human nature. The Tree of Death is growing, blooming in the universal soul.

14

Unless you are a born suicidal maniac you do not blow your brains out to censor human history. You kill your fellow countrymen and preserve yourself as a minister of doom, spraying the world with pesticide.

15

One revolver cannot kill all the inhabitants of a big industrial city; one pair of hands cannot strangle a crowd. (His hands were small.)

What would have happened had he any access to those legendary buttons which, being pressed by the dumpy fingers of a Doctor Strangelove, have so often triggered an atomic war in films and science-fiction novels? What would have happened? Another multiplication? Quantity, if pushed beyond a certain limit, creates another quality.

Would he have brought a flood of waters upon the earth, destroying all flesh, had he been God? Would he have added a few words to The Old Testament?

A true philosopher writes a commentary on a text, not the text itself.

16

Nobody looked bewildered except his former fiancée. She would fling her arms upwards as if conversing ecstatically with the ceiling. In the space of 2 months she added a dozen signs to the semiology of sorrow.

All his acquaintances and neighbours nodded meaningfully to emphasise their long-standing bond with the logic of fate. 'I knew—' They did not.

17

He was about to make his debut as a murderer. Critical situations predispose us to share our mental and physical worries with others: neighbours, friends, mistresses, gawking onlookers.

He might have sought the advice of a professional criminal capable of bringing into harmony the spiritual and material aspects of the radical project. Amateurs cannot foresee all complications and often err at the very first stage of the deed: they choose the wrong weapon or the wrong victim.

Professional murderers are not so easy to encounter. Retired or active, they do not open their hearts to anybody. They seldom teach and mostly act with absolute disregard for glory. Besides, many of them consider hands-on experience far more useful than academic qualifications.

He needed no advice, no tutors. Anyway he decided to kill her only in the third act of their last farewell ceremony.

18

The sun was filtering into the room through the curtains; the weather had no forebodings, no misgivings. (It was too early. He committed his atrocious murders 5 months later.) The doorbell rang noncommittally. He opened the door with eagerness and anxiety. Did he hope his former mistress and future victim would call on him? Without being invited? Did he expect her to take the initiative in patching up their altercation?

He saw his neighbour, a future witness for the prosecution. He let him in and closed the door. Was he disappointed? He was. But he preferred disappointments to the mnemonic torture he had been subjected to ever since her departure. Perpetually on the lookout for distractions, he felt much happier when his stomach was upset, when he had to roll his sleeve up, allowing an ugly nurse to give him a particularly painful injection.

His neighbour dropped in to ask for a loan which was granted immediately. But the neighbour did not leave. He stayed for 35 minutes as if he had suspected something. Did he look like a blackmailer or a secret agent? He looked and sounded like a polite scrounger. Some murderers see their future or past crimes everywhere: in the distorting mirror of a shop-assistant's smile, in a pool of water.

At the time, the murder was not yet on the agenda. He read no weird allusions into his neighbour's pouting sullenness. And his impetuous wish to kill him then and there was not rooted in the venerable tradition to which self-respecting murderers pay their tribute: witnesses must be silenced.

He saw no background shadows in his neighbour's eyes and heard no undertones in his voice.

They talked for a while. After leafing through a collection of American essays the neighbour touched upon several philosophical problems. He evinced a most ardent desire to probe into the mystery of death which, in the course of his pacifist exposition, became a mere aftermath of atomic wars. He jumped up, trying to remove a science-fiction novel from a high shelf. He failed and looked around in the hope of finding a ladder or a stool; he asked permission to use the most beautiful armchair.

The permission was given and, a few seconds later, the neighbour removed the novel from the shelf without breaking the precious piece of furniture. Perhaps he was not heavy enough to damage anything, however fragile and genuine.

Everything seemed to be all right. Yet that trivial encounter was little short of tragedy.

The man was going through the motions. He was neither dead nor alive. His incurable 'uneventfulness' was noisome.

Dante would not have granted him admission to Hell.

19

If anger arises in thy breast, instantly seal up thy lips, and let it not go forth; for like fire when it wants vent, it will suppress itself. It is good in a fever to have a tender and a smooth tongue, but it is better that it be so in anger. For if it be rough and distempered, there it is an ill sign, but here it is an ill cause. Angry passion is a fire, and angry words are like breath to fan it: together they are like steel and flint, sending out fire by mutual collision.

Jeremy Taylor, *The Rule and Exercises of Holy Living and Dying*

Before the assassination, his only film was even more tantalisingly unfinished than Schubert's *Symphony in B Minor*. (According to the legend created by those who have the nerve to obtrude upon the dead's privacy, Schubert's uncharacteristic pithiness was due to lack of time.)

It took him around 10 (5+5) hours to murder Zarina.

Soon after her arrival he switched the camera on again, shouting: 'Action!' She appeared in the background, sitting on the bed.

'How's your husband?' he asked, dropping into the armchair.

'I've never loved him.'

'But you've made love many times, haven't you?'

'Every time I yield to his caresses—'

'777 times. This number represents the flaming sword that drove Man out of Eden.'

'I think about you, every time. He's just my husband.'

'And I'm your lover, just your lover. Do you still love me?'

'Of course.'

'And you hold *my* body in your arms, don't you? Every time—'

'I love you,' she said earnestly.

'And your son? Whose body was in your bed *that* night? Is he *our* son?'

'I've brought him up to respect traditions and artists. He's your spiritual son.'

'Was the bed spiritual too? And your husband's caresses? What did you tell him on your wedding night? Did you quote the Fathers of the Church?'

'I've always—'

'Purity, chastity, innocence. How did you handle *his* bedclothes?' He drew a folded sheet of paper from the inner pocket of his jacket and unfolded it. "'—they always want to see a stain on the bed to know you're a virgin for them all that's troubling them they're such fools too you could be a widow or divorced 40 times over a daub of red ink would do or blackberry juice no that's too purple—'" He put the paper back in his pocket. 'Was it a daub of red ink this time? No. I can't quite imagine you ploughing through *Ulysses*. Besides, you don't really need Molly's tip. Or your lipstick, come to think of it. Your trick is far more ingenious. 3 days? 4 days?' She did not answer this question. 'I've got mathematical proof. 5 days. You said, "We'll meet on Thursday." You refused to come on Monday.'

'I was tied up the rest of the week,' she said.

'You were not. You had nothing to do. You could have come on Sunday, on Saturday. But you came on Thursday.'

'On Thursday?'

'You came, didn't you?'

'Was it Thursday?'

'5 days. Not 4. Not 6. FIVE. Number 5. The Quinary, Force or Motion. The interplay of the divine Will with matter. Derived from 2 and 3 by addition. The Mother made flesh—fierce and active.'

Again she did not answer.

'Symbol of union. Pythagoreans call it the "nuptial number". It's also the number of Shiva the Transformer. Do you realise how you've transformed me? You know what I'm talking about, don't you? Or have you sent a clone in your place?'

'I couldn't have come on Sunday. Your parents left on Monday.'

'I've always lived alone.'

'In Paris?'

'In Versailles and in Paris.'

'I remember your parents.'

'I remember *you*. I found what I'd been looking for. When you stood before the mirror.'

'What did you find?'

'The tokens, the sign. Driving dogs mad, infecting their bites with an incurable poison. In Kenya women are prohibited from milking the cattle and grinding corn. 5 days. The Pentagon. To the Pythagoreans everything was an embodiment of number. Marriage they identified with 5, because it is the union of male with female and according to them male is odd and female even, and the number 5 arises from the first even number (2) and the first odd number (3). Did your husband believe you?'

'Why should we talk about my husband?'

'Does he have a secretary? She is the Moon. And I am the Hermit, my dear Empress. I know the past which inspires me in my work on the future. I advance prudently. Armed with a seven-knot bamboo stick, I probe the ground before me as I move forward slowly but inexorably, with unwearying step and uncompromising determination. If I happen to run into the serpent—an emblem of selfish lust—I don't try to imitate the winged woman of the Apocalypse, who puts her foot on the reptile's head.'

'How do you treat the serpent?' A broad smile lit up her face.

'I charm it. Stamping on its head denotes an unhealthy, somewhat mystical ambition to vanquish all animality. So I charm it into coiling around my walking stick. I didn't kill you 30 years ago, did I?'

'Why didn't you?'

'I always knew that you weren't the right woman for me.'

'But the animal attraction between us—'

'Did you feel it? In spite of my clumsiness?'

'As a man you had a sort of animal magnetism.'

'In spite of my clumsiness?'

'Your inexperience was charming. How did you put it? You charmed me into coiling around your walking stick.'

'Not in *your* flat, though. 5 days. The Pentagon. Symbol of man's will, of the evil 4 dominated by man's spirit. The Beginning of the Great Work. I'll finish it today, my Great Work. I began it 30 years ago. You began it and I'll finish it. The Pythagoreans said that justice was the first square number. Fair and square. And you're 65. A false spirit.'

Suddenly she launched into a new confession:

'A family should be founded on moral and religious principles. I made you believe I was a virgin because I wanted you to respect me. There's a pattern—'

'The pattern!' he interrupted her. 'Christ wasn't born once but many times. This afternoon. And this morning. And yesterday. And last week. And 30 years ago. And He shall be born in an hour. And tomorrow. And on the day of my judgement. And on the day of the Last Judgement.'

She looked at him with astonishment. 'You do believe in God now, don't you?'

'I believe in my own rituals. I have often been permitted to see the atmosphere of falsehood which exhales from Hell.'

'Do you agree that family life—'

'You lied to me. Can one build—'

'Better a lie that heals than a truth that wounds. A Czech proverb. Besides, I didn't lie to you. I *was* Mary.'

'Every Harlot was a Virgin once. Or perhaps you *were* a virgin. That night, in Versailles. A *spiritual* virgin. Do you recover your virginity every time you bathe somewhere—in your bath, for instance? Hera washed in the springs of the river Burrha after her marriage with Zeus. And every year she recovered her virginity by bathing in the spring of Canathus. And you recover your virginity every day, I suppose. Twice. How often do unicorns fall asleep in your lap? Unicorns are so attracted by the purity of virgins—'

'It's a question of feeling. I loved you. Love *is* Mary. Love *is* the Immaculate Conception.'

'Not *your* love,' he grinned. 'You're ill-equipped for the role of Mary.'

'And I *thought* of virginity, otherwise I wouldn't have taken the trouble to pretend I was a virgin. Other women don't give two hoots about it. They care about status symbols. And virginity is no longer—'

'You took advantage of *my* virginity. Like Anatole Kuragin. Are you fond of *petits garçons*? Do you know what Robert told me about you? Private swimming pool, fast cars, designer clothes—pick your status symbol, she has them all.'

'I hate driving.'

'And *petits garçons* are a status symbol too.'

'Don't burst a blood vessel!'

'I was a *petit garçon*, a virgin. 83 days. How long had we known each other before that night? 83. Love in its highest form: energy, freedom, amrita, aspiration. The root of the idea of romance plus religion. The Kabbalah of Aleister Crowley. When did we first meet? When did I speak to you for the first time? What shall we regard as the starting point? Our first stroll in Versailles? We might get 83 in the long run. Or 111, which is priceless because of its 37 x 3 symbolism and its import in secret lore—'

'Secret lore?'

'—where the Unity may be found in "Thick darkness" and in "Sudden death", showing Samadhi and the Destruction of the Ego as gates of our final victory. It's also priceless because of Beethoven's *Piano Sonata* op.111.'

'Do numbers really count?' she asked, a look of reproach on her face.

'Do you remember the second movement?'

'I remember the concerts in the Théâtre des Champs Elysées.'

'The score of the movement is streaked, blackened with demi-semiquavers that seem to stand for conflicts, struggles, battles, suicidal urges. It is as if a tragic shadow were cast over these pages. Yet the belligerent-looking demi-semiquavers turn out to be the purest expression of peace, a kind of V-sign. Well, a V-sign is more associated with "Victory". And it is also the "Fuck Off" sign—very far from a notion of peace. Would you marry me?'

'Of course I would.'

'You're not divorced yet, as far as I know.'

'I'm not. But this is top secret information. Secret lore.' She smiled. She dared to smile during his ritual. 'We can go to Moscow,' she added.

'Why to Moscow?' he asked, bewildered.

'We can go to Moscow and marry there.'

'You're not divorced yet, are you? Why do you want to divorce him in Moscow? Is your husband a Russian spy?'

'I don't need to divorce him, do I? We can marry in Moscow. I love you more than I used to.' She gently pulled him towards her.

'It's in your passport,' he said.

'Is it?' She opened and closed her handbag. 'Anyway the Russians don't know what the word "*mariée*" means.'

'Some of them might have a smattering of French.'

'Then I'll lose my passport. Do you remember all the fuss and palaver when Guy thought he had lost his passport? No, I've got a better idea.'

'You're bubbling with good ideas.'

'The Russians often steal, don't they? "I came back to my room to find I'd had my passport and credit cards stolen."'

She let out a small laugh and stroked his forehead. As if nothing had happened.

'And your son? What about your son?'

'He lives in Bordeaux with his wife and little daughter. They'll all come and visit us, if you don't mind.'

'In Moscow?'

'In Paris! What on earth would we stay in Moscow for?' She looked at him in genuine surprise.

'And your passport...your husband...'

'We don't really need to marry, do we? I'll just call Pierre—'

'No, we'll go to Moscow. We must go to Moscow.'

'On our honeymoon.'

'Did you talk to him about me?'

'To my husband?'

'To your son. He might have been *our* son.' He buried his face in his hands.

'I'm sure you'll hit it off. And his daughter—'

'How old is she? Not 5, I hope?'

'She's 4.'

'Too young, too young.'

'For what?'

'Have you seen Buñuel's *Le journal d'une femme de chambre*? A little girl is raped and killed in the woods.'

'Oh, here we go again! Film-directors, composers...'

'Anyway you don't care about her, do you?'

'Just fancy I'm a grandmother already! Do I look *so* old? Please don't laugh—I'm being serious.'

He was not laughing. 'You must have been ugly during your pregnancy. St Jerome thinks that women are horribly disfigured by the foetus. I wish I'd seen you before your son's birth. A few days before, a few hours before.'

'I was beautiful,' she told him with an expression of pure rapture on her face.

'You're *not* beautiful.'

'I *was* beautiful then, with my son inside me.'

'What adults say about children is always dreadfully clichéd.'

'Your favourite writers pinned all their hopes on children.'

"Blessed are the sterile!" said St Ambrose. Another cliché, an opposite cliché. In the 4th century the world was believed to be overpopulated. Gregory of Nyssa, Basil, Ambrose—none of these Fathers sang hymns to mothers. Only virgins found favour with them.'

'Are you a member of the Family Planning Association?'

'Why should we *automatically* pin all our hopes on children? Why entrust them with reviving art, philosophy, sacred books?' He stood up, headed for the secretaire and soon returned to the armchair, a book in his hand. He sat down and put the book on his lap.

'They'll revive them when the necessity arises,' she said. 'Necessity is the mother of invention.'

'Another hymn to motherhood. But necessity has grown sterile of late. Besides, our children don't need anything. They think they've been supplied with all the necessities of life: computers, games, drugs, star wars...'

'They'll build their own future.'

'On what, may I ask? They won't even build castles in the air because they're not interested in castles.'

She dropped her handbag on the bedside rug and knelt down in front of him.

'Do you really love me?' he asked. She opened her handbag and took out a photograph. 'My photograph? Do you kiss it every night?'

'Yes, every night.' And she kissed the photograph.

'Feeding your eyes and lips on the dead shadow. Soon I'll feed my eyes on *your* dead shadow.'

'Do you want to take my picture?'

'But I won't kiss you. I won't kiss your dead shadow.'

'Why not?' Again she kissed his photograph. She then put it back, produced a notebook and started to read: 'How could I let him go? Last night I dreamt about his lips. I kissed him so frantically that he moaned with pain and lost consciousness. In the morning my husband told me I had been crying in my sleep. Why did I marry *him*? I feel revulsion at his touch, at his smell. I married him out of despair. I married him to punish my only love, the man I'll never forget. Will he ever forgive me? I punished myself, only myself. Naively I thought I could live without him. Shall I die without ever seeing him again? There is no point in living without his caresses, his irony, his lectures on literature and music. I have no choice but to commit suicide.'

She closed the notebook and put it back.

'When did you write it?' he asked.

'2 days after the wedding ceremony.'

'Why didn't you commit suicide?'

'Because I was sure I'd meet you again.'

'When shall we three meet again?'

'Why three?' she asked.

'I'm another man now. And also because there are *three* sisters in Chekhov's play.'

'Just another lecture on literature.' Again she smiled.

'It's nice to be able to bring a smile to people's faces.' He smiled in his turn.

'Why did you mention *Three Sisters*?'

'One of them speaks about Moscow. "Let's go to Moscow. There's nothing better in the world." So when shall we leave? In 5 days?' She was stroking his arm now. 'In 5 days?' he repeated.

'Snap out of it!' she cried, removing her hand from his body.

'*The Persistence of Memory*. Neurotics like nothing better than wallowing in the evils of the past and self-pity.'

'We can still be happy.'

'We shouldn't leave earlier,' he said. 'Otherwise our future children—'

'I just told you I was a virgin and you believed me. You didn't have to. But you ought to have played the game. For the sake of the future. For the sake of our children. It was...beautiful, wasn't it? Beautiful!'

'*Kinder, Kircher, Küche*...the domestic-bliss strategy...playing hard to get for a long time...Any male who is not patient enough to wait until the female eventually consents to copulate can't become a faithful husband. By insisting on a long engagement period, a female weeds out casual suitors...'

'Why did you spoil everything?'

She had not changed. Not a bit.

'Your hidden agenda was to pass your menstrual blood off as the Church-glorified blood of a virgin. Why didn't you resort to blackberry juice instead? For the sake of our child?'

'Even as a teenager you had a reputation for being a misogynist. Why can't I do what I wish with my blood? It's *my* blood after all.'

'Can *I* do what I wish with your blood? I might bathe in it. Or drink it. Consuming large amounts of virginal blood significantly increases man's potency.'

'Your fear of impotence has affected you physically.'

'I would have inculcated into his mind real knowledge and philosophical wisdom,' he said.

'Who are you talking about?'

'About our son, our virtual son.'

'You say that children are useless and yet you regret you don't have a son. Isn't that a bit of a contradiction?'

'You tore him away from your womb with evil spells and herbs. Intentionally you killed our son in your body. No, you did your best not to conceive him. Your worst. Or did you kill him after his birth? You laid him down by the fire and put a cauldron of water on the fire. Inadvertently my son tipped the cauldron over, spilt the

boiling water and died. I wouldn't have omitted to instil into him a stoic contempt for death and the vicissitudes of life. No, you killed him *before* his birth. You were pregnant, no doubt about that. Given the advanced stage of your depravity, you were sure to secure the services of an obstetrician. Midwives seem to be out of fashion nowadays. Obstetrician. Is that the right word? Do obstetricians perform abortions? No, never. Obstetricians look after pregnant women and attend the birth of their children. As a result, those children are born and live happily ever after. And our son could *not* live happily or unhappily, as the case might have been.'

'He *could* have been happy. Your genes—'

'Some of these points will have to be further elaborated as we go along,' he added with a big wink at his former mistress. 'In the USA, the anti-abortion lobby is so strong that many charities dare not campaign openly for diagnostic tests for diseases. The ethics of abortion are different from those applied in other medical fields. The decision is made on behalf of someone else—the unborn child—rather than by the person actually involved.'

She pretended not to notice his rambling speech. 'Your genes—'

'And *your* genes? Do you know this anecdote? A man goes to a kindergarten. "I've come to fetch my Zarina." "Open that door," says the guard. The woman opens the door and ventures into a long corridor. She takes a few steps and sees a door with the inscription *Wonderful Children*. She knocks on the door. "Is my Zarina there?" "Straight ahead," says a voice. She walks a few paces and sees another door. The inscription runs *Obedient Children*. "Is my Zarina there?" "Straight ahead," says a voice. Another door. Another inscription—*Disobedient Children*. "Is my Zarina there?" "Straight ahead." Another door. *Awful Children*. "Is my Zarina there?" "Straight ahead." The last door—*Zarina*. Funny, isn't it? Your room, your apartment. Why did I finally get in? I should have sat down before the door, like Kafka's hero. Praying for admittance to the Law. You are the Law, my darling. The Law of the Universe, the Law of the Jungle. But the door wasn't meant for me alone. The Law had become a sheet of paper everybody could read and learn by heart.'

'I love you,' she said.

'What's all this cupboard love? The cupboard is bare, you know.'

'I love you,' she repeated.

'There's no denying the technical brilliance of your performance but one might have hoped for a little more feeling.'

She touched his mouth and eyes with her forehead. 'The "embrace of the forehead",' she pointed out.

'You were shy and unassuming and not at all how one expects an actress to be.'

'I'm still shy and unassuming. And I've no gift for acting.'

'Not one of your fortes, eh? Our son will be disappointed. My son. A throbbing extension of my body, of my heart, of my soul. I talk to him every day. Once in a while he asks questions about you. "What a wonderful actress she was," I answer him. For three years you did your "coy mistress" act with me, didn't you? "But let's not talk about her any more," I say to my son. "I've got many women at my disposal. Your father is a handsome man, you know. Do you remember your mother? Beautiful, wasn't she? But I chased her away because the women I frequent are even more beautiful than your mother. Besides, her behaviour was often appalling. And she betrayed my trust. And human history. Do you really need a treacherous mother? Aren't we happy together? Both of us? Alone?"'

'Calm down. Let me explain.'

'You would have strangled our son. When Lilith finds no children born, she turns on her own.'

'Who's Lilith, may I ask?'

'A female demon. Lilith is assigned a central position in Jewish demonology. After his quarrel with Eve—the original, *ursprünglich* divorce case—Adam encountered Lilith named Piznai who, captivated by his beauty, lay with him and bore male and female demons. The offspring of this Lilith have replenished the world.'

'What does it have to do with us? My name is Zarina.'

'In Arabic demonology Lilith is known as Karina. One letter—'

'I don't believe you.'

'Just read Gershom Scholem's book on the Kabbalah. One of *my* books.'

'Anyway I am Zarina.'

'Tsarina—in Russian demonology. The wife of a tsar. You're known by thousands of names...moving about the world at night...visiting women in childbirth...strangling their newborn babies. The *Testament of Solomon*.'

'I even campaign for the rights of the unborn children.'

'But there's another Lilith—the seducer of men. From their nocturnal emissions she bears an infinite number of demonic sons. The harlot, the wicked, the false, the black. The mother of the unholy folk. She rules over all that is impure. Are you sorry for what you did 30 years ago?'

'We can still be happy,' she repeated, pulling his head towards her and kissing away his tears.

'I would give anything for a walk in our parc. 30 years ago, 32 years ago. Just walking around. No cuddling, no lascivious leering. Hand in hand, like a couple of coy teenagers. The conjunction of the minds and opposition of the stars.'

'The stars will *not* interfere with our plans. I read my horoscope this morning—'

'I might tell you stories. The story of your betrayal. And of my vengeance. I might talk to you about the symbols of the human soul.'

'We might talk about something else. There are so many things we might talk about.' She continued to caress him.

'I might tell you the story of your absence.'

'32 years ago? Don't forget we're walking in the past.'

'I might tell the story of my virginity. Why did you never accuse me of being a bungling amateur?'

'To spare you embarrassment.'

'At least I'm spared the shame of our son knowing.'

'I wouldn't have told him anything.'

'I'm an amateur par excellence, an all-round amateur. But the word "amateur" should have no pejorative connotation for you. An amateur writer, an amateur musician, an amateur photographer, an amateur film-maker, an amateur painter, an amateur philosopher. What's wrong with that? Wittgenstein was also an amateur philosopher. And an amateur musician.'

'How about painting my portrait? Something like the *Naked Maja*.'

'She wears the veil of Maya. Nobody's naked in this world. But the deception of the *principium individuationis*—'

'Veils are *so* beautiful. In my teens I even considered taking the veil—'

'I was an amateur lover in those days, in our times...feeling your body all the more acutely...your body, your caresses. Amateurs never indulge in hair-splitting. They prefer nerve-splitting, soul-splitting. Or vein-splitting.'

'I understand.'

'I've turned professional. As a lover.'

'I'm sure you have.'

'Nerve-splitting, time-splitting, space-splitting. You can't imagine what I've gone through since your departure.'

'I've never left you.'

'Haven't you? Could I erase all those years? Time-splitting.'

'Of course.'

'And your marriage?'

By way of an answer, she began to unbutton his shirt.

'Don't!' he pleaded. '*Noli me tangere*. Too late. The veil of Maya has become transparent—'

'Too late, too late,' she echoed, wagging her finger sternly. 'Being defeatist will get you nowhere.'

'I should erase all this. I shouldn't forget to erase—'

He wrenched his body (and soul) out of her grasp, sprang to his feet, letting the book drop on the floor, and switched the camera off again.

20

He left the traces of his crime all over the place and even beyond the windows—on the streets and boulevards of Paris, in the weeping sky of the Ile de France. His crime resounded everywhere. Zarina's corpse lay in the middle of his most beautiful carpet. Ladies would shield their eyes with their fingers and dash out of the room, sobbing and shouting for help. Children were prohibited from getting too close to his hands. Journalists and onlookers were requested not to take too many photographs.

The floor and the walls of his room were painted with blood. He had added a new masterpiece to the vast treasure of American expressionism.

The blood has been scraped off the floor and the walls, but we can *see* his crime. We can also *hear* it. His neighbours continue to talk and shake their heads. And they roll their eyes. And they still brandish kitchen knives—and also forks and spoons, when carried away—to show how the ritual was conducted. And their friends still ask idle questions.

What brought him to that pretty pass? How did the whole thing come about? Hypotheses are no substitute for reality, but people often switch from a hesitant to an affirmative tone, from questions to answers; and they nod their heads instead of shaking them.

What would have happened had he been more talkative before that blood-besmeared anniversary? Most of his friends and neighbours might have applauded his growing attachment to knives. 'I would have killed her, if I were you. Then and there. It's not too late, though.'

It was not too late. He proved it brilliantly.

21

Now and then Zarina survived her death, his murder. Those dining-room talkers would end up making her invulnerable, impregnable, impervious to knives, bloodless, deathless:

'He can't handle knives properly—'
 'Did you see him with a knife?'
 'No. Did you?'
 'No.'
 'Neither did I.'
 'And the wounds? Didn't look like wounds to me!'
 'What *did* they look like?'
 'A kind of...I don't know.'
 'A dagger—'
 'He had no dagger.'
 'In his country house—'
 'Did he murder her in his country house? In Berry?'
 'She wouldn't have driven in a taxi so far!'
 'I understand her husband is a multi-millionaire—'
 'She hates driving.'
 'I wonder how she managed to find a cab—'
 'There are more cabs in New York—'
 'Did he murder her in New York?'
 'You can never find a taxi after midnight. Never!'
 'When did he murder her?'
 'Never!'
 'It wasn't the rush hour, though.'
 'Were you in that taxi yourself?'
 'I wasn't. Nobody was.'

Nobody. Nothing. These words all but cleared him of the terrible accusation.

Those talkers seldom or never mentioned other victims. Only *her* death seemed motivated, logical. Only *her* blood was in keeping with the analytical strain of post-prandial discussions.

22

Talking with a 'monster' did not cause any disturbance in Zarina's invulnerable heart. She had blockaded her female intuition behind the iron walls of egoism and vainglory so that, during their fatal conversation, she had no fear of death as if she were a goddess. Her self-assuredness protected her from a number of unpleasant sensations—the habitual lot of sensitive, mind-reading women—while exposing her to the danger of death.

23

During that memorable conversation he did his best to broaden her horizons:

'In olden days many countries—Japan, Senegambia, Scotland—were infested by dragons and serpents who threatened to destroy everything unless offered an appropriate sacrifice—a virgin, for instance. Virgins have

always been far more delicious than prostitutes, you know. Lakes, mountains, fountains, castles, shrubs, haystacks were inhabited by various monsters who ate virgins day and night as if there were no other food on earth.

'Young maidens would line up and go east, west, north and south. (In those days young maidens were all virgins. They would have played themselves, if engaged for a film on virginity.) They cried and screamed but nobody paid attention to them except the monsters.

'As the virgins walked towards the monsters, who used to sunbathe profusely both before and after meals, they looked around in the hope of spotting a young man of humble birth—their presumed rescuer. Am I of humble birth? Indeed, according to books, that young man was to slay the monsters and their offspring; he might also ravage the nests and break the eggs lying scattered on the grass. As a reward for his courage and chivalry, he was allowed to marry the most beautiful virgin. Are you the most beautiful virgin?'

24

Quite a number of murderers are fond of lying. That inclination explains the cruelty of crowds and public prosecutors. Besides, murderers are good at word-games. They seize every opportunity to say: 'Nothing', 'Nobody', 'I didn't', as if our fate depended only upon words. Their fate does, sometimes.

He told no lies. He did not deny the compositional beauty of his murder which had ripened over 30 years into a piece of fine art worthy of De Quincey's connoisseurship.

When did the process start? Neither in his cradle nor in the kindergarten where he would build his sand-castles with remarkable avidity. He never destroyed them.

He took part in games without molesting other participants. Not once did he point a toy revolver at his friends' unprotected heads or hearts. He simply did not like revolvers and war games.

What did he like? Ropes, horror-movies? When did he first read about murder? How did he react? Was he elated or horrified? Did he try to visualise the scene? Did he question his father to find out more about human slaughter, blood and cemeteries?

Sometimes his father questioned *him* all of a sudden, as if yielding to some remote paternal instinct that seemed to dwell in another dimension and probably was in the dark about the identity of its owner. 'What shall we discuss, my dear? I mean what topics will our discussion range over? Let me ask you a question—what kind of profession have you chosen? None? Have you ever given a thought to the question I'm asking you? Are you hoping for a career in the diplomatic service? Or do the intricacies of international banking appeal to you more than anything else?'

Just for the fun of it his son would answer that he wanted to become a doctor. 'A doctor?' His father's eyebrows would jerk upwards, often remaining in the middle of his forehead for the rest of the so-called discussion. 'Are you aware of the number of people murdered by doctors all over the world? Would you like to become a murderer?'

His parents never described tombs; nor did they imitate the grisly grin of vampires.

World-wide massacres begin at a slow pace, taking their cue from a badly articulated word, from an unfinished glance.

25

He was not scared when he first saw human blood; he had no fainting fit. It was his own blood. He looked at his wounded finger with amazement and then, amused by the discrepancy between the colour of his skin and that of the liquid coming from it, he began to chuckle. He felt no pain. Pressing his finger against a blank sheet of paper, he traced a line on it, a beautiful red line: a few days before he had broken his only red pencil.

He drew a face covered with blood. An old man walked jerkily beyond the window. He tried to draw the hunching silhouette but ran out of blood. Furious, he cut his finger intentionally. That time an awful pain invaded his consciousness. He screamed and his mother hastily laid her lipstick down on her dressing table.

A relentless sadist always rejoices at the sight of human blood. He doubles up with laughter and does not resume his erect posture until the blood-river dries up. He bares his teeth and waves his hands wildly.

An indefatigable masochist rejoices at the sight of his own blood.

He was neither a masochist nor a sadist. His first wound amused him, but his temporary delight was so linked with his unavowed desire to become a painter that the hypothesis advanced by the public prosecutor should be discarded without regret.

The public prosecutor oversimplified the enigma, reducing it to a spectacular display of forensic folklore: 'Good people never kill. Bad people are bound to kill. Blood is indelible. If human blood appealed to you in your childhood, you'll try to see it as often as possible in your mature years, not necessarily by becoming a doctor or a blood donor. If you used to pinch your dog's tail before lunch you'll strangle your wife in bed. If you used to stroke your cat the right way before and after lunch, you'll never grab a poker to kill your refractory mistress.'

We should not reduce our brain, its flurries and flowers, to a few bones.

26

It was a wilful murder, not an accident. He did not dash out of his apartment, shouting: 'It was an accident! She tripped over the poker and fell backward! She smashed her head against the mantelpiece!'

It was a murder. And every murder has its roots somewhere, near or far, even if the affair is settled on the spur of the moment. This decisive moment has been prepared, either consciously or unconsciously, in the Chamber of Horrors swarming with uncontrollable impulses.

What occurred 2 years ago can be detected in the sound our boiler is making this afternoon. And the words that our neighbour utters noncommittally on the tennis court date back to the beginning of the 19th century.

Zarina Lenoir was murdered in Ancient Egypt. The Pyramid of Cheops is still bespattered with her blood.

27

How did the murder come about?

Hidden cameras do not yet hold humanity in their grasp; microphones are not installed in every apartment, in every room and corridor. The landscapes of crimes, their winding paths, remain unfathomable.

Little can be known about the words and nods and grimaces which traced their red itineraries on the map of his life. His former fiancée's testimony is not to be trusted completely; and yet, during the trial, she made a spectacular display of goodwill and forthrightness.

'Impossible. He's never raised his hand—'

'You saw the film, didn't you?' asked the public prosecutor.

'He told me once, "My body is a secret. And my words are a multitude of secrets. Why should I confide my secrets to strangers? On a train, at a funfair, in a bed?" He would never have confided his secrets to that woman.'

'You saw the blood and the knife, didn't you?'

'He veils his personality with secrecy.'

'But he unveiled his personality in the film.'

'And what about that girl who killed three people at the age of eleven? In a film? She wished to get a teddy bear as a birthday present. And the teddy bear was to come into her possession only after the death of its owner. An old woman said to the girl, "Do you like my teddy bear? Look, you'll inherit it after my death, when I don't need it any more." So the little girl killed the old woman and got the teddy bear as a birthday present. Or as a Christmas present. She also killed her school friend for a medal he'd won. Do you think such a girl really exists? Outside the film?'

Her former vitality had deflated like an arrow-pierced hot-air balloon. (*Kind Hearts and Coronets*.) Had she been judged for a crime of that scope and importance, she might have been acquitted. Softened by her pathetic meekness, the jury would have overlooked the quantity of blood shed in one room within a few seconds.

In the fifth act of our tragedy the unity of place and time and blood was scrupulously observed.

28

The routine of earthly justice dragged him from one voice to another voice, from one set of teeth to another set of teeth. All those faces had the same expression: curious wrath. All those voices talked to him in the same tonality.

He wondered what all those people were trying to impart to him and to each other. He got the impression they were just opening and closing their mouths without uttering a word. They did not give vent to their indignation or bewilderment; they just indulged in a spectacular display of gymnastics, constantly training their jaws, teeth and nostrils. What for? Why did they transform the prison into a stadium?

He nodded his head decisively and approvingly. Had he disapproved of their words, of their gymnastics, they would have acted in the same way.

On the second day of the imprisonment his solicitor joined the choir. The grizzled advocate of leniency and mercifulness assured him that he was still his friend.

'I'm your best friend now and I'll get you off the hook, old boy. Not scot free, I'm afraid—we'll have to plead guilty. But no more than 5 or 6—7 years at the outside. "I can resist everything except temptation," says Oscar Wilde. And how do we get rid of a temptation? By yielding to it. Oscar Wilde again. "Deliver us from evil," says the Bible. But how do we get rid of evil? By yielding to it, by committing sins, by committing murders. Gnostics thought so, if my memory serves me right. Gnostics of Alexandria. I agree with them, by the way. Don't you? *Revenons à nos moutons*. I've handled a lot of similar—Well, see for yourself.' The solicitor took a few index cards out of his attaché case. 'Read this one!' And he handed his client the biggest card. 'Don't feel like reading, eh? You idle old sod! It's just as well for you I've got my specs this time. Pin back your ears!' And the solicitor began to read:

"Elephant-hunters in East Africa believe that their wives' unfaithfulness bestows upon the elephant a measureless power over his pursuer who will therefore be severely wounded or, in most cases, killed. If a hunter

hears of his wife's misconduct—rumours are spread in the jungle with drums and smoke signals—he abandons the chase and returns home. As his wife salutes him outside their dwelling he beats her to death, preferably within his children's sight." A good one, isn't it? "He abandons the chase and returns home." Nice. It's done the job before. The jury are fond of African references. Our former colonies. Here's another one. I've gathered enough material to vindicate all the cuckolds in Europe. Listen: "While a Wagogo hunter is away on business, his wife is not permitted to let anyone pass behind her or stand in front of her as she sits; and she must lie on her face in bed." Sorry, wrong story. Hold on a minute.'

The solicitor went on his knees and deployed the cards all over the floor as if playing a game of patience.

'No. No. No.' He shuffled the rejected stories into a separate pack. "He who takes the Self to be the slayer and he who thinks He is slain, neither of these knows. He slays not, nor is He slain. He is not born, nor does He ever die; after having been, He again ceases not to be; Unborn, Eternal, Changeless and Ancient, He is not killed when the body is killed." Thus spoke Krishna to Arjuna in the *Bhagavadgita*. "Chastity Required of Persons Who Handle Dishes and Food." By the way, how does she cook? You should drop round some day. The wife's *blanquette de veau* is something to write home about. No. "Chastity Required in Service of Sacred Serpent." No. Oh, yes. That's the one. "The Huichol Indians of Mexico worship a species of cactus which, being uncommon in their latitudes, has to be fetched every year from a distant land. The sacred mission is assigned to those who can outrun an antelope." I was quite a runner at the university athletics club, you know. Still am, come to that. Pity one can't train properly in here. Should bring you one of those electric running mats—whatever you call them. Even hamsters have their plastic exercise-wheels, don't they? You must get into trim for the trial. If a horse isn't in good form it's unlikely to win a race. Where was I? "—outrun an antelope." That's right. "Health, luck and life are to be gained by gathering the cactus—" What cactus? "The pure fire never benefits the impure." May come in handy. "As the travellers embark on their journey—" Let's skip the landscapes. "The women meet in the biggest temple. They take out the strings they have brought with them and begin to count the knots. They mention aloud all the men they have scored on their strings, name after name, number after number. Having ended their confessions, they throw the strings—alias their lovers—into the fire and the god consumes everything and everybody in his pure flame." By the way, what's the exact number? I mean, how many—'

'That's beside the point.'

'What?'

'Betrayals.'

'Look, I know she was faithful to you, but we must...Don't you see? For the sake of the jury.'

'No.'

'Would you agree to 5? Or 7? A perfect integer. A sacred digit.'

'Did they really abolish capital punishment?'

'Don't you worry. Even if you'd butchered 10 orphans and raped the vestal virgins—'

'The gallows?'

'God forbid. We've got the guillotine in France. The kindest cut of all. No—you'll do 10 years' porridge at the outside. I'll work your file up into a charming tale of purity and chastity. Chastity and chastisement!'

'That fellow's got to swing.'

The prisoner's memory was now stuffed with crooked images and foreign words. When forced to answer useless questions, he spoke English.

The solicitor, who had only a smattering of English and Spanish, did not need to understand his client: the life-sentence was a foregone conclusion. But he had a very professional attitude to his work and was, moreover, fond of his client's former fiancée. So he proceeded in a traditional way and began from the beginning—from his client's childhood.

'Did you play football? I'm sure you did. A striker, I presume? Like Platini. How charming! Scoring in the last minute...right into the top corner of the net. I hope there'll be lots of football players among the members of the jury. A few supporters of our national team at least.' The solicitor spoke French. He rightly presumed that his client still had some *passive* knowledge of his mother tongue.

29

His former fiancée also paid him a visit.

They sat in silence for 5 minutes. Then she asked him if he had really murdered *that* woman.

'I murdered no one.'

They had often spoken English at home so she was not surprised. She would have learnt any language to understand him.

'I knew it,' she said with solemn tranquillity. Her voice and mouth were different from those he had seen before.

'No one,' he repeated slowly, hesitant about the number of people he had not murdered in his apartment.

'They say you've murdered 5 people.' She shook her head and sprang up.

'How many?' He glanced at his left hand, at his fingers.

'5.'

'The lotus flower sacred to Buddha and Osiris has 5 petals which symbolise the 4 limbs and the head; the 5 senses; the 5 digits; and, like the pyramid, the 4 points of the compass and the zenith.'

'I'm happy you haven't killed them.' She sat down again.

'I'm happy too.'

He *was* happy. He *was free*. And the cosmic *harmony* was restored. Partially.

She moved closer to him and took his hand which held no knife. He had killed nobody; she was reassured. She pressed his hand several times. Morse therapy.

She also seeks this tenuous contact in her nightmares. Her hand glides around the blanket, clutching pitifully at whatever it comes across in its wanderings: a bedpost, an alarm clock, a book, a tube of lipstick. She moans, screams, and her mother flies to her rescue.

She wrote him one letter only. She opted for the language of hands, the alphabet of glances. Her hands and eyes needed no translation, no transposition. The language of silence.

He opted for his own language.

30

Reward her even as she rewarded you, and double unto her double according to her works; in the cup which she hath filled fill to her double.

The Revelation of St John the Divine

His film was shown in the courtroom.

'Why have I waited all these years, months, hours? He wouldn't harm a fly—that's what they say about potential murderers. Under some circumstances the urge to kill gains its legitimate ends. Our equilibrium is fragile. 30 years ago she took advantage of my naïveté. The mechanics of lovemaking were a taboo subject—in my milieu. Even in the 50s, during the years of sexual liberation. Of course I had many sex tutors, but I knew that hands-on or rather cock-in experience was far more important. What a pity they couldn't take my place that night, in that bed, between those sheets. They might have spotted the difference between purity and infamy. P and I. Purity and infamy don't belong to the same blood group. C and D. Chastity and disgrace. Their colours must be different too!'

At this point he interrupted his reading, crumpled the paper into a ball and put it in the right pocket of his trousers. 'Your crime will be mirrored by my punishment,' he said and went to the kitchen.

I'll deflower her! At last! I am also fond of tangible symbols. I am also a master of substitutions. Anyway, strangling is reserved for innocent people like Desdemona. Was she innocent? I wonder. That long piece of cheap backchat with Iago in the second act, during the tempest. Why didn't she go to the harbour? Othello was at the mercy of some sorcerer, a Prospero of sorts. They always cut this passage. Purity, chastity, innocence. Her reputation is at stake, the immortal part of Desdemona. The immoral part of Desdemona. The unkindest cut of all. One of the best scenes in Shakespeare.

31

The camera was standing in the middle of the room. Why did he hand his murder down to posterity? Did he try to teach human robots a lesson?

In his youth he was ambitious enough to conceive an aesthetic, Nietzschean metamorphosis of the world. He liked to tamper with maps, encyclopaedias and history books. His dreamy hand was carrying the pencil farther and farther—beyond holiday lands, beyond the present and the past. He used to draw the future of mankind in the air, near his favourite window.

He wished to make people conscious of their stupidity and vulgarity, overestimating their capacity to respond to his ideas. Engrossed in their petty whims and sins, they neither heard what he said nor saw his glowing eyes. Everybody wore the mask of nothingness. Paris was deserted; so was the earth.

Human consciousness is slippery. People intercept a muffled sound of words, but they turn their heads away and silence welcomes them like a dignified host.

Words skim over human consciousness. Words never reach human memory. Human memory is too remote to be reached by words.

Heavy sleepers open their eyes and leave their beds whenever blood makes its appearance in their immediate surroundings. The blind see it; the deaf hear it. In comparison with blood, words seem colourless.

32

He chose the longest and sharpest knife and returned to his room where she was lying motionless on the bed.

'Do you think I should just give you a good spanking? That's what Gary Cooper did to his unbridled bride after reading *The Taming of the Shrew*. Or was she his wife already? Had *he* found the tokens of virginity? Of course not, otherwise he would have killed her. And he would have killed her 5 times if she'd killed his son, if

she'd had an abortion. No, no, no. No abortions in American movies. Just a shrew, nothing more. Spanking is reserved for shrews.'

He headed for the armchair, pushed it towards the secretaire and sat down. 42 minutes later he stood up and resumed his position in front of the camera, a sheet of paper quivering in his hand. (42. AMA, the Mother, still dark. Here are the 42 judges of the dead in Amenti, and here is the 42-fold name of the Creative God.)

'She went out, slamming the door. She drove up to the city and ventured into the back streets where she risked being accosted by dubious individuals of all kinds. She had to run the risk: a strong anti-abortion law had induced a lot of unfortunate women to seek help from back-street abortionists. (That same law had pushed up the fee to be paid, but fortunately there was enough money in Zarina's purse. "Put money enough in your purse" is a good advice.) Did she believe she was unworthy to become the mother of her own child? Why didn't she leave the child in peace?

'She did not get murdered in those streets around which a few abortionists were strewn like scraps of paper torn out of the Book of Life. Another murder was in the air. Oddly enough, there was no room for a second murder that night, in that area of the city.

'I do think abortionists have been torn out of the Book of Life. Moreover, I was unable to find them at once on my computer screen. What at first appeared on it had nothing to do with death—obstetricians. Just the opposite of abortionists. My computer screen must have an allergy to death. The Screen of Life. Does this mean I have already vanquished death?

'She found a house that looked like a dwelling place where an abortionist might live and prosper. She found a name that sounded like the name of an abortionist and rang the bell. The door opened silently as if trying to keep a multitude of secrets. "Hush!" said the door to the unexpected customer. Are all their customers unexpected? "Don't tell anybody what you're here for," continued the door. An ominous hush fell on the entrance hall and on the corridor leading towards the Door of Death. The Door opened at last. Actually the Door of Death is always wide-open. She entered the room and proceeded to explain the aim of her visit. To whom? There must have been a nurse inside. Or a secretary. Or do abortionists operate alone, in utter solitude?

'She talked to somebody about her problem. "My husband wouldn't endure the presence of someone else's child in his duplex and numerous villas. Besides, he thinks I'm a virgin." Somebody understood her situation and even laid a consoling hand on her bare shoulder. She didn't remove the hand from her skin. Anyway it remained on her body only for a few ritual seconds. The abortionist had no intention of raping his client; nor did the virtual nurse. They both preferred money to sexual pleasures.

'What happened next? There must have been a table in that room; or in the adjacent room. (Abortionists have a lot of money now. They can afford huge apartments and luxurious cars. And what about obstetricians?) There must have been an armchair in one of those rooms, in both of them. Perhaps a few magazines—on a small table or a console. She might have leafed through one of those magazines. What does it matter? There was a rich assortment of knives in the adjacent room.'

33

474 minutes had elapsed before his knife touched her body. (474. DVTh, Knowledge, the Sephira that is not a Sephira. The Zarina that is not a Zarina. In one aspect the child of Chokmah and Binah; in another the Eighth

Head of the Stooping Dragon, raised up when the Tree of Life was shattered, and Macroposopus set cherubim against Microposopus. It is the demon that purely intellectual or rational religions take as their God.)

The *physical* murder lasted 131 minutes. (131. SMAL, Satan so-called, but really only Samael, the accuser of the brethren. Samael fulfils a most useful function; he is scepticism, which accuses intellectually; conscience, which accuses morally; and even that spiritual accuser upon the Threshold, without whom the Sanctuary might be profaned. We must defeat him, it is true; but how should we abuse and blame him, without abuse and blame of Him that set him there?)

Her gloves and raincoat remained in his flat for 3 days and 2 nights. 61 hours. Did *they* recall Zarina's body? *Weltlos*.

34

He switched the camera on again. Zarina looked at him narrowly through half-closed eyes. 'Odysseus wouldn't have considered himself avenged unless the Cyclops perceived both by whom and for what he had been blinded,' he said. 'I've got one of your books. Do you want me to read something from it?'

Several pages were dog-eared. 'Listen! "Our Lord has announced that the life after our resurrection shall be as that of the angels. Now, the peculiarity of the angelic nature is that they are strangers to marriage; therefore the blessing of this promise has been already received by him who has not only mingled his own glory with the halo of the saints, but also by the stainlessness of his life has so imitated the purity of these incorporeal beings. If virginity then can win us favours such as these, what words are fit to express the admiration of so great a grace? What other gift of the soul can be found so great and precious as not to suffer by comparison with this perfection?"'

He took a glance at his prisoner. Her face was as motionless as her body. He turned a few pages.

"A garden enclosed is My sister, My spouse, a garden enclosed, a sealed fountain. Christ says this to the Church, which he desires to be a virgin, without a spot, without a wrinkle. A fertile garden is virginity, which can bear many fruits of good odour. A garden enclosed, because it is everywhere shut in by the wall of chastity. A sealed fountain, because virginity is the source and origin of modesty, having to keep inviolate the seal of purity, in which source the image of God is reflected, since the purity of simplicity agrees also with chastity of the body."

He closed the book, laid it down and drew a sheet of paper from the left pocket of his trousers. 'In contact with menstrual blood the fruit is stunted, the juice of grapes turns sour, grasses wither and die, trees lose their fruit, rust eats into iron, the air darkens. Should a dog lick it, he is bound to come down with rabies. Menstrual blood pollutes the world. Thus the sky darkens when thick smoke billows from a blazing oil well. (With this personal touch he updated Isidore of Seville's treatise composed in the 7th century.) The glue of tarmac, which is resistant to iron and water, dissolves without delay in contact with this blood.'

She dissolved into giggles. He crumpled the paper into a ball and dropped it on the floor.

'You've always behaved like a little girl who has the fidgets and can't sit quietly on her father's lap. She slithers down, makes for the ball she had forgotten on a carpet in the early afternoon, picks up the ball and throws it into your face. And when you complain or tell her off she says you were supposed to catch the ball and bounce it off the cupboard. "What cupboard? What do you mean?" you ask her. But she gives no answer, her

attention riveted by the ball. And then you realise it's your cortex she's playing with, the foremost part of your brain. You're still playing with my cortex, with my soul, with my life.'

'I don't care about your life,' she said.

'You're still a little girl, my little girl. Or a cat playing with a ball of wool. Or a cat playing with a mouse. But this time the mouse is bound to win. I've got a friend who plays with his cat. He adores his cat and plays with her. There's a game called "the cork". His cat smells corks whenever he opens a bottle of wine. The cat approaches him, waiting for a new cork. According to him, she can recognise the sound of a cork being pulled out of a bottle. And she comes to him. And he shows the cork to the cat. And the cat jumps up, trying to reach the cork. Apparently she can distinguish between various corks. Burgundy, Côtes du Rhône, claret. After a few jumps she snatches the cork from her master's fingers and runs away, the cork sticking out of her mouth. The master calls her back. Submissively she obeys his order. The master extracts the cork from her teeth and puts it on the table, beside the bottle. So you'll fetch the cork—on all fours. And you'll bring it back in your teeth.'

'You're mad. Let me go.'

'Shakespeare introduced comic scenes into his tragedies by way of relief. Comic scenes, death scenes. Are they identical? Shakespeare's tragedies are comedies. And Shakespeare's comedies are tragedies. Did you see the film *Doctor Mabuse*? Fritz Lang, a wonderful film director. Doctor Mabuse used to hypnotise his patients. Not only his patients—everybody! He hypnotised people into doing things against their own will. A very neat little solution to our problem. Here's the cork I've chosen.' He took the cork out of the right pocket of his trousers and flung it across the room. The cork bounced off a wall and dropped onto a carpet. Trying to seem matter-of-fact, he loosened the knots on Zarina's ankles and wrists. 'Kneel down and crawl! If you bring the cork back in your teeth, I'll let you go. You'll return home where your husband is waiting for you.'

Zarina brought the cork back.

'Cats are not allowed to play with corks.' He looked at her disapprovingly. 'Who allowed you to play with the cork? Did I say anything to this effect? I said nothing, if I remember rightly. I just showed you the cork. "Look how beautiful it is," I said. I wanted you to admire it. And what did you do? You snatched the cork from my fingers.'

'I didn't,' she said.

'How inconsiderate of you! I'm your master after all. Aren't you forgetting your manners? Next time I'll put you in the corner. You can *look* at the cork, but you're not allowed to *play* with it. Corks don't serve this purpose. Do you think wine growers and wine merchants stuff them into bottles for your sake? Corks have a different mission. They keep the wine in the bottle. And they keep the wine alive for many years, for centuries. And you'll never spill it, even if you tip the bottle up. And you can *store* your bottles, thanks to corks. Bottles sleep in wine cellars, you know. And nobody sleeps bolt upright. Do you sleep bolt upright? Of course not. You lie down and close your eyes to see a pleasant dream. So do wine bottles. They actually dream in wine cellars and corks protect those dreams from outside interference. Do you understand your error now? I don't think you intended any disrespect, otherwise I would already have put you in the corner. You simply didn't know anything about corks. You saw a cork and immediately jumped to the conclusion it was a toy you could play with to your heart's content. But you made a mistake, didn't you? Do you admit you made a mistake? Nod your head. Why don't you nod your head? All right. Let us see if you understood me or not. I'll drop this cork on the carpet. Inadvertently, unintentionally. I don't want you to play with it, as I told you. The cork will just slip from my

fingers and fall on the ground at my feet, beside your paws. Don't pick it up. If you run away with it I'll put you in the corner. And I'll deduce from your behaviour that you're a stupid cat, unworthy of her master.'

Zarina picked the cork up.

'Why do you hold it like an ordinary piece of wood? Like a piece of chewing gum? Now I realise you're not as intelligent as I thought. You're rather stupid as a matter of fact. No point in speaking to you. You don't understand a thing. Smell this cork. What does it smell of? The cork smells of wine. So the cork was in a wine bottle. Not *inside*, mind you. In the *neck* of the bottle. The cork remained in the bottle for many years. The cork was faithful to the bottle until I came along and pulled it out with a corkscrew. Do you want me to show you what a corkscrew looks like? Here it is. I won't let you play with it because you may injure your little mouth, but I'll let you play with the cork. The bottle doesn't need it any longer. Anyway the bottle can neither forgive nor forget the cork's betrayal. The cork made love to the corkscrew. Actually the corkscrew fucked the cork. So the bottle doesn't love it any longer. Nor do *I* have any use for it. Unlike many wine lovers I don't collect corks. So you're allowed to play with it if you wish. Just for 5 minutes. It's your bedtime soon. No, no, no. You might play like that with a Burgundy cork. And the cork you've got between your teeth is a claret cork, no doubt about it. Just smell the cork. Take it out of your mouth, put it down on the floor and smell it. Smell the cork! Typical claret bouquet, isn't it? And you treat it like a Burgundy cork. Well, a Piedmont cork might be treated like that, but not a claret cork. Never ever.'

He talked on and on. He was holding a cork above her head; she jumped higher and higher. Finally she snatched the cork from his fingers, and he pressed her mouth with his hands so violently she spat the cork out and screamed with horror. 'Bad girl,' he said. 'Why did you want to eat the cork? Only cats eat them. And only cats are allowed to play with corks. Actually corks are the only thing cats are allowed to play with. This is the supreme goal of their lives. They're not obliged to eat mice—there are enough mousetraps in the world to cope with the profusion of mice. Cats have been created by the Almighty for the sole purpose of playing with corks. But humans are forbidden to fiddle with corks. They can push them into bottles and pull them out of bottles. They can also collect them. But under no circumstances are they allowed to *play* with corks. If I catch you playing with a cork once again I'll put you in the corner.'

After a while he changed his mind, allowing her to play with corks and even to eat them. And he began to open wine bottles, one after another. And he dropped a multitude of corks onto his carpets. And she crawled on all fours behind those corks which kept rolling away from her: he was kicking them. And he smacked her from time to time. He walked by her side, smacking her bottom. And he would order her to pick up one of those corks. Their number grew quickly and steadily as if there were 5 corks to each bottle of wine. She obeyed his orders. He would order her to chew and swallow the corks. 'You're not allowed to drink the wine but you can eat the corks. Isn't that wonderful?' She ate a few corks and felt an awful pain in her stomach. 'Do you feel a pain in your stomach?' he asked. 'A good sign. Anyway it's a part of the game. Do you know what I call this game? "Stomach Ache". Beautiful name, isn't it? "Stomach Ache" or "Stomach Trouble". Which do you prefer?'

'You've promised to let me go,' she reminded him.

'Some cats are far more intelligent than dogs. You, for instance. Whatever I might accuse you of, you're a wonderful and intelligent cat.'

'You said I was stupid. Why don't you get rid of the stupid cat? You could give me to your neighbours, to one of your friends. A nice present.'

"As we are human beings, it ill befits us to laugh at the misfortunes of mankind. We had better deplore them," says Democritus. And he says that those we take for our friends are often our deadly enemies. And those who stroke us hold razor blades or pen knives. Why did you laugh at me? Why did you mock me so viciously?"

'Why don't you let the cat out of the bag?'

'I *might* imprison you in a bag, in a cage. No food, no water. Just some green salad and the dew from my flowers. I mustn't deprive you of food *completely*. While curbing the desires of your flesh, I would let you have enough strength to read the Scriptures and St Jerome's letters, to sing psalms and observe vigils.'

'Are you sticking to this diet yourself? I'm beginning to see the results.'

'Actually I wasn't as gullible and awkward as you thought. And I'd lost my virginity before you entered our lycée. Our teacher, Barbara, was about 24 and very strict. Do you remember her? One day she came into the lecture room while I was kissing my girlfriend and fondling her breasts. Barbara ordered us both to go to the Principal's office. I carried on kissing my girl. Barbara walked up to us and yanked me by the hair. A struggle developed and I grabbed at her blouse, forcing it open, tearing off the buttons and revealing her black bra. I then began to strip her—first the shoes and stockings, then the trousers. I unbuttoned her trousers and pulled the zip down. How many lovers did you have during *our* years? I wish I could put all your lovers in one room. Or in one compartment, on a runaway train. On the train I took that night. I might starve them to death. No, I would just leave them somewhere...on a distant track overgrown with grass, leading nowhere...in a no-friend's land...An anonymous and cheapened death we can dole out to all our enemies.'

'I've never deceived my husband.'

'We're all puppets, all of us. And you're also a puppet, my Zarina. Don't you see the strings? I'm pulling the strings right here, in front of you. Not behind your back, as you might presume. Right in front of you! You're like a balloon on a string. I pull you down and you descend. Obediently. You plummet downwards and I trample upon you. Yes, my darling—I'm trampling you underfoot! I'm trampling you to death. A last ditch attempt to save the world.'

35

Another cassette. She appeared in the background, on the bed, moaning and wriggling. He continued to broaden her horizons:

'*Faire durer le plaisir*—a typical French expression. Short pleasures don't count: they are too short in comparison with the length and depth of life. They're of no significance, of no value. Your dining-room is *not* a petrol station. You aren't supposed to *feed* yourself. You *treat* yourself to gorgeous dishes. You're supposed to spend 2 or 3 hours at your dinner table, even if you stay at home. The same goes for my purifying ritual. Death in slow motion. The length and depth of death. Interviewed by a television reporter, a preacher affirmed that happiness, as a state of mind, was foreign to murderers except when they could greedily watch their victims writhe in abominable pain. In his opinion happiness meant living in complete concord with Nature, with God impregnating the oceans and trees. "Those who don't feel this harmony are not happy," he concluded. Murderers live in concord with the dark side of Nature. Mother Nature. Killing, pulverising her sons and daughters into the insignificance of ashes. Watching her children pass away. Nature is saturated with blood, and her impassiveness isn't synonymous with repugnance and nausea. Assassins are vulnerable: their memory may give them a qualm of terror—rather often, in most cases. Nature has no conscience, no memory, no qualms. Nature has a multitude

of eyes. Nature watches her victims with no interest but with a steady manifold gaze. I'm not a murderer par excellence who kills for the sake of killing, for the sake of shedding human blood in large quantities. I don't share the views of political or lucrative murderers whose ends will never justify their means. Nor do I wish to teach humanity a lesson: I know that the quantity and quality of the "horror", to use Conrad's favourite noun, will blot out the educational aspect of my deed. After all, I shall leave no traces of my conduct. None.'

36

He who repents of an action is doubly wretched or infirm.
Spinoza, *The Ethics*

He had no pangs of conscience. And he shed no tears of repentance, not even when he leant over Zarina's corpse—like Othello, like Orson Welles.

'An angel...an inhabitant of the Jetziratic world...an incorporeal being wrapped in a luminous garment...so different from the Asian world, the world of action, the world of shells, the world of matter. She used to be the wife of Samael, a woman of whoredom.'

37

'The Golden Calf,' he said gravely, opening another book.

"I stoutly maintain that martyrdom is good, as required by the God by whom likewise idolatry is forbidden and punished. For martyrdom strives against and opposes idolatry. But to strive against and oppose evil cannot be ought but good. The healing art has manifestly an apparent cruelty, by reason of the lancet, and of the burning iron, and of the heat of the mustard; yet to be cut and burned, and pulled and bitten, is not on that account an evil, for it occasions helpful pains; nor will it be refused merely because it afflicts, but because it afflicts inevitably will it be applied. The good accruing is the apology for the frightfulness of the work. In short, that woman who is howling and groaning and bellowing in the hands of a physician will presently load the same hands with a fee, and proclaim that they are the best operators, and no longer affirm that they are cruel. Thus martyrdoms also rage furiously, but for salvation. God also will be at liberty to heal for everlasting life by means of fires and swords, and all that is painful. "

He closed the book, dropped it on the floor, went to the kitchen and presently returned to the room, carrying a box of matches. 'Let us burn the past. I don't need it. Do you? There was an emperor in China. Can't remember his name. I'm already burning the past in my memory, a part of my memory. And sooner or later I'm bound to burn your betrayal, your crime. No, I hit upon another idea, a better idea. What was I talking about? The Chinese emperor. Starting with a clean slate. That was *his* idea. At an imperial banquet a Confucian scholar said something to the effect that only things which are modelled upon antiquity can endure for long. But the emperor disagreed, ordering all books to be burnt except those dealing with agriculture, medicine and fortune telling. We'll burn only sacred books. And history books. We'll write our own history on the proverbial clean slate. Is it as clean as all that, I wonder? Never mind. It's clean enough for our purpose, for our unclean purpose. You *are* Mary, another Mary—Mary II. The Maculate Conception. Our son will be God. Not Damien, God forbid! Just another God, another Christ—Christ II. The Second Coming. Virgins will be despised in our Kingdom, in our Kingdom of God. Every woman will be forced to have several lovers. Women will lose their virginity at the age of 10. Do you know what this number means? The Daughter, fallen and touching the shells

with her hands. And also the illusory physical envelope. Virginity is illusory, isn't it? All women in our Kingdom will lie to their husbands. And to their lovers of course. For the sake of money and status symbols. Truthful women will be burnt at the stake. No, I've got a better idea. They'll be allowed to tell the truth only once—during farewell ceremonies. They'll be allowed to scorn their husbands and lovers. They'll be allowed to laugh in their faces. They'll be *forced* to laugh in their faces. Forced laughter, you know. And all of them will have to pretend they're virgins. Blackberry juice, lipsticks and red ink will be on sale everywhere. No, I've got a better idea. Just have a guess! In 5 days. On Thursdays. They won't be allowed to make love to strangers on other days, on other nights. Only on Thursdays. What date was it? Can't remember the date.'

38

Does Zarina Lenoir believe in God? Her daily prayers, conspicuous for their loudness and clearness, have been resounding near her bed ever since she learnt to reproduce human speech in its simplest forms. Her mother, who loathed the fickleness of weather and feared car accidents and microbes, showed her the necessity of communicating orally with the Supreme Being.

'Why do you never go to Mass?' she asked him one misty afternoon after lavishing a considerable number of caresses upon his body.

'Because I don't want to ape my relatives,' he answered proudly, pulling the blanket over his right shoulder.

'God belongs to everybody. Without God—'

'I'll never kill a human being,' he hastened to point out, recalling Ivan Karamazov and his argumentation.

'Of course you won't. I'm sure you won't.'

'Will you always hold me in your arms? Without God? In 10 years? In 20 years? In 5 years?'

'I love you,' she said. 'You're my God. I'll always love you. Even if you marry another woman.'

Was I her *God*? She thought I was Alberich, didn't she? Wrenching her treasure from her body. Let us remain within *Das Rheingold*—I feel at home in this opera, but not in Nibelheim, not amidst the Nibelungen. Nor am I one of the giants who lust after Freia, the goddess of Youth. *Hilf mir, Schwester! Schütze mich, Schwäher!* Why didn't she cry for help? Save me, sister! Protect me, husband! Will she haunt me for the rest of my life? I'll always talk to her. 'Well, never fear! I'm neither Fasolt nor Fafner. You know who I am, don't you? Can't you see the rainbow-bridge? Stretching across the Rhine to the castle. Can't you see the castle? Splendidly lit up in the sunset. *Abendlich strahlt der Sonne Auge.*' Our *Rheingold*, our Greek tragedy. I am just a member of the audience or the chorus whose role is to express the audience's reactions to what is happening in the play.

Did Zarina ask permission to say her prayer before being assassinated? Had he removed the handkerchiefs from her artificially distorted mouth, she might have said something, anxious to turn her past lies into future truths, into eternal chastity and innocence. She might have recalled the inevitability of the Last Judgement.

He did not allow her to speak. She had uttered too many words in the course of her life. Too many words, far too many.

According to the Kabbalah, words *are* God. Words and numbers. Numbers, numbers, numbers.

39

Those who have abandoned beauty are bound to fall from the Tree of Life, for the only season they know is winter.

The world is an empty cup; nobody can fill it. Words are inaudible, punishments translucent.

Humanity exists and acts, seeking to thwart the projects of its saviours who are posthumously awarded the palm of martyrs. Humanity foils intelligence and philanthropy, so it does something. A cup of poison could hardly be called empty.

Is it better to read mediocre books or not to read at all? He upheld the latter view.

40

Only 5 hours spread before him. He was terribly busy: he had to finish his movie and avenge himself to the utmost.

Did they make love off-camera? Did he subject her body to his soaring will, to his searing pain? Or was he so disgusted that he resolved to destroy the object of his disgust without giving it the slightest opportunity to conquer his senses?

Did he get Zarina to remove her clothes? Was he disappointed? In that case he might have felt sorry for her, and the sentiment of pity is hardly propitious for the perfect execution of a murder. The pathetic sight of her struggle with decrepitude would have warded off his blows, his blood-letting knife.

Perhaps he removed her shirts and skirts. Perhaps she did so herself, offering him an opportunity to contemplate her body from a distance: perspective is an essential trait of voyeurism. Perhaps he was enthralled by her immaculate, Time-impervious beauty. Why did he murder her, then?

Love-making is a wearisome process, especially after long separations: Time and Space breed unquenchable desires. Would he have murdered her in spite of his fatigue? Would he have preserved enough strength? Wouldn't he have become indifferent towards her blasphemy? Physical fatigue, which is inseparable from its mental counterpart, favours indifference, apathy, detachment, aloofness.

Was he disappointed only by her skin or her breasts? Ah, she used to have a queenly bearing!

41

A witness for the prosecution affirmed that he had distinctly seen a circle painted on the floor of the prisoner's bedroom. 'There were a few words within the circle: *Raphael, Rael, Miraton, Tarmiel, Rex.*' But either the prisoner washed the floor before the arrival of the police—this hypothesis was refuted by the overabundance of blood—or the circle was the forbidden fruit of the witness's imagination.

The way he handled his knife was far more eloquent than any circle, any inscription, any incantation.

Did she decipher the oddity of his conduct, the weirdness of his movements before she actually *felt* them? Did she suspect anything? Did he willingly subject her to the torture of presentiment? She knew she would become a palpable shadow of his knife; a palpable, palpitating shadow of his punishment.

He repeated the word 'virginity' 41 times (41. AM, the Mother, unfertilised and unenlightened) in 91 minutes (91=7x13, the most spiritual form of the Septenary. AMN, Amen, the holiest title of God; the Amoun of the Egyptians). Did she understand how it was linked to the point of the knife?

In his closing speech the public prosecutor compared the prisoner to the protagonist of Lautréamont's masterpiece *Les Chants de Maldoror*. Another erroneous comparison.

The prisoner did not remove the guts, the lungs and the heart from the body of his victim. Even Zarina's liver remained intact. What was more, he deflowered her with a kitchen knife, not with an American penknife (*un canif américain*).

'A bulldog also deflowered that little girl—with his teeth!' shouted a middle-aged man. 'On his master's orders.'

Alas, the prisoner had no dog.

42

King Egfrid married Etheldreada, a daughter of Anna, King of the East Angles, of whom I have often spoken; he was a very devout man, noble in mind and deed. Before her marriage to Egfrid, Etheldreada had been married to Tondbert, a prince of the South Gyrwas; but he died shortly after the wedding, and she was given to King Egfrid. Although she lived with him for 12 years, she preserved the glory of perpetual virginity. This fact is absolutely vouched for by Bishop Wilfrid of blessed memory, of whom I made enquiry when some people doubted it.

Bede, A History of the English Church and People

He sat hunched over her face for almost an hour. He was reading the Book of Death.

He did not close her eyes. Did he sing her a lullaby? Some murderers cradle their victims in blood-and-thunder movies. He did not. Perhaps he had no desire to sing out of tune.

Did he have any desire, any intention? 'An hour must have elapsed,' he thought. It was his first thought in the post-Zarina era. During that era he had 543 thoughts. (543. AHIH AShR AHIH, 'I am that I am'. Carrying us back to the Mother.) Numerous dials surrounded him, keeping his Time in working order. He did not look at them. Blunted, saturated with unholy sights, his sense of Time was not up to the mark: 5 hours had elapsed since the departure of Zarina's intact soul from her mutilated, mangled body.

He had plenty of time and leisure—414 minutes—in which to concentrate on eternity, on its lingering, claret-like fragrance, on its repetitive music. Claret, Burgundy, an indulgent, generous sword. He was sharing with Time its mysterious expansion. (414. HGVTh, Meditation, the 1 dividing the accursed 4. Also AIN SVP AVR, the Limitless Light.)

He did not try to remove the corpse from where it had found its eternal peace to throw it in the Seine, to bury it in his cousin's basement, under a broken barrow or a motor-mower. Nor did he attempt to prepare himself for the trial by inventing a plausible alibi or justification for his deed. 'I've managed to safeguard the pedestal of the human race.' His second thought in the post-Zarina era.

We need firm ground to stand upon. We need shelves for our books. Hanging gardens do not hang in the sky like hawks.

43

He said that Egfrid promised to give estates and much wealth to him if he could persuade the queen to consummate the marriage, knowing that there was no man for whom she had a higher regard. And there is no reason to doubt that such a thing could happen in our own day, since reliable histories record it as having happened on several occasions in the past through the grace of the same Lord who has promised to remain with us until the end of the world. For the

*miraculous preservation of her body from corruption in the tomb is
evidence that she had remained untainted by bodily intercourse.
Bede, A History of the English Church and People*

He was sitting beside her body. He had nothing to do. His murder put an end to his activities. His brain lost its competition with Time. He had no strength to live, no strength to die. But had she been alive he would have had enough strength to kill her once more. As many times as necessary.

43. The number of orgasm.

44

Without shedding of blood (DM=44) there is no remission.

I told this story to a woman—in the third person of course. 'Once upon a time, a friend of mine—' She did not understand what I was talking about. 'What *did* she do?' I spelt it out for her. 'What's so unusual about it?' she asked, lowering her eyes and fingering her skirt. 'I also have periods. I'm having one right now, to tell the truth. I wasn't a virgin either, when I met Alain-Gilles. But he didn't kill me, did he? We've never talked about it, not once. There are far more important things to talk about. Why don't *we* ask you indiscreet questions? Why don't *we* care about your blood, about your so-called purity? Why are *you* allowed to make love to thousands of women before you deign to kiss our lips? Because you don't have hymen? That's *your* problem! Actually I have painful periods, long and painful periods. Irregular periods. And sometimes I miss a period. Too much stress, you know. Too many stresses and strains are being put on our family. By the way, the colour is different—the colour of menstrual blood I mean. How could he confuse the 2 bloods, I wonder? He *was* inexperienced and gullible. Or was it too dark in the room? Anyway people don't kill each other for a few drops of blood on a sheet. Why worry over trifles? We've got our children to take care of. It was in November of last year that I began to suspect my son was on drugs. Young people are often thoughtless for the future. Do *you* have children? Of course you don't. 30 years. He tried to withdraw from the world, to block it out. Why? Because of that virgin? There must have been some other reason, I'm sure. Nobody would believe such nonsense at court. A crime *passionnel*—yes. But virginity wouldn't wash with the jury! Anyway your friend should go and see a shrink. He'll learn something about *real* symbols.'

'My friend is in prison,' I reminded her.

45

Was there anybody to assassinate?

Humanity is dead already. Human blood has been discoloured, deprived of its life-saving qualities.

What is the skeleton in the cupboard? It is a man who once played hide-and-seek. He won.

Humanity has played hide-and-seek for decades with a light heart and obstinacy. People are pretty good at hiding themselves. But they cannot find what they have hidden.

What have they won? Computers?

What is left? Their shadows? Not even their shadows.

By whom are soap operas made and watched? By soap bubbles. Not even by skeletons. Not even by robots. Not even by the living dead. A Human polypus of Death.

They have all committed suicide—many times, at short intervals.

You cannot kill a dead man. Or a dead woman.

Killing humans has been declared a contradiction in terms. By the UN Security Council.

He killed no one. No one.

Blow me a soap bubble, daddy!

46

Luscious and sweet, the smell of her blood saturated the air. He was gazing at her with dull, glassy eyes. 'What have I done? What have I done? What have I done? What have I done? What have I done?' His third thought in the post-Zarina era. The doorbell rang violently. As if awakened by an insolent alarm-clock, he scrambled up and tottered to the bathroom. He had a bath and went stark naked in search of some unstained, immaculate, virginal clothes. The water was dripping from his body, diluting the redness of the carpets.

As he was changing into a brand new pair of pyjamas the doorbell rang once more. Its violence had not decreased under the soothing influence of Time. He unhooked his dressing gown and cast an apathetic glance in the general direction of the door.

The doorbell kept ringing. He had no need to answer the bell. Nobody cried, 'Open up in the name of the law!'

He answered the door. He was bored to death by Zarina's immobility and silence.

He saw a middle-aged man and an old woman.

'Have you got cancer?' asked the man.

'Are you ill?' asked the woman. She had a broader outlook on life.

'Perhaps,' he answered with a grin. His last grimace.

'Do you know that cancer can be dealt with rather easily?' said the man, peering into the apartment. The perspective was disappointingly curtailed by one closed door.

'Not so easily,' said the woman.

'Well, no harm in trying.' The man started to remove his raincoat. 'God brings back the dead as easily as we wake a child after a sound night's sleep. We splash him with icy water or slap him round the face. No point in missing school, is there?'

'Do you remember what Jesus said to the Sadduceans?' the woman asked. 'Do you know who the Sadduceans were? They tried to catch Jesus out with a question about the Resurrection. Shall we have a talk in your living room?'

'Why not in my bedroom?'

'In your bedroom?'

The man was already sitting on the couch. In the living room. 'Just think. Yesterday you were full of energy and desires. Today you are lying in your bed unable to move. What's happened?'

'Do you really want me to tell you what happened 30 years ago?'

'You may lie in bed for the rest of your life. How long? What does "the rest of your life" mean?' The man gave the woman one of his gimlet-eyed looks.

'An electric hot plate in the kitchen doesn't go cold the minute you switch it off. It cools very slowly. We could draw a parallel with our first forefathers. They were denied access to the Tree of Life that used to transmit the life force to them.'

'They learnt what it was to cool off—I mean, to die,' specified the man. 'The Word was made flesh, dead flesh, a cadaver. We're all dying, in a manner of speaking. We're all cancer victims.'

'Doctors won't help you,' said the woman. 'With the best will in the world.'

'Medical science—' said the man.

'I think we've talked enough about science,' said the woman. 'Nobody believes in it any longer. Let's talk about *the* cure.'

'By the end of the 21st century, scientists will find out how to prevent cancer—if they keep their promises!'

'Whores' promises,' specified the woman.

'And we all know *how* they keep them. According to the Scriptures, cancer will be vanquished much earlier—at the turn of *our* century.'

'Why do we claim that it is true?' said the woman, raising 3 fingers of her right hand.

The man answered her leading question in thunderous tones, confusing Christ with Zeus: 'Because Jesus Christ, Who was sent to our planet more than 1900 years ago, cured all sorts of individuals: cripples, paralytics, epileptics, a woman suffering from a haemorrhage, a man suffering from dropsy. By what means? By any particular therapy?'

'As a matter of fact,' said the woman, 'He used neither hypnotism nor psychotherapy. His amazing achievements had nothing to do with his faculties, his knowledge or his personal wisdom. He cured those individuals by supernatural means.' And she raised 3 fingers of her left hand.

'"That it might be fulfilled which was spoken by Esaias the prophet, saying, Himself took our infirmities, and bare *our* sicknesses,"' quoted the man.

'It was His Father's spirit that brought about—'

47

He stood up and made the sign of the cross—slowly, with unmistakable resoluteness.

'Wait a minute! We haven't finished yet.' The man spoke very loudly.

The door was open now; he had opened the door of his bedroom. Neither the man nor the woman turned their heads to read the history of his life. The man was talking; the woman was looking at the man.

'Some day, obedient humans will profit from God's gifts which are life and health, health and life. And there shall be no more death, neither sorrow, nor crying, neither shall there be any more pain: for the former things are passed away. Cancer and Aids will pass away, among other things. In the Kingdom of God, under the government of Christ to Whom the Supreme Being has assigned that prestigious office, the mortal factors—part and parcel of our society—will disappear forever. Forever! Nervous stress, its debilitating and demoralising consequences, shall no longer impair the biological beauty of our blood and urine tests, of our electrocardiograms. Our immunity system shall function like a flawless, well-lubricated mechanism. Sound in body and mind, we'll look upon spiritual values as our chief preoccupation.'

48

'Come here,' he murmured. 'I'll show her to you. How beautiful she is! *The Woman in a Room*. My best and last painting, my rainbow-bridge. She was right—I am God, I am Wotan. Soon I'll reach Valhalla at last.'

He was already in his room, in *her* room. They did not follow him immediately. The man went on with his sermon; the woman was awaiting the end of his sermon. The man closed the notebook lying on his lap; the woman opened her handbag and produced a lipstick. 3 minutes later they stood up and walked as far as the nearest stain of blood. They gave no shriek, no groan, but their bodies went limp and seemed to dangle from a hook.

Whom did he kill first? The woman. He picked up the knife and stabbed the woman in the middle of the chest and under the right shoulder. The man dropped his notebook but made no use of his free hands, hoping that the assassin's vampirish thirst would be definitively quenched by that additional ration of blood. (Women shed far more blood than men. Are their veins and arteries longer? Much longer?)

He cried, 'Traitors!' and knelt down to inflict a few more wounds on the corpses. He walked onto the balcony and showed the knife to those who knew neither Zarina Lenoir nor her one-time lover.

49

Blut. Blood. It smells of human blood! Fee, Fie, Foe, Fum—I smell the blood of a French woman. Your profession? A murderer. *Blut. Blut. Blut. Blut. Blut.* In a foreign language blood sounds and looks like water. *Blut. Blut. Blut. Blut. Blut.* Where's my knife? I've left it somewhere—

The knife was lying near his left slipper. As soon as he took the trouble to lower his gaze, he spotted its flashing sharpness.

All is quiet and dead. Peace and quiet. *Calme et volupté.* All is dead. *Tot.* Silence. Murder! Murder!

Nobody cried, 'Murder!' But some people had seen the boastful flourishes of his knife.

A curious teenager and a fatalistic pedestrian were running up the stairs, mistrusting the punctuality of the lift.

50

They reached the same stain of blood without loitering in other rooms, but he had enough time to pick up his indefatigable weapon and stab them. (How had they broken in? An axe? A crowbar? Or had the door been left ajar?)

'Too late! You won't save her!' he cried to the teenager before stabbing him in the stomach.

He fell on her body but shed no tears, deviating from the cinematic role models. He suddenly forgot everything: Buster Keaton, Rita Hayworth, Lulu, Tosca, Wozzeck, Marlene Dietrich. His memory became as white as a flag of truce. All the same, a number of intruders carried the war into the enemy's camp. Holding his limbs tightly, they set him on his feet. Did he walk out of the room, out of the house? Did they carry him? He could not remember how to walk. He would have remembered how to kill had she shown Lazarus-like propensities.

Zarina Lenoir was no more. They did not carry her out at once.

51

51. AN, pain. NA, failure. ADVm, Edom, the country of the demon kings.

The trial was long and tedious. Yet it satisfied the murderer's neighbours and colleagues; they heard what they had wished to hear.

The second victim of the 'monster'—the old woman—was represented by her cousin who raised his cane and pointed it to single the criminal out from the mass of decent people: his fingers were too short in comparison with the length and depth of the crime. Nobody heard what he was shouting. Everybody looked at his cane which did not move for 5 minutes.

Another witness enlightened the jury and other spectators on torture and its vicissitudes in the history of mankind: 'The use of torture was authorised in 1252 by Innocent IV!'

'Iago was put in a cage. They hauled the cage up into the air on a chain,' said the only brother of the third victim.

'He was so young! Do something!' implored the father of the fourth victim.

'Do what?' asked the public prosecutor.

'For God's sake don't send him on a holiday of a lifetime! They have TV sets these days and net curtains on the windows.'

He was already an exhibit in Madame Tussaud's.

52

He was so young! As my schoolmate put it, 'They aren't even mercenary, those youngsters.' He was alluding to a 20-year-old girl who did not seem to have an eye on his furniture, paintings and rubies. She had never asked him to marry her. 'And she's in love with an ugly, stingy, stinking blockhead,' he added.

Even money is of no interest to young people nowadays. Some time ago another schoolmate of mine compared his son to the water running from a tap in his bathroom. 'The water fills the bath. When the tap is turned off, the water doesn't fill the bath. The water may also drip from the tap. Today the water is barely dribbling out of the tap. I still haven't got round to fixing that tap.'

Oh, I don't want them to work 'very hard', doing something 'useful' for society. I don't want them to give pompous utterance to the phoney and catchy ideas many people are so fond of. But I want them to vibrate and to transmit vibrations. I want them to exert and enjoy themselves, frivolously blending sounds and colours, songs and words. I want them to prove they may grow irritated, revolted, appalled, disgusted, assuming that there is any psychological perspective in those flat, two-dimensional creatures.

Our generation was full of energy. We rebelled against rules and laws; our senses scorned the sights and odours of our epoch. We were often in the wrong but at least we tried to do something. There was nothing to do.

They make no attempt to change anything. There is nothing to do and they do nothing. In a way, our generation was dishonest and presumptuous. Our tone was peremptory; our decisions were one-sided and ideological. But we did not moon around, drinking Coke and eating hamburgers. (We travelled to the moon instead!) We feverishly debated twofold questions, threefold problems.

Those wretched phantoms pass through walls and Time without brushing their shoulders against anything. They are translucent. Nobody has ever heard their voices.

They *are* mercenary. And they don't dare question the sacred cow of technological progress.

53

A witness for the prosecution certified that the accused had broken his own television set with a hammer. The scope of the crime was thus broadened, magnified, inflated:

'It was a rehearsal of the murder,' said the public prosecutor. 'What he really abhorred wasn't his television set—he couldn't care less about wires and fuses—but the people it showed. He smashed *them* into pieces, not the machine that stood on a small table opposite his couch. *They* were standing before him when he seized the hammer with inhuman frenzy. And he killed them mercilessly, one by one, hitting them in the face, smiting their heads off.'

At the end of his speech the public prosecutor enlarged once more on television and the mass media in general:

'The prisoner knew he was an ordinary man. He knew that his talents didn't live up to his ambitions. So he decided to do something unprecedented to attract everybody's attention to his body and soul. What could he do but kill not one person—a common practice—but several men and women who, unlike him, were talented and full of indescribable charm? He knew that his photograph would be reproduced in thousands of newspapers and magazines. He hoped that his evil face would darken television screens throughout the world. It was his only chance to inscribe his name in the annals of history that have often been smeared with the names of murderers, robbers, rapists and so on. He didn't hesitate for a moment. Never once did his conscience awake him in the midst of a pleasant dream to draw from his eyes a few tears of repentance and from his lungs a moan of deep-seated agony. He had no pangs of conscience, neither before the crime nor after it.'

Had the criminal respected journalists he would have dusted the television screen instead of searching for a hammer.

If you do not respect the man who speaks highly of your achievements, his praise can only irritate you for, somehow, it reveals your kinship with him.

Had he contemplated his own face on the television screen, he would have smashed everything into pieces—even his couch and secretaire. And he might have disfigured himself.

He did not hanker after glory. Whenever a spotlight was trained on him, he covered his eyes with his hands. His fondness for shadows might have become proverbial had he been a public figure. He was not.

He would avoid human eyes: their glow seemed to jar with the shadows of his meditations. Inquisitive or admiring, they interposed between him and his midsummer night's dream. 'Get out of my night,' he would say to Alexander the Great had he been in Diogenes' shoes, in Diogenes' barrel.

His vocabulary lacked a few vital proverbs: 'Live and let live', 'Death is no cure'. Stupidity always irritated him into a frenzy he could not keep under control. But stupidity linked to a superiority complex used to provoke such a tension in his nervous system that he had to bite his lips in order to spare his colleagues and acquaintances. No wonder he broke his television set.

He was not tempted by power.

In an article devoted to the film *The Last Temptation of Christ* a learned priest argued that sexuality was not alluring enough to usurp the spirit and body of our Saviour. 'Jesus Christ may only have been tempted by power, but He finally rejected the devil's offer, "Get thee hence, Satan: for it is written, thou shalt worship the Lord thy God, and him only shalt thou serve."'

Intelligent men cannot be ruled. Sometimes they follow a utilitarian piece of advice, but their thoughts never submit to a tyrant's ideology. When their legs are chained, their will takes wing. And they are too sceptical to accept the wisecracks of a prime minister.

Why mutilate their bodies? The human mind is a far more sophisticated prey.

Only the rabble can be ruled. Why rule over the rabble?

54

To God all things are fair and good and just, but men have assumed some to be unjust and some just.

Heraclitus, *Fr. 102*

'M'lud! Ladies and gentlemen of the jury! In the course of this trial you've heard many witnesses. You've seen their tears and grimaces of disgust. You've also seen the horror-movie shot by the murderer himself. Incidentally, my client is fond of cinema and football. I'm aware of your indignation and fury, ladies and gentlemen. I do realise that some of you are burning with a desire to lynch my client. Vengeance. (*The counsel for the defence opened a dictionary.*) "The wine made in a particular year, or a particular year in which wine has been made." Oh, I'm sorry. I've folded over the corners of too many pages. Incidentally, my client is a well-known oenophile. "Vintage wine is wine of high quality that was made in a particular year, and which can be kept for several years in order to improve it." Vengeance, vengeance. Here it is! "Wild justice. The retributive infliction of injury and chastisement. Thou God to whom vengeance belongeth, shewe thy self." (*The counsel for the defence shut the dictionary.*) God will show Himself, if necessary. Why should we impersonate or, worse still, upstage Him? *Crime and Punishment*. We all appreciate Dostoevsky's novels, but should we ape the doings of his heroes? We're not Russians, are we? Do you know what's going on in Russia these days?

'You condemn my client. You think he is a monster, a beast. Let's not jump the gun! Do you recall Renoir's film *La Bête humaine*? Wasn't Jean Gabin a paragon of virtue or, as Shakespeare might have put it, the beauty of the world, the paragon of animals? Beast indeed! For argument's sake, though, I am willing to admit that my client is a human beast, a monster. Well, this monster took no vengeance on his offender—Zarina Lenoir. He took no vengeance on his perfidious beloved. Do you wish to be more monstrous than my client, ladies and gentlemen?'

Thus the counsel for the defence began his closing speech. He talked for a while about Zarina's adolescence:

'Her ageing father failed to secure a lucrative post in an insurance company so that budgetary issues were frequently aired around the dinner table. "Look at my wardrobe! Oxfam would turn their noses up!" was the keynote of her mother's tirades during which Zarina couldn't help looking at her own blouses and skirts. She gradually shifted her gaze to shop-windows; their glow and adornments were not wasted on her sensitive mind. Later on, without averting her eyes from the shop windows, she began to inveigle my client into marital union. Of course she gave him that whole song and dance about being orphaned at the age of 5 and growing up on the streets. Yet her parents were alive and kicking.'

The counsel for the defence read a few paragraphs from *The Kama Sutra* and then resumed his love story:

'By the morning the flickering flame of desire had ceased to tremble and burnt instead with the pure, gem-like fire of deepest love. There was nothing here of slow budding, of fruit ripening in stillness. He stared at her; she stared at the shop-windows. She also stared at other schoolboys. Even middle-aged stockbrokers might now and then fall prey to her sexual appetite. He was unaware of her "sociability". She was a woman on whom he had built an absolute trust, as Shakespeare referred to Lady Macbeth. The jury gets my drift, I presume. In such cases discovery of the truth often leads to nervous breakdowns.'

He added that his client had suffered from a nervous breakdown for 33 years. '33 years!'

This time the jury did not understand the allusion.

'He first discovered the truth in his sleep, in his dreams. Once he invited her to his friend's apartment in the hope that he might at last overcome her resistance—she had been playing hard to get for quite a while. His friend left them alone despite the show of innocence she was putting on. The words she uttered on that occasion sounded like a song of innocence. Songs of innocence and songs of experience sound alike when performed by artful, unscrupulous females. To cut a long story short—and the story lasted 3 hours—she repulsed his advances, pointing out that her body would become his property only on their wedding night, in their wedding bed. "Until then my body belongs to Christ," she added as if her body indeed had "Property of the Almighty" stamped inside it. She turned a deaf ear to his arguments and entreaties; she turned a dead body to his caresses. "Private Property, Keep Off." At the appointed hour his friend came back and found them peacefully talking on a divan. A blush of shame crept up across Zarina's face. She buried her face and shame in her hands and hurried into the bathroom. In a whisper my client acknowledged his defeat, *his* shame. "A virgin, eh?" his friend asked in a mocking voice. A song of experience. "I'll take her home." A purely philanthropic gesture. "I'll call a taxi and take her home. I suppose you're not over-eager to do it yourself...under the circumstances. Wait for me upstairs, at Peter's." Another 3 hours elapsed. Meanwhile my client told his long story to Peter, slowly sipping his wine. The doorbell rang placidly, almost lifelessly. They both stood on the landing. His friend winked at him in a horribly suggestive way. A wink of experience. Zarina had no strength left to blush. My client screamed and woke up, pouring with sweat. The dream would have proved grimly prophetic had he believed in dreams, in their songs of the future. But he believed Zarina; he believed in her songs and dances. Her dances. She would go into hysterics whenever he jokingly questioned her loyalty and purity.

'Another 3 years elapsed. One afternoon, unable to quell the daily riot of his body, he dialled Zarina's number to ask her to bring forward the hour of their meeting. The line was engaged. He tried once more; once more it was engaged. He dressed and bolted out into the street.

'Out of breath and perspiring, he paused on her landing. He heard a door-muffled voice. Was it her voice? He recognised it at once. He idolised her voice, her mystical voice. The music of the spheres. All other sounds seemed superfluous and even cacophonous. He was listening to the melody of her voice. He paid no attention to *what* she was saying on the telephone. I asked my sister to record Zarina's monologue for us. Enjoy the timbre and song-bird melody of her voice, by all means. But don't let the meaning of her words escape you. (*The counsel for the defence took a tape-recorder out of his briefcase and turned it on.*) "This telephone call lasted merely an hour. My fingers were drenched in a hot, salty dew of sweat...I shouted and screamed into the receiver...and I begged him to call me early the next day, after Frederic had left." (*The counsel for the defence turned the tape-recorder off.*) My client was still listening to the melody of her voice. *Lieder ohne Worte*. A song without words. Incidentally, my client is keen on music and, like Einstein, plays the violin in the evening. (*The counsel for the defence turned the tape-recorder on again.*) "He was punctual. He made me undress bit by bit, obliging me to let my hand linger under the elastic border of my panties." (*The counsel for the defence turned the tape-recorder off.*) Suddenly my client noticed that the song wasn't altogether devoid of literary merit. He began to analyse the words of his mistress. (*The counsel for the defence turned the tape-recorder on again.*) "Kneeling on my divan, I closed my eyes while from the earpiece I could hear a marvellous lapping noise emanating from his tongue and saliva which I allowed to bathe my body, especially the area between my midriff and my rump,

passing between my thighs, over the pubic mound. Nadine, I'm mad, happy, exhausted..." (*The counsel for the defence turned the tape-recorder off.*) My client knew he had never aroused her over the telephone. Put yourselves in his place, gentlemen of the jury. You're standing before a door. And the door leads to the flat of your mistress. Mistress, stress, distress. She is on the phone. You eavesdrop. What do you hear? The whole pageant of her love-life recounted in titillating detail to her bosom friends. And you learn the identities of all her old and new flames: Frederic, Albert, Robert...

'My client is pure in heart and body. *Entre nous*, his relationship with Zarina was his first incursion into *The Empire of the Senses*. Every Friday Zarina expressed her love for him in the parc de Versailles. My client is gullible. He believed Zarina was faithful to him. That afternoon he realised he was wrong. He shrieked with horror and began pounding her door. No answer. He went home and lay on his bed, looking punched and worn.

'A man realises that an irresistible desire to strangle somebody overcomes him every time he goes to the cinema. And one day he yields to his desire and strangles the person sitting next to him. His solicitor has him examined by a panel of doctors. These conclude their examination by flashing a light at regular intervals into his eyes and find out that the flicker, if set at 24 cycles per second, produces violent jerking in his limbs. And films are recorded at 24 frames a second. By the way, a flicker somewhere in the alpha-rhythm range, between 8 and 12 cycles a second, acts in the same way on epileptics, provoking them into a seizure at any time.

'That afternoon there was a kind of flicker in Zarina's flat—a sound-flicker. Frederic, Albert, Robert, Hubert. He heard the names of her lovers. His thoughts and limbs couldn't help jerking in rhythm with her betrayals. Ladies and gentlemen of the jury! The shock of losing Zarina jerked my client out of his settled lifestyle. What was more, his thoughts went on jerking for 30 years. Eventually they jerked to a halt.

'La Bruyère writes that an unfaithful woman is just unfaithful, if you know she is unfaithful. But if you think she is your faithful wife or mistress, whereas she betrays you with all and sundry, the woman in question is perfidious. La Bruyère maintains that perfidy is a cure for jealousy. I beg to differ, ladies and gentlemen. Jealousy is better dissected by Shakespeare in his immortal tragedy *Othello*. The Moor thinks that Desdemona is unfaithful, and yet she maintains her innocence. So in his eyes—in his ears, rather—she is perfidy incarnate; a harlot pretending to be virtuous. Does her perfidious nature cure him of jealousy? Hardly. For the space of 3 acts Othello believes that his wife feigns purity, chastity and innocence. In the fifth act he murders Desdemona. Let me remind you, ladies and gentlemen of the jury, that Othello's jealousy lasts but a few hours. My client had to endure his torments for 30 years. "What can't be cured must be endured." Shakespeare proves rather brilliantly that jealousy *can* be cured. Murder is a cure-all wonder drug. And my client is a lifelong admirer of the distinguished English playwright. 30 years. Even La Bruyère admits that Space and Time enhance the sentiment of love. 30 years. And don't forget Space—the distance that separated the lovers over those long, burdensome days. Physicists tell us that particles always remain in touch with each other, however great the distance between them. Particles and anti-particles. Zarina was a notorious anti-particle. And my client plays the classic anti-hero who drops out of society to join a world of loners and nervous wrecks. Don't forget that he has been on anti-depressants ever since she came into the open. When Othello commits suicide, Cassio says: "He was great of heart." And Iago is tortured to death. Well, in the present case, Zarina is Iago. It's her words that brought about my client's jealousy and fanned his fury. What's more, she told the truth and nothing but the truth. She *was* a harlot. In short, my client had every reason to torture her to death.'

The counsel for the defence was going to turn the tape-recorder on but thought better of it and immersed himself once more in his papers. Fearing that the jury might not be convinced by his arguments, he switched to an opposite line of defence.

"It could pertain to the fundamental nature of existence that a complete knowledge of truth would destroy one," said Nietzsche. When faced with depravity and wickedness, a virgin adolescent often loses control and kills either himself or the perpetrator of a moral crime. Strong emotions arise from the satisfaction or frustration of desires. Had my client killed her then and there, I'm sure you would come to a unanimous verdict of "Not guilty". Well, ladies and gentlemen, he *did* kill her then and there. The feeling of sadness he experienced that day was to blot out the 30 years spanning their first and last farewell rituals. He still eavesdrops on her telephone chatter and listens to the murmur of her voice, to the meaning of her words.'

55

He said his client had killed Zarina Lenoir on the spur of the moment. He used the trial-honoured definition 'temporary insanity' and talked for a while about the 'irresistible impulse' which had usurped his client's will and mental equilibrium. 'But there was no vengeance in his heart,' he added. He then tactfully reminded the members of the jury that resentment and rancour were an ideal breeding ground for premeditated murders. 'And a premeditated murder doesn't necessarily result in a murder. Roasting one's enemy over a slow fire is far more cruel and sadistic than a quick, torment-ending death.'

The glinting steel blade of Exhibit B. He brandished it in the air with a bellicose flourish. 'This bread knife, members of the jury, was my client's Misericord, the weapon of Mercy, the instrument of the *coup de grâce*.' He delicately lowered the Exhibit and placed it on the Holy Bible. He resumed his case.

'The story I'm going to recount is an Everest of cruelty and sadism, compared with which my client's homicide is a paltry molehill in an alpine meadow. A Russian friend of mine told me this story. It concerns an illustrious Soviet painter who emigrated to France in 1973. He loved a woman in Moscow. She was in love with 4 other men. He knew neither about her indifference nor about his rivals. The lady—let us call her Zarina II—aspired to settle in Moscow, which was by no means an easy matter, the Soviet Union being the show-place of bureaucracy. She was born in a tiny Siberian village and had to marry a Muscovite for her name to be entered in the city-register. He was a Muscovite and moreover had a huge apartment near the Bolshoi Theatre. Don't forget that huge apartments—especially those situated in the neighbourhood of the Bolshoi Theatre—are a rarity in the Soviet Union, a country renowned for its housing shortages.

'So she proposed to him and he said, "Yes, of course. I'm crazy about you." But 5 days later she was caught in the act on his divan and he tore all his paintings to pieces. He rang her the following afternoon to ask for a final meeting—a farewell ceremony, as he called it. She agreed and they met near the Kremlin wall. She was weary and frustrated; he was crying and wiping off his tears. She enumerated the shortcomings of his sexual craftsmanship and admitted she had as many as 5 boy-friends. "I'm a woman," she declared vehemently, as if making a stand for female rights. "And Vasya lives near the Bolshoi too." "Do you remember our first night? It began to snow," he said.

'As they bade each other adieu he supplicated God to bring down the wrath of heaven upon his former mistress. 17 years after he took the affair in his own hands.

'He couldn't bear the sight of the city where he had been ridiculed and humiliated. So he went on a trip to France and asked for political asylum, hoping to obliterate his unpleasant memories in Parisian bistros. With the passing of the years he forgot the ignominious female upstart he had been involved with in the snowy country of his birth and was in a position to do some painting, blissfully reverting to the lifestyle of his youth. He became known in Western Europe and even in Japan and South Korea. The commercial success of his art enabled him to buy a duplex apartment near the Académie Française. He was now the happiest bachelor in the world.

'Zarina II prospered neither in matrimony nor in business, for all her lies and stratagems. In spite or because of perestroika, the economic situation of the Soviet Union had deteriorated so disastrously that even the closeness of the Bolshoi Theatre was no longer cheering and soothing. Zarina loved her only son and betrayed her husband with all the would-be Romeos who passed beneath her balcony. She often burnt her husband's hard-earned roubles in the kitchen and strewed their ashes over his clothes—just to make her point.

'Meanwhile, her former lover was invited to the Soviet Union as a guest of honour. His works were exhibited at the Tretyakov Arts Gallery—the most prestigious gallery in his versatile homeland. Zarina came to the private view and posted herself beside the biggest canvas. Their eyes met for the first time since their improvised farewell ritual. He saluted her and, for a few minutes, they engaged in small talk. She invited herself to the dinner-party during which they had another talk—a bigger one this time. Then he saw her off and she kissed him. "I'm still in love with you. I've never stopped loving you," she said. "What about your husband?" he inquired automatically. "Why should we waste our time on that jerk?!" she retorted. "But I love my son. I hope you'll love him too. He's a gifted cello player." And she kissed him ardently, feverishly.

'The next morning he returned to Paris and once again forgot the treacherous woman, relegating their recent encounter to the irrevocable past. He didn't give the incident a moment's thought until she phoned him one sunny afternoon. "I'm coming to Paris in June," she announced point-blank. "You can stay with me," he replied. Thus he set out to avenge himself for the injury he had suffered 17 years before. His vengeance was inhuman and horrifying.

'Ladies and gentlemen of the jury! I roundly condemn the trick the second Zarina played on her gullible lover and had he killed her in a paroxysm of despair, instead of crying, moaning and destroying his pictures, I would have taken up his case without the slightest hesitation. In Siberia too there must exist a moral code forbidding human beings to trifle with the destinies of their fellow creatures, even for the sake of a huge apartment located in the centre of Moscow. But, unlike my client, the illustrious painter didn't kill his Siberian Zarina. What he finally did was far more despicable and cruel; he subjected her to psychological torture. Interminable torture—she is still strapped to the rack.

'He made her believe he was in love with her—more than ever! He assured her that he would purchase another apartment in the centre of Paris—a larger one still—so her son could have a music room. "He deserves nothing less than the acoustics of a concert hall," he said. And he promised to rent a one-bedroom flat for her younger sister. "A maid's room will do," Zarina interjected. "And of course we'll find a villa on the Riviera," he pursued.

'She informed him that her husband would be in Vladivostok at the beginning of April. He phoned her and they talked for 5 hours. He had to prove his love *mathematically* in order to bring off his abject scheme. He knew she would analyse this long-distance call in terms of money, converting its duration first into roubles and then into dollars. He was right. The total amount of love on the balance sheet was so enormous that she

immediately drew up an inventory of valuables and purchased a dozen suitcases. She also started to learn French and English; she went so far as to enrol in evening classes.

'He called her again and again. He mapped out their forthcoming felicity with such exuberance of detail that she regretted not having abandoned her husband 16 years earlier, right after the birth of their son. "I can't help dreaming about our conjugal happiness," he told her. "But what if it doesn't come off? What if I disappoint you? Promise to be frank with me!" "I promise," she said. "I hope to God it does come off!" he exclaimed. "You succeed in all you do. Always," she answered.

"My schoolmate called on me last week. He's going back to Moscow this afternoon. I gave him something for you," he told her a fortnight later. She expected a diamond and received a book on Paris with lots of engravings and drawings, which suddenly placed their new relationship in an ideal, visionary dimension. She took fright and phoned him instantly. "Why didn't you send me photographs? These drawings are so far away. Am I imagining things? What are your intentions?"

'He sent her a dozen photographs of his apartment. They also looked like engravings and drawings—extraterrestrial and inaccessible. She tried to convert their ideal space into a tangible one, counting metres and rooms, measuring the height of the ceiling. The figures she obtained were too contradictory and illogical, but she couldn't relinquish her passion for mathematics. She was the Queen of Parallelograms.

'The countdown began. She was counting the hours which lay between Paris and Moscow, between the Académie Française and the Bolshoi Theatre. 280 hours...156 hours...Her departure was scheduled for the 15th of June. He gave her a call on the 13th of June to say he was leaving for Jamaica. "Tomorrow. A very important exhibition." "Jamaica?" She was astonished. "2,000,000 dollars. But if I don't go—" "Go! You must go!" she shouted. "For you, for your son. I wouldn't do that for myself."

'She came to Paris in the early afternoon and went in search of his apartment. After a deaf-and-mute discussion with the concierge she worked out that Parisian apartment blocks were not easy to get into—by comparison with Moscow. For a few hours she crouched behind a dustbin. Under cover of darkness she slipped out of her hiding place and stole upstairs. Nobody answered the doorbell; she failed to open the door with her key and a pencil.

'The next morning she discovered the beauty of Saint-Germain des Prés and the Ile Saint-Louis. It was love at first sight. Mentally she juxtaposed her 2 idols: her son and Paris. She managed to unite the 2 images, blending the Parisian atmosphere with the musical gift of her son. "Wonderful! Wonderful!" she repeated. 2 weeks later she returned to Moscow.

'He didn't call her in August. She calculated that he would come back on the 9th. His answerphone was long-winded and adamant. Had he become infatuated with a Jamaican girl? A stewardess, a journalist? She consulted 5 books on Jamaica in the Lenin Library and came across a great many photographs of local beauties.

'He rang her in October. "I'm rushed off my feet at the moment. Absolutely snowed under. Just bought a *château* in the Loire Valley. I make it up to Paris every fortnight, though." "What's happened? You sound so different," she murmured. "Something *has* happened. Can't tell you now. Perhaps next month." "Is there another woman in your life?" she screamed. "Next month," he answered. A week later she received a gigantic book: *Les Châteaux de la Loire*.

'She called him at the beginning of December. "Can't speak now. Sorry." "You're not alone, are you? You're with a woman!" "Sorry. I'll call you next Sunday." He didn't call her on Sunday. She called him on

Monday. He was laughing and talking to somebody in a whisper; she heard a clink of glasses. "Next Thursday." He called her on Thursday and said he loved her. "There's no other woman in my life, only you. But something *has* happened. It concerns you and me, only you and your obedient servant. The more I think about our future the more I recall our past." "My errors?" she inquired cautiously. "I couldn't care less about your betrayals, past or future. Fallen women have their charm. *The Brothers Karamazov*, *The Possessed*, *The Idiot*. Dostoevsky knew what he was on about. There's something far more important than betrayals. Symbols. Symbols of the human soul. They're not to be trifled with." "For Christ's sake! What are you talking about?" she bellowed. This time she was sincere: she did not know. "And I'm not joking. Our future's at stake," he answered. "Tell me! I'm entitled to know!"

'Members of the jury, she still doesn't know. She hasn't found him out. She never will. Never. Meanwhile the standard of living in the Soviet Union plunges ever downward.

'He calls her from time to time. During the conversation he may burst into laughter for some obscure reason. "What's so funny?" she inquires, apprehensive of further defeats. "Nothing, nothing. Just recalled an anecdote. Can't tell you." He stops calling her for 5 months and she hears again his answerphone or a clinking of glasses and a female voice.

'Ladies and gentlemen! This painter is committing a murder, a premeditated murder. He's stabbing his victim in the back and in the chest round the clock, without respite. He's strangling his victim day and night, in winter and in autumn, come rain or come shine. I would ask you to compare this eternal torture to a sudden merciful death, ladies and gentlemen of the jury. Death is nothing but a sleep, a heavy sleep. "To sleep, perchance to dream—"

56

'Ling'ring perdition—worse than any death can be at once.'

In the epilogue of his speech, the counsel for the defence enlightened the jury on the other murders committed by his client. 'There were no other murders, properly speaking. My client killed Zarina Lenoir and nobody else. There was nobody in his life except Zarina Lenoir, his one-time mistress. When killing the others he thought about her crime, her unfaithfulness. He was still turning the knife in her body, in her treacherous, adorable body. They were alone in the whole world. Zarina was his humanity.'

57

I'm still holding her in my arms. Now. Her body. She must have resurrected with her body. What received mind and reason is not the soul alone. A human being. A mixture of material and immaterial elements. No wonder we resurrect with our bodies. Or perhaps nothing has happened. No death, no resurrection. A dream, just a dream. The wise commit murders in dreams while others do it in reality, in earnest. A nightmare. No, a sweet dream, a luscious dream.

The prisoner talked to the dead woman. He continued to caress her. He was tender now—at a distance.

Would you care to have a bath? May I attend your ablutions in my bathroom? May I assist you, soaping your back, running my slippery hands over your bottom? Besides, you're an accident-prone woman. What if you fall and break your leg? Many people slip over in the bath. One of my friends broke his arm while having a shower. And his leg. He lost consciousness. He spent 12 days and nights in a hospital after being badly

concussed. He felt sick and confused. And he suffered from headaches for quite a long time. He died several months ago. I think you need a bath after our labours. *Love's Labour's Lost*. You lost a lot of fluid by sweating. You lost a lot of blood. And you lost your virginity.

He continued to kill her. Killing her softly, with his words. And after the murders he felt lonely and forsaken.

Where are you? You're not in my room. You're not in my bed. Do you realise I'm lonely? Are you jealous of my former fiancée? She's not in my bed. Did she prevent you from coming into my room in the dead of night, before dawn, before daybreak, before sunrise? Did *I* prevent you from coming here? What did I tell you? You must be faithful to your husband. He loves you. He never betrays you with his secretaries. What a husband you have! You should be proud of him! Is that what I told you? Or did I kill you? But death is no obstacle, no obstruction on the path to happiness. We can still be happy, can't we? I'm waiting for you, for my goddess. Why don't you come? Did you have an accident? A road accident, a space accident? A time accident? Gnostics used to collect menstrual blood and drink it along with sperm. Mary and Christ, the Eucharist. I'm waiting for your blood in my armchair. I've left the front door ajar. To hear your footfalls on the gravel. To hear your voice in the dead of night, in the dead of light. Light is dead without you. And night is dead, and day is dead. Why don't you come? You're not married, are you? You've got no obligations, no matrimonial duties. The Russians don't know what the word '*mariée*' means.

And he continued to read out *his* books:

Then smiting upon his face, he said, 'With what face can I look up to the Lord my God? or, what shall I say concerning this young woman?

'For I received her a Virgin out of the temple of the Lord my God, and have not preserved her such!

'Who has thus deceived me? Who has committed this evil in my house, and seducing the Virgin from me, hath defiled her?

'Is not the history of Adam exactly accomplished in me?'

'Joseph, the Blessed Virgin,' he said turning a cold, reptilian gaze on the door of his cell. 'Zarina, Zarina. Her husband, another serpent. Why didn't I put my foot on your head 30 years ago?' After a while he lowered his eyes and went on reading out loud:

And, indeed, when Adam looked at his flesh, that was altered, he wept bitterly, he and Eve, over what they had done. And they walked and went gently down into the Cave of Treasures.

And as they came to it Adam wept over himself and said to Eve, 'Look at this cave that is to be our prison in this world, and a place of punishment!

'What is it compared with the garden? What is its narrowness compared with the space of the other?

Then Adam threw himself down from the top of that mountain; his face was torn and his flesh was flayed; much blood flowed from him, and he was nigh unto death.

But God knew that Adam had in his thoughts, that he should often kill himself and make an offering to Him of his blood.

Once a week he talked to his virtual son. Among other things he would lecture him on Thomas Hardy's poetry. *'In a Waiting Room.* Life is a waiting room of sorts. What are we waiting for? "And still no train came in." A grey drizzly morning, a grey drizzly afternoon. The train must have left already. Suddenly 2 children turn up in the room. "Like the eastern flame of some high altar." A glimmer of hope. What can we hope for? Another train? Another waiting room? A castle on earth?"

His son kept looking at him. He never asked any questions as if he knew all the answers. When ordered to repeat what had been said, he would eventually utter a few words that seemed to originate somewhere outside—outside the human brain, outside the world.

58

Let him quit this dwelling, composed of the 5 elements, where the bones are the beams, which is held together by tendons (instead of cords), where the flesh and the blood are the mortar, which is thatched with the skin, which is foul-smelling, filled with urine and ordure, infested by old age and sorrow, the seat of disease, harassed by pain, gloomy with passion, and perishable.

The Laws of Manu

His solicitor did not forsake him: he was too fond of the lady who had secured his services.

'Pity,' he said plaintively. 'What a pity,' he repeated dolefully. 'I'm awfully sorry. I thought—' There ensued a conventional silence. 'We must plead insanity, otherwise he'll be convicted.' Was he thinking about his next client?

They were sitting at a large rectangular table.

'Never mind,' said the prisoner.

'Put your mind at rest. Not at eternal rest, God forbid! Just at rest. I mean, don't harp on the punishment. It's nothing when compared with what Damiens the regicide had to endure on 2 March 1757. He was burnt with sulphur, his flesh removed with pincers, his wounds covered in boiling liquid, and his limbs harnessed to four horses, stretched, hacked and pulled off. Then his body or what remained of it was chucked on a bonfire—and all in front of the public!'

'Never mind,' said the prisoner.

'But for two centuries we've been far more preoccupied with the soul, which involves confronting passions, instincts, drives, effects of environment and heredity.'

'Never mind,' said the prisoner.

'I wonder why he didn't ask that witness to speak louder.'

'Never mind,' said the prisoner.

The solicitor took a folded sheet of paper out of his pocket, unfolded it, coughed and emptied a glass of water in one gulp:

"Just as a man casts off his worn out clothes and puts on new ones, so also the embodied-self casts off its worn out bodies and enters others which are new. Weapons cleave It not, fire burns It not, water moistens It not, wind dries It not."

'I'm game for anything,' said the prisoner.

"Indeed, certain is death for the born, and certain is birth for the dead; therefore, over the inevitable, you should not grieve."

'Could you help me?' said the prisoner.

"There are 5 Skandhas, and these he considered as by their nature empty. Form is emptiness, and emptiness indeed is form. Emptiness is not different from form, form is not different from emptiness. What is form that is emptiness, what is emptiness that is form. Thus perception, name, conception and knowledge also are emptiness. Thus O Sâriputra, all things have the character of emptiness, they have no beginning, no end, they are faultless and not faultless, they are not imperfect and not perfect. Therefore, O Sâriputra, here in this emptiness there is no form, no perception, no name, no concept, no knowledge. No eye, ear, nose, tongue, body and mind. No form, sound, smell, taste, touch and objects."

'Just a small favour.'

'In Japan survivors have their reward in terms of worldly success but traditionally serve as a foil to the fallen who are idolised by historians and the multitude—2 or 3 centuries after their deaths.' He patted his client on the knee. 'Patience, old boy! Everything's going to be all right!'

'Just a small—'

'You don't seem to understand, do you? In France we idolise those who vanquish their foes and overthrow Empires. But the Japs don't see things this way—they've a soft spot for losers, good and bad alike. Their heroes wither away on desert islands or die a Roman death in mortal intimacy with their swords. Failure is an important trait of romanticism, like tears or paleness. And you're very romantic, aren't you? I'm told you have poetry in your soul. Every womaniser is a poet in his own right. Do you think she still loves you? Never mind. Doesn't really matter, not at all. By the way, have you ever seen the tombstones in that cemetery near London? Funny inscriptions they have on them: "Born in 1837. Departed this life, June 10th 1909. Lived 5 years." Do you remember?'

'No.'

'Those poor stiff only counted the happy days. You were happy sometimes, weren't you? Not with Zarina. Never mind—your happiness belongs to eternity. You're immortal, old bean. During those happy hours you sentenced Time to death. And you executed Time.'

'That's the only murder I've committed,' said the prisoner approvingly. 'And I'll do it again. We owe a cock to Asclepios. Pay my debt, and do not forget it.'

59

The expression 'to vanish into thin air' may be applied to various events and substances—not only to those which evaporate without leaving any trace, any remembrance. A star falls, painting its own agony on the indifference of nights. A man blows his brains out without putting on his writing desk a final explanatory note. Some of those events leave traces on highways and byways: an imprint of tyres, a pool of human blood.

How long do the vestiges of a dead man remain in the living world?

Suppose he did nothing exceptional. He wrote no immortal novels and killed no multimillionaires.

Does his family still remember him? How often do its members glance at his gravestone, at the inscription which bears his name and his last words—a pathetic triviality? Once a month, once in 30 years? How often does their memory vibrate with his words? How often do his footfalls awake them in the dead of night when Time streams back so smoothly?

He sang no songs, built no castles. His Ego crumbled away without tracing any inscription on the gravestone of humanity.

His senses seemed to function perfectly. His brain stood the test of public opinion: no one ever thought of locking him up. He was an ordinary man. Nothing distinguished him from the crowd of his fellow countrymen save his immoderate, almost extravagant sensitivity. Who remembers his uprightness and honesty? Do his colleagues remember his little speeches? Do their wives remember the flowers he brought them, sometimes with no reason? He loved flowers. Alas, flowers have no memory.

His dog might have treasured his olfactory image; she died before her master. After the fatal accident he attempted to find a substitute for her but soon realised she was irreplaceable.

He liked animals and animals do have memory—as long as they live. Their memory is so personal, so narrow it does not reach into the world. Animal memory does not nourish our history, flowing outside, despising our space.

Is it worthwhile loving animals? Should we love only our future hagiographers? 'He was a worthy, generous man. He never forgot anything.'

People adore memoirs which are more popular nowadays than detective stories. People forget memoirs as soon as they put them down; a closed book is far away. They read other memoirs and forget them too. And often they question what is written.

Kindness is forgotten sooner than cruelty. A caress leaves no scars. A caress is taken for granted as if inherent in human nature; cruelty astounds everybody in spite of its frequency.

Your ex-fiancée marries again; the black colour of your death whitens overnight. Now your death is red, green, yellow, blue. Your children laugh and play within the cemetery walls. The dead are merely toys for them—pieces in a construction set, an army of lead soldiers.

60

Fear of death is almost universal. Is there anything to fear? Religions have taught us that the Hereafter is an oriental palace in which the dead, like sultans, own numerous wives. They undress their wives and, while doing so, rest their weary eyes on the lissom limbs of Salome-like dancers gyrating on silk rugs. The thousand and one night of Eternity. Do we honestly have time for Time?

Human life. We strike a match and light a candle; its wavering flame casts a neurasthenic shadow on the wall. We blow out the candle. Is there anything to talk about?

Those who can adapt themselves to our earth will not fail in the muddy gardens of the Hereafter.

61

Then came the Word of God to Adam, and said unto him, 'O Adam, as thou hast shed thy blood, so will I shed My own blood when I become flesh of thy seed; and as thou didst die, O Adam, so also will I die. And as thou didst build an altar, so also will I make for thee an altar on the earth; and as thou didst offer thy blood upon it, so also will I offer My blood upon an altar on the earth.'

The First Book of Adam and Eve

61. AIN, the Negative. ANI, Ego; and so the number seems to deny and destroy the Ego.

How was the instrument of deliverance smuggled into his cell? Inside a sugar-loaf? A razor blade.

He finished his frugal dinner and sat down on the iron bedstead. The guards were moving outside the magic circle of his forthcoming death. Their evening stroll was almost inaudible and absolutely invisible. They had an inkling of his intentions but that was none of their business. Playing hide-and-seek with his death.

He lay down on the bed and closed his eyes. His private eternity spread further and further, striving to destroy the geometrical patterns of Time. 'How many years did it last? What did she do? How?' He could not remember. He *had* forgotten something.

Memory lapses are suspension points of the past. But for their timely assistance, we might never experience the feeling of happiness.

When did they meet? When did they part? Did they part at all? The more he endeavoured to fix his attention on numbers the quicker they slipped away. 'In my youth I liked mathematics, exact sciences. Profession: mathematician. Profession: physicist. Profession: biologist.'

Che se la vita corre come il rivo fluente...Blut, Blut, Blut, Blut. Lethe. Within an hour he shed more blood than Zarina. In exceptional circumstances men shed far more blood than women.

Zarina III, Zarina IV, Zarina V, Zarina VI. River out of Eden. Her blood is flowing through the veins of the world, for she has been killed everywhere: in Carthage, in Brassempouy, in St Petersburg. And as long as Homo sapiens are alive she will be put to death in megalopolises and on the motorways of distant planets. *Amor fati*. Zarina is immortal.

Did his friends prepare a bath? He had no friends. Everybody was far away, beyond the wonderland of his eternity.

No water, no bath. A blanket, some sheets. They grew heavier and heavier. His body grew lighter and lighter. Beethoven. The second movement of the *Piano Sonata in C Minor*, op. 111. *Adagio molto semplice e cantabile*. The cosmic harmony, the music of the spheres. A demi-semiquaver sign. A 32-note sign. A 32-sonata sign. Music is love. Music is God. And words are Zarina. Human languages are nothing but Z-signs.

Music brings about a reconciliation between victims and their tormentors; between numbers. The offender and the offended, a consonance and a dissonance, life and death, 12 tones, a multitude of rhythms. All languages are but one harmony—the chord that Mozart heard sometimes. (The happiest moments of his life.) The chord in which an opera or a sonata seemed to be enclosed; and all the rest down to the other world where Don Giovanni performed his serenades, seducing devils, angels and gods.

Could he hear that chord now? Who? He was losing his identity to become everybody. *The Disintegration of the Persistence of Memory*. He had forgotten everything except her deep mellifluous voice. And her smile, and her apricot-coloured skin. And a few words from her letter. 'God shall unite us. I am waiting for you.'

When did he meet her? Who? Zarina, Zarina, Zarina. He still recalled her voluptuous name.

Their parallel lines were infinite.

ZARINA

(THE PRICE OF HER DEAR BLOOD)

TO WHOM IT MAY CONCERN

THE SYNOPSIS

After reading Gorky's *Death and the Maiden*, Stalin said to the proletarian author, 'This thing is far superior to Goethe's *Faust*. Love triumphs over death. ' I don't claim to be Goethe's disciple – I write in English, in French and in Russian, not in German – but the work I am about to send you depicts an elaborate, laborious, blood-bathing triumph of love over death. This triumph is incontrovertible, and no amount of bloodshed and cruelty can mar its *Missa-Solemnis* resonance which also sings the praises of our moral, immortal values: purity, chastity and innocence.

The action of the novel is set in Versailles. In the early Fifties the scion of an old French family makes his debut as a lover. His parents being reticent about the thorny subject of sex, he resorts to the help of his fellow students who demonstrate various types of lovemaking, often breaking their glasses in the process. He also imitates film stars when courting girls in his lycée and outside it – the trick used by Buster Keaton and Woody Allen. No wonder he fails pitifully. He does not mind his defeats, however, until the day he takes an interest in a girl called Zarina who both encourages and resists his advances. Even in the parc de Versailles, which was full of trees in those days, she does not allow him to kiss her. And when he finally decoys her into letting him spend a night in her flat, she treats him to a half-hearted, unfinished striptease. And she lectures him on virginity, abundantly quoting the Fathers of the Church. But unexpectedly she promises to come to his flat on Thursday—in 5 days. Her hidden agenda is to pass her menstrual blood off as the Church-glorified blood of a virgin. He falls for her ruse despite his hope of being taken for a seasoned lover. From then onwards numbers become the main feature of his life, alongside moral philosophy and sacred books. Even 30 years later he is haunted by the events of that 'wedding night'; and by the 'farewell ceremony' during which Zarina told him everything, answering the questions he had not asked. Of course she betrayed him many times, but he is much more bothered by her betrayal of human history and symbols. Actually, he did not care about virginity and so-called chastity in his teenage years. And his sexual tutors maintained that a stubborn refusal to indulge in the ecstasies of love invariably led to a nervous breakdown. 'Beware of virgins' was their motto. Now he thinks that making a mockery of sacred books denotes a dangerous streak in the human mind. What is more, he sees Zarina's blood everywhere. She belongs to the human species so anybody can do it. That deleterious seed has been planted in human nature. The Tree of Death is growing, blooming in the universal soul. Indeed if he were Doctor Strangelove, he might trigger an atomic war by pressing buttons in the Pentagon. And he might 'bring a flood of waters upon the earth, to destroy all flesh', if he were the Almighty. Oddly enough, he would save only Zarina from his Flood: her monstrous callousness has made other women uninteresting, insipid. Why did she fake virginity? Why was she so eager to play this old-fashioned, mythical part? Perhaps she aspired to be accepted by his parents whose dignified silhouettes she saw in church every Sunday. Besides, in addition to the title of prince, her awkward, unfledged lover was to inherit a castle. Their liaison lasted 2 years. She left him for the sake of a multimillionaire. 30 years have elapsed since their wedding night. To commemorate the sinister anniversary he invites her to his place with a view to purifying humanity—a ritual blood bath. In his opinion, symbols need updating from time to time. And he films the purifying ritual in order to give humanity a lesson. But now and then he switches the camera off, and the members of the jury wonder what happened during those

blackouts. At the end of the film, in slow motion, he kills/deflowers Zarina with a kitchen knife. In passing, he also murders four innocent intruders. The counsel for the defence presents the whole affair as a belated *crime passionnel*. The defendant is given a life sentence. In prison, using a razor blade, he commits suicide, proving that, on some occasions, men shed more blood than women. Numbers plague him until the very end, especially 111 which is priceless because of its 37 x 3 symbolism and its import in secret lore, where the Unity may be found in 'Thick darkness' and in 'Sudden death', showing Samadhi and the Destruction of the Ego as gates of final victory.

Some of my biographical data can be found on my site.

Valery Aleff (Afanassiev)

THE EXCERPTS

3

Murder has not yet become a natural reflex. Black-and-scarlet photographs represent only one aspect of our many-sided, many-coloured earthly existence. There are other photographs in the same publications; there are other colours on our palette. We are still living, aren't we? Shortage of assassins. The circumference of the human clockface is measureless.

Are we supposed to venerate Time? Shouldn't we stop before it is too late? When read aloud, the history of mankind *already* sounds like a closing speech for the prosecution. Our interiors resemble courtrooms despite the reassuring intimacy of furniture.

We should have stopped before Lenin, Stalin and Hitler were conceived by their otherwise innocent mothers. Now it is too late perhaps. Too late.

4

Not in the sky, not in the midst of the sea, not if we enter into the clefts of the mountains, is there known a spot in the whole world where a man might be freed from an evil deed.

Dhammapada

30 years have elapsed without her being permanently disabled or, better still, abandoned by her husband. She is not begging for her bread from door to door. Her dresses and mink coats have not grown threadbare, outmoded, pitiful.

No Hell can expunge from her soul those 30 years of happiness, those marks of earthly bliss. She lives and laughs. In vain do I curse her round the clock.

She should be punished by her victim, not by anonymous imps or boiling mud. She should be punished in France, not in the City of Satan. Hyperrealistic crimes are not met by surrealistic or abstract punishments.

Must I kill her? Of course I must. What else am I supposed to do? To give her a medal? She slapped me on the other cheek too! Several times!

Shall I dig up the trial-honoured term 'temporal insanity'? Shall I go insane in the course of the killing? Shall I *pretend* to be insane in the course of the killing? I'm not insane now, am I? I suppose my tying her to the bedposts may be considered bizarre except that it's done in virtually every X-rated movie. But do my bizarre

ideas indicate any lurid pathological shift in my brain, in the way my mental processes form my existence out of the transparent immensity of Time, out of the cumbersome bulk of Space?

Or shall I vindicate myself by using the expression I heard in one of Preminger's movies: 'irresistible impulse'? I do feel an irresistible impulse to kill Zarina Lenoir.

I don't really need to bother about how my defence should be conducted: the members of the jury will be appalled and moved to tears. I hope their moral standards are high enough to make them appreciate the horror of my tale, of my fate. Zarina! Zarina! *You* will be my lawyer, my defender. *Witness for the Defence*. Dead and buried, you will save my life. You will rise from your tomb to protect me from my detractors, from my executioners. I'll tell them everything. They will shudder, shake and shriek with horror.

I must tell the story to my lawyer, to the court, to the members of the jury, to my former fiancée sitting in the court-room, flinging her arms upwards—higher and higher. I must go over the facts again and again.

'Vengeance is mine and I will repay.' The famous epigraph to *Anna Karenina* prompts me to interfere with the natural flow of history which, in its moral neutrality, may allow her to live a happy, cloudless life. I must trouble the pulse of fate because my disloyal mistress is not as remorseful as Madame de Tourvel and the heroine of Tolstoy. And one cannot rely on the Supreme Being: His legendary indulgence is bound to minimise the scope and significance of her offence. Vengeance is *mine* and *I* will repay!

Compared with earth, Hell is the Garden of Eden.

5

The genetic code is in fact literally identical in all animals, plants and bacteria that have ever been looked at. All earthly living things are certainly descended from a single ancestor.

Richard Dawkins, *River Out of Eden*

Modern science compares man to a book based on 4 letters only. This theory has a great deal in common with the Kabbalah. There are a 100,000,000 pages in our book. All these pages, all our novels and poems, are based on only 4 letters. (The greater part of *his* book was based on the number 5.) And our book differs from the chimpanzee-book by 1%. Not by 300% or 400%, as many of us believe, but by 1% only. And an ordinary child-loving, Bible-reading individual, who goes to Mass every Sunday, differs from another individual—Stalin, for instance—by an infinitesimal particle. By 5 sentences lost in our 100,000,000-page book. Are we all Stalin's brothers and sisters?

We have killed neither Hitler nor Stalin. Why do we kill animals who *are* our brothers and sisters?

Even plants feel pain and fear death, according to the polygraph or 'lie detector' (or 'pain detector') that Cleve Backster connected one day to a potted rubber plant growing in his office. After dipping one of its leaves into a cup of hot coffee, which had elicited no psychological response on the part of the 'guinea plant', he decided to get a box of matches and burn the leaf properly, in earnest. 'At the instant of this decision, at 13 minutes and 55 seconds of chart time, there was a dramatic change in the PGR tracing pattern in the form of an abrupt and prolonged upward sweep of the recording pen. I had not moved, or touched the plant, so the timing of the PGR pen activity suggested to me that the tracing might have been triggered by the mere thought of the harm I intended to inflict on the plant.' Cleve Backster went on with his research and found out that the long-suffering plant also responded in sympathy to the harm he inflicted on other living creatures—the shrimps he would drop one by one into boiling water. What a pity the plant could not avenge itself by pushing its torturer into the

boiling water he appreciated so much as an instrument of doom or at least by knocking out his teeth. A tooth for a leaf.

When did Zarina begin to suspect he would kill her? When did she know it for certain? To what heights would the recording pen have soared at those climactic moments had her body been connected to a 'death detector'? What kind of curve would her soul have inspired had *her* torturer committed suicide in her presence? Would she have pitied her former lover, her gullible tutor? Would she have asked her husband for compassionate leave? Compassionate leaf.

6

Though aware of death, of its impenetrable curtain, many people deny accidents, shipwrecks, machine-guns. They expect to die at home, in their own beds, in deep sleep—in full accordance with their mental arrangements. They die in a car crash, in a back street.

Accidents happen to other people! Don't go out after midnight and you'll live forever! These exclamation marks misguide our instincts, paralyse the protective tentacles of our foresight.

Under some circumstances the urge to kill gains its illegitimate ends. Our moral standards are fragile; their supposed permanence can scarcely match the fickle essence of our world.

Today we bear no grudge against our neighbour; tomorrow we quarrel with him and we kill him the day after tomorrow. Our neighbours change every minute, so does our attitude towards them. Our habits change quicker than autumnal hues. What seemed impossible an hour ago has suddenly become a commonplace, a widespread custom.

His neighbours did not move away from the sinister building; nor did they go to the police. They noticed nothing—not the faintest outline of the forthcoming tragedy. As the news reached their ears and minds they began to remember. They said, 'We knew—' Their belated prophecies sounded hollow like an old dying tree.

10

Only presumptuous individuals believe that a human action can be traced back to its origin, that everything has its foundation and explanation. There are inexplicable events in our life; there are rootless trees in human woods. Now and then something is done on the spur of the moment and, however illuminating and detailed, our analyses leave us stranded in the desert of uncertainty. We cast around for a while, hoping to pick up a trail in the infinite network of sand and, utterly exhausted, let the veil of darkness envelop our minds.

Some crimes have no origin. A gun falls into your hand from nowhere. Your fingers tremble; you fire and shoot a passer-by dead. The police arrive on the scene of the murder; you are arrested and conveyed to the nearest prison. The door of your cell is shut and locked with the clatter of invisible chains. You look around—nothing is to be seen save your death—and sink down on a cot. Why was the crime committed? Because the gun had fallen into your hand from nowhere and your fingers begun to tremble violently, irresistibly.

A knife lies on a dinner table. You search for a spoon but your hand, misguided by the crinkled topography of the tablecloth, finds and grasps the knife, turning it into a medieval weapon. Incredulous and dumbfounded, you raise the knife to make sure it is not the spoon you have been searching for, and the man sitting next to you interrupts the trajectory of your hand. How did he get in the way? Did he want to leave the

house? Lunch was still in progress and there were no newcomers to greet. Somehow he straightened up awkwardly, lurched sideways.

And now a crowd of strangers presses upon you, asking you the questions you cannot answer. You are taken away; you float through the days and nights without living and, for a while, without dying. They let you live to ask you questions. You feel neither your thoughts nor your tongue. They do not stop. They go on and on, like human history. But they are bound to stop.

They are bound to stop because trials do not last forever. Judges must be given an opportunity to recite death sentences. The shorter the verdict the broader the smile they endeavour to hide from the audience. No poem is so enchanting as a death sentence.

Fate's guided-missile system is never off-target. Air-to-ground.

12

Their first farewell ceremony.

'And what about that blood on the sheets? Where did it come from?'

'Where does blood come from?' Zarina burst into laughter.

'How did you do it?'

'I just...cut myself. With a knife. A pocket-knife. I cut my forefinger and pressed it—'

'Where...where did you hide it?'

'The knife? Let me see. Under the pillow. Under the mattress. *Under the Volcano. Under Western Eyes.*'

Again she burst into laughter.

'The knife—'

'You were so clumsy. You inflicted a wound...'

'The knife—'

'My virginal body was delicate...such a fragile thing...'

'You said—'

'What did I say?'

'You *were* a virgin. Why did you—'

She stopped laughing and gave him a sardonic stare. 'Idiot.'

'Where did the blood come from?' he asked.

'*Young Virgin Autosodomised by her own Chastity.* Do you know that Gala Dali was a virgin until 23?'

And then she married Paul Eluard.'

'Where did the blood come from?'

When?

The monthly flux of women. Turning new wine sour. Tarnishing the bright surface of mirrors. Crops become barren, grafts die, the fruit of trees falls off.

The monthly flux of women. Ants throw away the grains of corn that taste of it.

Before the assassination, his only film was even more tantalisingly unfinished than Schubert's *Symphony in B Minor*. (According to the legend created by those who have the nerve to obtrude upon the dead's privacy, Schubert's uncharacteristic pithiness was due to lack of time.)

It took him around 10 (5+5) hours to murder Zarina.

Soon after her arrival he switched the camera on again, shouting: 'Action!' She appeared in the background, sitting on the bed.

'How's your husband?' he asked, dropping into the armchair.

'I've never loved him.'

20

He left the traces of his crime all over the place and even beyond the windows—on the streets and boulevards of Paris, in the weeping sky of the Ile de France. His crime resounded everywhere. Zarina's corpse lay in the middle of his most beautiful carpet. Ladies would shield their eyes with their fingers and dash out of the room, sobbing and shouting for help. Children were prohibited from getting too close to his hands. Journalists and onlookers were requested not to take too many photographs.

The floor and the walls of his room were painted with blood. He had added a new masterpiece to the vast treasure of American expressionism.

The blood has been scraped off the floor and the walls, but we can *see* his crime. We can also *hear* it. His neighbours continue to talk and shake their heads. And they roll their eyes. And they still brandish kitchen knives—and also forks and spoons, when carried away—to show how the ritual was conducted. And their friends still ask idle questions.

What brought him to that pretty pass? How did the whole thing come about? Hypotheses are no substitute for reality, but people often switch from a hesitant to an affirmative tone, from questions to answers; and they nod their heads instead of shaking them.

What would have happened had he been more talkative before that blood-besmeared anniversary? Most of his friends and neighbours might have applauded his growing attachment to knives. 'I would have killed her, if I were you. Then and there. It's not too late, though.'

It was not too late. He proved it brilliantly.

28

The routine of earthly justice dragged him from one voice to another voice, from one set of teeth to another set of teeth. All those faces had the same expression: curious wrath. All those voices talked to him in the same tonality.

He wondered what all those people were trying to impart to him and to each other. He got the impression they were just opening and closing their mouths without uttering a word. They did not give vent to their indignation or bewilderment; they just indulged in a spectacular display of gymnastics, constantly training their jaws, teeth and nostrils. What for? Why did they transform the prison into a stadium?

He nodded his head decisively and approvingly. Had he disapproved of their words, of their gymnastics, they would have acted in the same way.

On the second day of the imprisonment his solicitor joined the choir. The grizzled advocate of leniency and mercifulness assured him that he was still his friend.

'I'm your best friend now and I'll get you off the hook, old boy. Not scot free, I'm afraid—we'll have to plead guilty. But no more than 5 or 6—7 years at the outside. "I can resist everything except temptation," says Oscar Wilde. And how do we get rid of a temptation? By yielding to it. Oscar Wilde again. "Deliver us from evil," says the Bible. But how do we get rid of evil? By yielding to it, by committing sins, by committing murders. Gnostics thought so, if my memory serves me right. Gnostics of Alexandria. I agree with them, by the way. Don't you? *Revenons à nos moutons*. I've handled a lot of similar—Well, see for yourself.' The solicitor took a few index cards out of his attaché case. 'Read this one!' And he handed his client the biggest card. 'Don't feel like reading, eh? You idle old sod! It's just as well for you I've got my specs this time. Pin back your ears!' And the solicitor began to read:

"Elephant-hunters in East Africa believe that their wives' unfaithfulness bestows upon the elephant a measureless power over his pursuer who will therefore be severely wounded or, in most cases, killed. If a hunter hears of his wife's misconduct—rumours are spread in the jungle with drums and smoke signals—he abandons the chase and returns home. As his wife salutes him outside their dwelling he beats her to death, preferably within his children's sight." A good one, isn't it? "He abandons the chase and returns home." Nice. It's done the job before. The jury are fond of African references. Our former colonies. Here's another one. I've gathered enough material to vindicate all the cuckolds in Europe. Listen: "While a Wagogo hunter is away on business, his wife is not permitted to let anyone pass behind her or stand in front of her as she sits; and she must lie on her face in bed." Sorry, wrong story. Hold on a minute.'

The solicitor went on his knees and deployed the cards all over the floor as if playing a game of patience.

31

The camera was standing in the middle of the room. Why did he hand his murder down to posterity? Did he try to teach human robots a lesson?

In his youth he was ambitious enough to conceive an aesthetic, Nietzschean metamorphosis of the world. He liked to tamper with maps, encyclopaedias and history books. His dreamy hand was carrying the pencil farther and farther—beyond holiday lands, beyond the present and the past. He used to draw the future of mankind in the air, near his favourite window.

He wished to make people conscious of their stupidity and vulgarity, overestimating their capacity to respond to his ideas. Engrossed in their petty whims and sins, they neither heard what he said nor saw his glowing eyes. Everybody wore the mask of nothingness. Paris was deserted; so was the earth.

Human consciousness is slippery. People intercept a muffled sound of words, but they turn their heads away and silence welcomes them like a dignified host.

Words skim over human consciousness. Words never reach human memory. Human memory is too remote to be reached by words.

Heavy sleepers open their eyes and leave their beds whenever blood makes its appearance in their immediate surroundings. The blind see it; the deaf hear it. In comparison with blood, words seem colourless.

'But you've made love many times, haven't you?'

'Every time I yield to his caresses—'

'777 times. This number represents the flaming sword that drove Man out of Eden.'

'I think about you, every time. He's just my husband.'

'And I'm your lover, just your lover. Do you still love me?'

'Of course.'

'And you hold *my* body in your arms, don't you? Every time—'

'I love you,' she said earnestly.

'And your son? Whose body was in your bed *that* night? Is he *our* son?'

'I've brought him up to respect traditions and artists. He's your spiritual son.'

'Was the bed spiritual too? And your husband's caresses? What did you tell him on your wedding night? Did you quote the Fathers of the Church?'

'I've always—'

'Purity, chastity, innocence. How did you handle *his* bedclothes?' He drew a folded sheet of paper from the inner pocket of his jacket and unfolded it. "'—they always want to see a stain on the bed to know you're a virgin for them all that's troubling them they're such fools too you could be a widow or divorced 40 times over a daub of red ink would do or blackberry juice no that's too purple—'" He put the paper back in his pocket. 'Was it a daub of red ink this time? No. I can't quite imagine you ploughing through *Ulysses*. Besides, you don't really need Molly's tip. Or your lipstick, come to think of it. Your trick is far more ingenious. 3 days? 4 days?' She did not answer this question. 'I've got mathematical proof. 5 days. You said, "We'll meet on Thursday." You refused to come on Monday.'

61

Then came the Word of God to Adam, and said unto him, 'O Adam, as thou hast shed thy blood, so will I shed My own blood when I become flesh of thy seed; and as thou didst die, O Adam, so also will I die. And as thou didst build an altar, so also will I make for thee an altar on the earth; and as thou didst offer thy blood upon it, so also will I offer My blood upon an altar on the earth.'

The First Book of Adam and Eve

61. AIN, the Negative. ANI, Ego; and so the number seems to deny and destroy the Ego.

How was the instrument of deliverance smuggled into his cell? Inside a sugar-loaf? A razor blade.

He finished his frugal dinner and sat down on the iron bedstead. The guards were moving outside the magic circle of his forthcoming death. Their evening stroll was almost inaudible and absolutely invisible. They had an inkling of his intentions but that was none of their business. Playing hide-and-seek with his death.

He lay down on the bed and closed his eyes. His private eternity spread further and further, striving to destroy the geometrical patterns of Time. 'How many years did it last? What did she do? How?' He could not remember. He *had* forgotten something.

Memory lapses are suspension points of the past. But for their timely assistance, we might never experience the feeling of happiness.

When did they meet? When did they part? Did they part at all? The more he endeavoured to fix his attention on numbers the quicker they slipped away. 'In my youth I liked mathematics, exact sciences. Profession: mathematician. Profession: physicist. Profession: biologist.'

Che se la vita corre come il rivo fluente...Blut, Blut, Blut, Blut. Lethe. Within an hour he shed more blood than Zarina. In exceptional circumstances men shed far more blood than women.

Zarina III, Zarina IV, Zarina V, Zarina VI. River out of Eden. Her blood is flowing through the veins of the world, for she has been killed everywhere: in Carthage, in Brassempouy, in St Petersburg. And as long as Homo sapiens are alive she will be put to death in megalopolises and on the motorways of distant planets. *Amor fati*. Zarina is immortal.

Did his friends prepare a bath? He had no friends. Everybody was far away, beyond the wonderland of his eternity.

No water, no bath. A blanket, some sheets. They grew heavier and heavier. His body grew lighter and lighter. Beethoven. The second movement of the *Piano Sonata in C Minor*, op. 111. *Adagio molto semplice e cantabile*. The cosmic harmony, the music of the spheres. A demi-semiquaver sign. A 32-note sign. A 32-sonata sign. Music is love. Music is God. And words are Zarina. Human languages are nothing but Z-signs.

Music brings about a reconciliation between victims and their tormentors; between numbers. The offender and the offended, a consonance and a dissonance, life and death, 12 tones, a multitude of rhythms. All languages are but one harmony—the chord that Mozart heard sometimes. (The happiest moments of his life.) The chord in which an opera or a sonata seemed to be enclosed; and all the rest down to the other world where Don Giovanni performed his serenades, seducing devils, angels and gods.

Could he hear that chord now? Who? He was losing his identity to become everybody. *The Disintegration of the Persistence of Memory*. He had forgotten everything except her deep mellifluous voice. And her smile, and her apricot-coloured skin. And a few words from her letter. 'God shall unite us. I am waiting for you.'

When did he meet her? Who? Zarina, Zarina, Zarina. He still recalled her voluptuous name.

Their parallel lines were infinite.