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LIFE AND DEATH

DEATH DEAD

What was said about Aristotle can be maintained, affirmed and even bet on, provided the person you are talking about, or writing about, was born. And this person *was* born; conceived, born (in this order) and lived, and died, and was buried, for all I know. Let this person remain where he is (let us let women out of this sordid business) – on a battle field, for instance, where crows and conquerors rob them of their lives and even of money or rather of the pockets where this money hides until the hand of a conqueror appropriates it rather brutally. This hand says nothing to the money; nor does the mouth let any sound out; any relevant sound, that is. You hear all sorts of =:lkjhlikjvhqaomielj fkjzea hfiu'r hoi e jlk rzhuyogfihij that remind you of any modern composer you dislike intensely, with more intensity than can be imagined by an ordinary person who never heard anything classical.

So what you say about Aristotle can be said about me, mostly because I was born. And I lived many years, according to many calendars; unless they are all wrong, according to a Dostoyevsky's hero. Yes, I was born, lived and died, although I've never written books on ethics, unlike my hero or Aristotle. When I speak of Aristotle in somebody's presence, this presence or persona says, 'I know who you're speaking about. Onassis! He died in Paris, didn't he? But before his death he paid a visit to Maria Callas who remained behind the curtains of her windows, leaning on a windowsill. It was probably silly of her, but she didn't say anything to Onassis, although he was a billionaire and left her several millions that she received after his death. She might have received two millions more, had she received *him* and acknowledged gracefully his call. Actually, he *might* have been received, for all I know, for everybody knows. He saw a sign (a skirt, for instance) and rushed to everything that was within his reach and also out of his reach, as it usually happens. But his death was beyond all these reaches; or before them. Anyway, they all missed the mark; except my life. Except my life. No – except my death, except my death, except my death.

What I am interested in – and I am the whole world – is myself; that is what usually happens with individuals of various kinds. And even if they understand others, they add: 'I'm on my own, and I'm the first on the list and also in the world; at least in this hemisphere.' And what about the mysteries we are confronted with on account of the world's infinity? You have one mystery and you seem to solve it, but all at once there arises another mystery connected to the first one, to the second one. And if you say, 'What about the rest?' they say to you, 'There are other histories you don't care about because you don't get any money for that.' And then you get the money for the rest. But do you really care more about this money-justified, money-rewarded rest? Isn't it rather unjustified, as it happens, when a woman you are in love with does not kiss you at the right moment, on the upper lip?

To tell the truth everything happens on the wrong lip, at the wrong moment. They kiss you on the wrong lip and this lip begins to swell – for no reason at all. And yet it bleeds for the reason known to both your offender and the offended – yourself. What are you supposed to do? Either you offer your other lip (the biblical solution) or you retire like a gentleman who has enough money in his bank to provide him with girls and boys

Aristotle is universally known for his categories and probably for the rest of his life. What's more, even his life is provided with the rest of his life. And this particular rest rests as long as his life-long, death-long-rest because they are universal and nothing escapes their notices; and the notice of the universal. If there is small or short category somewhere, they (universals) begin by noticing it either under a pillow or under a blanket – it depends on where our destiny hides its secrets – and then they bestow upon it a status it rightly deserves. And

we should not forget that Aristotle himself sanctified this status, putting his signature under it and sometimes even over it – to avoid all sorts of misunderstandings. So you see something over which there is written in capital letters ‘My Favourite Category’ and then you read what all this is about – either under the word ‘Category’ or before it; or behind it. Usually people think in terms of categories only when they travel, saying to each other, ‘There are three categories of accommodation – standard, executive and deluxe. What category do you stand for?’

‘The last one suits me perfectly,’ some people say on the spot, without going elsewhere, without changing their seats with somebody else.

‘And what about you?’ asks the same curious journalist. (All journalists are curious, as a matter of fact.)

‘I agree with your previous victim,’ says the next victim; the talking victim, in other words.

‘And what about you?’ the journalist goes on.

‘I prefer standard accommodation. I belong to the group of great Tolstoy admirers and he always travelled third class.’

‘And I always travel within the executive part, because I execute my own plans without failure. And I do it perfectly in all sorts of business class compartments.’

But if someone says to you, ‘There’s a prize for the fastest three runners in each category,’ you do not even enquire about the conditions which preside over the competition in question. You just say, ‘I want the first prize because I deserve it.’ And if someone dares claim your claim, you begin to show off your muscles or walk with a swagger. You could also sway your shoulders as you walk around. You sway them, sway them, sway them and they finally detach themselves from your body and start performing a sort of dance in the atmosphere as if competing with Plisetskaya or Anna Pavlova. And then you say to them, ‘Enough!’ and they join your body without further ado.

What else can be said about categories? Of course you can say, for instance, ‘Each category has several subdivisions.’ And if they ask you what kind of subdivisions you have in mind, you will never confess you have no mind to speak of – only a kind of brain. No, of course not. It is better to be stigmatised than ridiculed. So you say, ‘I, for one, am always running in the veterans category.’

‘What do you mean?’ they ask. (They cannot avoid this question.)

‘I’m a veteran, you know,’ you answer.

‘Did you fight in the last war?’ they ask.

‘I also fought in the one before last,’ you answer.

‘Before the last war?’

‘That’s right. And also before that one.’

‘Have you ever been decorated?’

‘Several times. Before and the one before and the two before.’

‘And the three before?’

‘And the three before as well.’

I wonder why they never go as far as the four before; as far as the far before.

But if they continue to look in wonder at you, you add the following remark, ‘There are sporty people and non-sporty people, and I’m definitely in the second category.’

‘Non-sporty people!’ they exclaim in unison.

‘No, no, no, no – sorry! Sporty people of course.’ And you are so happy you turn three somersaults on the lawn.

Then we pass to another category. But there are so many of them you have no idea where to start with, with all this nonsense. Some categories appeal to you. Yet you do not know for sure if their appeal is sincere and honest; and any dishonest appeal will lead you astray, even if it takes some time, the procedure during which the appeal is leading you astray. What to do? You must choose an appeal which will never lead you astray, whatever happens. And what could ever happen? Hell or High Water. You laugh for a while and afterwards resume your studies of categories. High Water, however high and menacing, is certainly not a category, not even a Kantian category, let alone the one you can find on the list of Aristotle’s achievements. And what about water? Let us not forget that, in accordance to the latest scientists on our list, water recalls everything, even the elements that belong to other elements, such as fire, earth and air. What does it recall of the air? you may ask. ‘When children bombard each other with water, inspired by some war or other, they think they really bombard their adversaries and kill them. It’s not true, of course, but let them believe it, let them believe it. It does them a lot of good.’

And the earth as such is a close friend of water because it lets it in all the time. Suppose a drunkard – a Russian drunkard, as usual – drinks a bottle of vodka on a bench somewhat lost in a park. He drinks, drinks, drinks, and then (finally) removes the bottle from his lips and the rest of his constitution. The bottle assumes a precarious status and the precious liquid begins to quit it as if dismissed by Trump. *Fired* by Trump, I should have said; but I missed this opportunity.

And what about subdivisions? Suppose you take your liver out. ‘Why?’ do they ask you justifiably, logically and even lawfully. ‘Because I don’t want it to poison my body with its cirrhosis.’ Logical enough, isn’t it? So, before drinking a bottle of wine, you extract your liver from your body, anxious as you are to spare it an unpleasant experience, and put it on your table – for everybody to see. And then you say to everybody, ‘Can you see my liver? I exhibit it to make you realise I’ll never poison it with alcohol, considering you can see it on the top of the table. And what could it drink on the top of the table? It could have licked something from the napkin, from the glasses. But not from the top. Can you hear me? Could it leak my liquor from the air? I’ll never let it do it with impunity. I would massacre it. I would smash it to smithereens or to reens, to reens, to reens, to reens, to ens.’

But what about suburb? You often come across the same problem in your ordinary life. You must wash dishes because your machine never works, for some reason known to itself. It knows this reason, but it will never talk to you about it. You come across a problem, but it is not easy as all that – coming across a problem. Here you are; and there is a problem. Is it a sub problem? Or subsubproblem? Of course you say optimistically, ‘You’re just a problem, and I’ve solved so many problems like you in my life that you shouldn’t worry – you’ll disappear in the twinkling of an eye.’

‘What eye are you speaking about?’ asks the problem. ‘One of *your* eyes, with all due respect?’

‘As you can see, my both eyes don’t twinkle.’

‘What kind of eyes are you speaking of, then?’

We are speaking of categories. There is a category on the left and on the right as well; on the right-hand side of the table. What is the difference between them? There is no difference you can speak of, except that one category is made of silver and the other of gold. Of course you choose the latter one as you remove it from the

table, putting it slowly but surely and also accurately into your numerous pockets – they are more numerous than what is usually expected in the course of such meetings – and you depart; at least you think you depart with honours and many salutations. Instead they throw tomatoes at you, rotten tomatoes, and you have no alternative but to remove your jacket, your Sunday best jacket. But then you realise your shirt is also painted rather abstractedly, not to say surrealistically; so that you remove it as well and what you are left with does not even amount to what may look like a pair of shorts. Somebody says, ‘Your shorts aren’t short enough. You should shorten them as quickly as possible, otherwise you won’t be admitted into the treasure of our club.’

What category are you talking about right now? Now and then, when speaking to Aristotle, you wonder what kind of category you are discussing with him. Sometimes you are tempted to put him a blank question, ‘What category do you have in mind, Professor?’ And sometimes the Professor replies, ‘The category of the categories,’ and then you simply bow and leave the country, being afraid of persecutions. This sort of thing happens from time to time. Some boy or other pursues you with a rifle at the ready and shoots you either in your heels or in your elbows, saying, ‘What category is this, pray?’

You are walking down the street. What kind of category is this? Is it walking, is it walking down, is it a pair of boots you are wearing? Is it the lady you fell in love with during your short walk? You fall in love with her or him or it and this must be a category in its own right. Suppose you say rather proudly, ‘I fell in love with her.’ But what kind of category are you discussing when addressing to me your meaningless words? You say, ‘This category concerns my falling in love.’

‘And what about *her*? Don’t you ever forget women, otherwise you’ll go to prison, you know.’

‘But she’s an internal, imperial part of this category.’

‘Is she only a *part* of this category, nothing more?’

‘Every category is made up of parts, and each part is essential to the whole of the category.’

‘The woman is the essential part of every category we’re dealing with. Otherwise it’s no use dealing with this particular category.’

Let us take this category apart. You have a pair of boots which follow the lady in question. The lady in question does not want this particular pair of boots to follow her feet. That does not matter; not for the moment, at least. Actually, the pair of boots we are concentrating upon is not fond of the pair of feet it is slavishly following. But it cannot, out of its own volition, jump from one pair of feet to another, bent on following another, far more attractive pair of feet and legs – merely because it does not belong to itself. It belongs to its master, and Hegel is too far away to interfere and intervene on behalf of the pair of boots. Of course many feminists stage a revolution, proclaiming that even a pair of boots – even if it belongs to a man – has every right to choose an appropriate pair of legs, although every pair and every leg which belongs to a woman is perfect to the point of being suited to any boot, shoe, man, office, cavalier, and so on.

Let us continue to take this category apart. You look at the lady you are following, don’t you? And if you do not look at her, you are not interested in her – the problem is solved once and for all. All right – your glance follows her movements, gestures and even the way she breathes, otherwise she would die on the spot; or on the next spot, on the second spot, on the third and fourth and fifth (and filth) and sixth spot. She no longer breathes. Why? Because you don’t look at her lungs, letting them act on their own. And her lungs are always against you: whatever you say or do or intend to do is directed against her lungs: that is what her lungs think anyway. Are they in their own category? Do they act as responsible beings? Suppose they decide not to breathe at all, and you

are waiting for a declaration of love. You wait, wait, wait, wait, you listen, listen, listen, listen – nothing. Of course you don't stomp off out of the house to demonstrate the magnitude of your anger. Is it a category? What is it, for God's sake?

And what about the face of the lady we are talking about? So far we have followed only her shoes; her legs at best. Her legs are not on their own, and every pair of legs, worthy of this name, knows this truth. So if one leg wants to overtake the other leg that belongs to the same pair of legs, it cannot do it for the fear of dismembering the body to which all these legs belong, even if their own volition has nothing to do with this arrangement. Suppose, however, that one leg floats conventions and goes much faster than the other. As the result of this operation, the other leg feels humiliated, offended, persecuted, but it cannot do anything about it because its owner has no wish to accelerate his or her body's movement which, supposedly, is on the slow side. Changing sides is not always as easy as – there are many additions to this as, as everybody knows. For instance, 'As easy as drinking a glass of water.' All right, you have a glass of water by your side and you drink it. All right, once again. And what if you do *not* have a glass of water by your side? All right – all these all rights are all right, given that you have every right to be all right – but this glass of water is not *always* by your side, quite near your elbow. It may repose in the kitchen and so you have to walk as far as the kitchen to get this glass and think you are awakening progressively as if any progress were still on the agenda. Well, you show the agenda and say, 'This curve leads you upwards, to the tops of the tops of the worlds. And also to the top of the worlds – in the light of what our semiologists discovered in the course of the last thirty years. During the first year that marks this period – it got a bad mark, I supposed – we discovered light; once and for all, as we decided on the spur of the moment. Then we changed our minds and re-decided everything on the spur of the moment: it is as if a cat were purring all the time, whatever happens. And whatever did happen – not once, I can assure you: twice, thrice. When whatever happens, you first ask yourself, 'Is it really whatever? Does this word or notion or event or catastrophe really happen? Or does it just pretend to happen which is easy, making believe a million of spectators that whatever really happens does happen – really, into the bargain. You wish to stand up and proclaim the truth to the world, but your teacher admonishes you to keep your seat and remain silent.

Sometimes you stand up and say, 'Liberty is far more important and progressive than serfdom.' Then you hear a voice that says to you directly, without mincing words – when you do mince words, they become more and more mince, unsubstantial; in French at least – 'If you feel free to do whatever you like, you'll collapse at once, even if you're not inclined to find yourself on the floor or rather in the mud, your lips swallowing this mud rather savagely.' And what does serfdom mean in the context? You just continue to swallow the mud because the mud gives orders, something along the lines, 'You should swallow me to the rest of your life, otherwise you'll be punished by many policemen and presidents armed with whips fabricated by Nietzsche at the end of the nineteenth century. Don't you wish to be whipped by a Nietzsche-signed, Nietzsche-autographed whip? Before the procedure you should act rather prudently: you don't let them whip you for nothing. This makes no sense, as we all know pretty well after signing many papers that ruin us altogether, without leaving us a penny to live on. All right: they (the gods) leave you two pennies. So what? What could you do with these two pennies? One penny buys you a piece of bread; the other provides you with a glass of milk. You consume both and enjoy your annual rest or your daily rest – does it really evolve in the gigantic context of the world and its things? You enjoy an afternoon nap, saying to yourself it will do you a lot of good you need. You don't just need good, any good, too put it bluntly – you need *a lot of good*, otherwise your health will go from worse to worse. It is already

at the third worth, if you must know. But if you let it go, it will find yourself (and you, and you) at the fourth worth in no time. For once, you address time very earnestly, talking in French, ‘*Suspend ton vol, my dear.*’ You mean, our time (whatever it is) should in the first place take flight or wing – for a while it is absorbed in this dilemma: wing or flight? – and then it does take both flight and wing. Sometimes it even takes two wings, so as not to experience shortages during his Paradise-oriented flight. It takes two wings and then it drops one of them because it cannot carry two wings at once. Let us not forget: these are occasional wings you acquire during the procedure called, ‘Taking wing.’ And what if your command says to you, ‘Take flight’? What flight are you supposed to take? You consult numerous timetables and all of them seem to imply you should not take any flight, for fear of being squashed (or *moched*, as the French put it).

So you don’t take any flight – anything, as a matter of fact. You just walk down the streets, saying to yourself you can do it safely – without losing your life once and for all. Sometimes you lose your life once; sometimes you do it twice; but the third time, whenever it happens, you lose it forever, and that is something you do your best to avoid to the best of your abilities. You align a few ‘best’ and hope this alignment, this array, this parade will help you tide over the next week at least; or at most, *it depends*, as we all know. What are you doing right now? This question is rather useful in any contest because you are not supposed to do anything, anything at all: whatever you do is supposed to be useful and serve the cause, whatever the cause in question and causality. This causality says to you, ‘Go right, otherwise you’ll meet death.’ (Mostly we do our best to try to get rid of causality. Sometimes we succeed, sometimes we do not. For instance, we seduce a young lady who is duty bound to abort. The cause is clear and the result is deplorable – everybody knows that. But not everybody *feels it profoundly*.)

What does our progress depend on? If we don’t progress, we regress, and we do all we can to eliminate ‘re’ from our vocabulary. For instance, we say to everybody, ‘We’re not retrograde. We’re just trograde.’ And this proclamation works; at least within one union of one party or association. But let us not go back, within our civilisation. What would we find in this back of ours, of yours? Bickering, bickering, bickering? Many other bicks and backs as well; as worse, as I am tempted to say. And for once I yield to my temptation – not to get rid of it, though. Let it remain where it is, troubling my spirit and body to the point of making me spend another sleepless, dreamless night or afternoon. So much time wasted on dreams with no end, because the only end to these dreams is the emptiness of the packages filled to the brim with sleeping pills which do not allow you to dream: they eliminate everything down to your very life. And then your life raises its ugly, beautiful, or non-descript, non-existent head again and you see the same picture associated in every mind with isolation, horror and just orroooo, orrrrrroooo, orrrrrrrroooo.

There are sentences you see either on a wall – in this case you are very close to the Bible – or just in the air; and that reminds you of parades of all kinds. The walls you talk to highly praise tolerance that you can renounce once and for all if you feel that intolerance is much more profitable in the domain of life. (You damn tolerance with faint praise.) For once, you do not quote Aristotle, although you could quote him all the time, given that one of his books adorns your writing desk and also your mind, provided you are capable of reciting some sentences, some remarks, some pieces of wisdom from these books. This time – and I have no idea where this time is situated. I have decided that time is not situated anywhere: it does not exist any more, which will enable me to live without problems to the very end of my endless, eternal life. Well, whatever I say or do, Aristotle did say something and, after all, this book is partly devoted to Aristotle and his categories; to the

category named or entitled 'Aristotle'. After all you can always call a category by the name you might have heard in your childhood, if your parents and grand-parents were versed in philosophy to the point of making you learn the words pertaining to it. Of course, with the passing of the years, you realised that what counts is not a category as such but your *conduct* in the society to which you belong *corps et âme*: no translation is needed in this case and respect. All the sinews of your body and the sinuosity of your brain belong to either Aristotle or Plato. Some thinkers add St Augustine to this list – they enlist the saint in the army of thinkers endowed with the legendary capacity of constructing our future and ideals – but let us leave him alone for a while, which is all the more charitable since I solemnly promise he will not remain in an ammunition/arms/weapons/food dump for long.

Often they ask you what you really think about Aristotle: is he a piece of ammunition, an arm, a weapon or just a piece of bread, of well-bred bread. (There is such a thing as a well-bred bred and a bad-bred cheese.) To put it in a nutshell; does it belong in the domain of food or good? Good, you say at once, for you think in terms of the human brain, of its inevitable, ineluctable development that nothing can stop, not even an atomic war with all its disasters, collaterals and otherwise. Let us not forget that any collateral damage may become – and does become – quite *literal* damage. You say, for instance, 'Theatre, park, the Eiffel Tower, the Windsor Palace,' and you don't always realise you are speaking about ruins, not about possibilities, virtualites. You say the Buckingham and think you talk about a piece of reality, a piece of life, of real life. Actually you touch upon a photograph taken many years ago in front of the Buckingham Palace, and you wonder, silently, sullenly, why there is an individual in front of this palace, in front of its façade. Is he really dead? Does he belong to the world where we can still have a glass, a stew, a piece of all culinary masterpieces?

They say to us that children were conceived and given birth to by a lot of devils and consequently they are all perverse – as perverse as Scriabin's works. (At the beginning of the twentieth-century, musicians, especially those who studied at the Moscow Conservatoire, repeated inclemently and indecently that Scriabin's music is as perverse as our world, our today's world where a man turns into a woman in no time at all. And even if it takes some time, his boss supplies enough money for all the operations involved in the process; and you can stay away from your office as long as you do not feel the real woman in your entrails, her entry into your body and also, almost at the same time, into you immortal soul which is now depended on a woman, on a female element reigning in our world. And let us not forget it is also *defended* by it. A murderer confronts you, but you raise your hand and say simultaneously, 'Do be careful. I'm a woman.' And the potential murderer beats a retreat. Man is not born bad, says Hegel, or someone else. (Many men say that just for the hack of it. Little by little, the hack grows bad – as bad as Putin, shall we say?) Others add, 'But this child's mother is bad and anyway women are devils in disguise.' The discussion grows more and more animated to the point of becoming a declaration condemned by the Vatican and many concomitant services: 'Women are as bad as men and so we should pray for the salvation of their souls and bodies which often helps our body recover its good, healthy shape.'

They say you should not throw caution to the wind. But what about words? Anyway, you do nothing else, unless you write a book instead of talking all the time either on the telephone or in the streets. (Today, there are other means of communication, needless to say.) What else do you do, when talking to somebody or to the sky; to God, in other words? You talk, talk and talk, and words float in the wind: as soon as you utter a word it begins to float or fly or remain suspended in midair. But if it is a windy night you choose for your soliloquies

or communications, the wind literally takes care of your words, carrying them elsewhere, not necessarily to other continents where you might become a celebrity; thanks to your words. What does all this boil down to? You throw words to the wind and, according to some thinkers, by voicing your grievances or other sentiments you are prey to, you waste your time; whereas Aristotle did not talk to the wind. At least he talked to sheets of paper, now and then; and that is why we can quote him once in a while, at length or otherwise.

Here are some of his words translated from the Arabic: ‘Buying pleasure, treating it as a commodity that we work to achieve, cannot therefore be the supreme Good for humans.’ What does ‘therefore’ mean in the context? And even out of it? (We have to take notice of every possibility and virtuality.) (Why does my spellchecker suggest *verticality*?) To find an answer or the answer to this question you have to read the Complete Works of Aristotle, which cannot be done overnight; and even overday. And even over threedays, to tell the truth. Of course a lot of guessworks are as usual at your service and so you plunge into them, into their mess and chaos, headlong. You buy a pleasure, a jewel as usual, and your wife or mistress purrs like a cat. Or your cat purrs like your wife – this does not really matter. What’s the problem, as they usually ask you, for some reason? The problem is you have no idea why you cannot purr if you feel like it; and you do feel like it at this particular moment. (And this moment is quite particular, given that usually you feel like crying, dying and so on and so forth.) Apparently – according to Aristotle, at least – you had better ponder over the enigmas of life and your own self and finitude and the result of whatever happens over years. You ponder and ponder and ponder, and finally you come up with an answer that satisfies no one; not even yourself. What is the use or point? No point, no use. But you continue to ponder – just for the sake of wasting time in a sort of Aristotelian manner.

You spend time in this manner and get an upset stomach or indigestion; or a headache, as a result of your pondering, meandering in the labyrinth of thoughts; and so forth. Well, you buy a commodity and enjoy yourself thoroughly in spite of Aristotle and his interdiction with regard to purring with pleasure. And pleasure is a *physical* phenomenon – not a *spiritual* one, mind you. And what if the commodity I enlarge upon is one of Aristotle’s books? Of course you are unlikely to purr with pleasure upon reading his texts. Anyway, you have no time to purr or to imitate cats in any other domain. You just imitate a human being who reads Aristotle after opening one of his books; either in the original or in an English translation. I am using one of the English translations because I have no Arabic, and my Russian does not allow me to understand anything in Arabic. (Or Greek.) Or even in Turkish, whatever their language is called.

What Aristotle thinks and says can be summarised thus, ‘If you are human, a human being, that is, you should behave accordingly, in full accordance with your status. And your status is called “a human being”, and you should never forget it, when passing before a shop or mooning around a market, a market place.’ But what does it mean? Being a human being? Aristotle devotes to this matter, to this question rather, his whole existence; and also the whole content of his inkpot. Actually, he also dissects the sky, and a number of planets appear in his writings – together with a multitude of stars which do something irrelevant, if we lend ear to the learned opinion of our astronomers and their telescopes, taking their cue from Galileo, if I am not mistaken.

But there are things that trouble us much more than the distant stars about which we are told a lot of nonsense, namely, ‘These stars will never come home, for they are too far from the Earth.’ There are many people for whom there are homes, motherlands, fatherlands and other contraptions that make them survive in the world where there are only traps, nothing else. Once again we are over the top, I’m afraid. Where is the top, may I ask? Is common sense the top? If it is you go ahead, cross a few common senses on the way to perfection or

truth and say to everybody, 'Here's the top, the top of the tops. But common sense has nothing to do with it, you can believe me.' No one believes this man or woman and the game starts afresh, anew. It is neither really fresh nor new. Well, everybody enjoys it and that's what counts. Does it really count? You begin to count this particular matter and sometimes the count is good, as the French put it. (And I put it rather frequently as well.) Sometimes you are out for the count, sometimes in, but no one knows what being in for the count means because there are individuals who are never in, even if you invite them to come in; and the door is wide-open. They are *in*, but you have no idea whether they are in for the count; or just for money, for cash. They say, 'Cash, please,' and you answer, 'All right', although you have no cash in your drawers. What *do* you have in your drawers? Just a few love letters, I'm sorry to say. But you do not send these letters to your beloveds, contrary to what might be supposed. You just send them anywhere; you burn them, in other words. You burn their words in other words, and you will never know the result of your alchemical experiments.

The 'perfect' happiness can only be in intellectual contemplation – that is what we willy-nilly (nilly, nilly, Willy) inherited from Aristotle. But is my contemplation intellectual or not? That is the question I often ask myself during my visits to bookshops of all kinds. I browse through the books on display and find that the contemplation they offer is not intellectual at all. It might be erotic, for all know. But, frankly speaking, I don't really know erotic semiology, and even if a lady undresses in front of my eyes, I will not be able to decide whether the image I have in full view – in full view on the bed – has anything to do with any erotic picture of the worlds. The pictures I am talking about can be bought at any newsstand, and I just have to summon your intellect before looking at them earnestly, appealing to your concentration and your own sex appeal which helps a lot in the course of these games. You appeal to your concentration, the intellectual brand of concentration, to be precise, and therefore eliminate whatever is linked, connected and united forever with your shameful organs of which we shall talk some other time – not to mar the intellectual honesty and dignity of our present discussion.

What is purity, this proverbial purity of our intellectual discussions? The Supreme Being consists entirely of reason and spends eternity contemplating itself. And what about our private parts? Are they private to the point of not being able to take part in a discussion where the Supreme Being comes to the fore? As it may appear, the Supreme Being is always in the limelight, otherwise It would not be Supreme. The point is our humans do not always talk to the Supreme Being, mistaking him or her for an ordinary being who writes detective stories and nothing else, nothing else; apart from a few tales for children, not unlike those written by Oscar Wilde at the end of his career. The point is, we had better not touch our private parts during our investigations oriented towards Aristotle's enigmas. And if we do touch them, everything goes wrong – that's for sure; although some thing may *not* go wrong. Sometimes it does happen: something it does *not* go wrong; and yet everybody shouts, 'It's wrong, it's wrong, everything goes wrong!' All right: this goes wrong and that goes wrong, after much soul-searching, after much-instrument searching. You search, you search and you end up proclaiming, 'I'm right,' and sure enough, you are decorated, once, twice, thrice. And that is how your life goes on, in spite of all your failures, obvious and not quite obvious. They are obvious anyway, to tell the truth.

We, humans have a spark of the Supreme Being in us; or rationality. But what about our irrationality or internationality? Is it a spark or a black hole or the start of a new road leading towards our galaxies about which we know next to nothing? This spark or this nothingness enables us to contemplate the unchanging universe, provided the spark remains a spark and does not grow into a flame, a bonfire installed in the middle of a forest.

For a while we contemplate the unchanging universe and enjoy the sight to the utmost, but then the fire spreads all around us and we contemplate a world conflagration, a change of time, of period, of paradigm. There is a war in Ukraine, at this very moment, and I think the spark is to blame: instead of remaining an instrument of contemplation, it became a tank, a rocket, a drone and now we contemplate a lot of flames everywhere, and we walk in the midst of these flames, allowing our bodies to burn now and then – to keep the flames company, out of our commiseration and patriotic (idiotic) feelings.

You walk amidst the flames and now and then you offer your body to their savagery in order to participate in the conflict – not automatically, not publicly, as you might think, whoever you are (you may be nothing, as far as I am concerned). And then you retire because you are inspired and wish to write a poem or a novel – why not? At the same time – and you are quite aware of that – they drop bombs after bombs, not necessarily on old women and children. You throw a bomb and it hits a child. Immediately you write about it in your newspaper. And so you do upon learning about the death of an old woman. A young woman is wounded. She is lying by your side, but the old woman is in front of you, and you feel duty bound to write first about the old woman – after all she is really old – and then pass on to a young woman who is not as much in the news as her old counterpart. Her old counterpart survives yet another operation, whereas she (the young one) succumbs to a series of complexities, as they call them sometimes, and these complexities kill her in the long run. This run may be long, short, middle and even half-middle, but as soon as you begin talking about the run, everybody knows it is the end you touch upon all the time. You hold your hand upon this run and, oddly enough, it reminds you of the footballer who scored the last goal in the last match of the World Championship; in Switzerland; in 1954.

If the intellect is divine, compared with the life of the man, the life of the intellect must be divine compared with the man; the life of the intellect must be divine compared with a human being. Compare anything to a human being! What can you compare? Who do you compare? We are losers, all of us, but Aristotle says to us that he can save us in the long run, in the short run, in the longest run possible and imaginable; and unimaginable, as usual.

Therefore, when we contemplate the unchanging universe we are being about as divine as humans can be. Well – this well comes in handy – we are about, we are about, we are about. We are out as well. What do we contemplate, in the final analysis? We contemplate something final and an analysis. And the universe changes under our very eyes, due to the war in Ukraine or just the water that refuses to flow lavishly and humanistically in my kitchen. If it doesn't flow, I say to it, 'You're cruel, my dear. You'd better lavish upon me all your boons and moons, otherwise I'll remain a human whom our supreme force destitute of luxury for no reason at all.' Next day I get an email where all sorts of reasons are described in graphic detail and even in nuances. What am I supposed to do?

Apparently Nureyev, upon awakening or upon finishing yet another glass of champagne, rushed towards his numerous telephones and rang his advocates and lawyers up to find out whether he had lost some of his money in the course of the night and they answered him, triggering off an avalanches of contemplations among which there were some images of doom because the stock market is unpredictable. When dancing the *Swan Lake* Nureyev did both: he contemplated swans and jumped as often as he could; and he could jump a week, a whole week without letting his legs to repose on the floor – the floor of the Maryinski Theatre in Petersburg, for instance. His whole being was harmonised to the utmost because he both contemplated and jumped, never

failing a movement for the sake of an image. That is how we are supposed to live apparently – imitating Nureyev's movements whose vitality nourished his body and soul to the point of letting him go on with his masterpiece almost to the end of his tether. Alas, his tether was neither very long nor strong. And often, in the middle of a conversation, he would begin to dance with a telephone, a whole apparatus, in order to keep his hands, legs and shoulders in. 'What's going on?' his partner would ask. 'I'm dancing, you know. I'm Nijinsky today; or Fawn, if you prefer.'

'I prefer Nijinsky,' his partner would answer unashamedly, counting on Nureyev's generosity.

'How come?' vociferated Nureyev. (He liked neither Nijinsky nor Baryshnikov and would renounce any deal, however advantageous and luminous, if their names were pronounced at the beginning or (more often) at the end of discussions.) Well, according to Nureyev, you have to use legs even if you stay at home and talk to your favourite broker who is in the know, supposedly and almost surely. 'In the know?' asked Nureyev.

'In the know,' answered the broker.

'How much?' asked Nureyev.

'Much,' answered the broker.

'How much much?' asked Nureyev.

'Too much of the much,' answered the broker. 'But that's what you want, if I'm not mistaken.'

'But this isn't as much as the much I have in my head and especially in my legs,' answered Nureyev, executing one of his jumps.

'Now it's much, much, much, as much,' the broker would say.

'How much?' Nureyev would answer. Upon receiving an answer, he would jump again and again until reaching the amount of money he had in his legs; and also in his head.

Why do men suffer from the plague euphemistically named 'nastiness, spitefulness and wickedness'? If you just say, 'He's nasty,' some women are sure to interfere and add, 'He's also spiteful. Do you remember what he said last night?' And if you say, 'All right, all right – he's nasty and the very image of spitefulness, its spitting image,' they are sure to interfere once again. 'You forget his wickedness. What's wrong with your memory? You should go and see a doctor on the spot. *C'est urgentissime!*'

What is the definition of wickedness? We are supposed to align our emotions with what is the right thing to do in particular circumstances: we want to do what is right. But first of all we determine the nature of circumstances we are confronted with: are they really particular? This happens every time, a thousand times on every square; on every bench, to be precise. What is so particular about them? But they might become particular on the strength of the people who take part in them either willingly or unwillingly. They might also turn out to be peculiar under the rays of a new synthetic sun often used in the cinematographic studios. You turn a camera and someone proclaims, 'This situation is very particular. We should film it at once, and then we'll do what can be done about it in the world of the commerce, of our oligarchs.' We are excited on account of a young actress who is likely to be loved to distraction by the producer of the production, but we hesitate a moment, two moments, because there is another diva whose participation in the team creating a film or an opera cannot be questioned even by Jesuits, if they happen to be in the neighbourhood of the production in question which grows together with the question (or the question grows together with the production) so that one cannot help asking oneself the following question, 'What does it all lead to?'

I think the Japanese have a sort of a ritual *au ralenti* – they really add this French tag to their tradition-illuminated gesture which deprives you of your belly, entrails and even your life. To *terminer en beauté*, as the same French says without blinking. So you terminate everything in a blaze of glory or with a match you strike at the right moment; at the twelfth stroke of midnight, as usual.

Am I not weary of all my thoughts, bright or dim? I may have the feeling that such and such thought is bright; or is it just a bright idea? Who knows. Who could distinguish a thought from an idea? But the more you direct your torch at it, focusing your torch's intensity on its brightness, the gloomier it becomes – like a hero belonging to the descendants of Alberich we all know thanks to Furtwängler, Clemens Kraus and also Toscanini. Let us isolate one bright idea or thought or mood and create what is grandiloquently called 'The Virtue of the Soul'.

We align our emotions and think that part of the job is done: our emotions seem prepared for a solemn parade. They are arrayed for it, so to speak. Usually they look a complete mess – dressed anyhow with hair sticking up on end. And then we realise we are speaking about an individual, not about humanity, for the sake of humanity and its worries. Humanity is dressed any old how but at least its hair does not stick up on end, on any ends it has. (Usually it has four ends.) But what is the right thing to do, for God's sake? Of course, before the beginning of our ritual at the end of which we are supposed to receive a letter from God, we ask ourselves constantly, stubbornly, 'What is the right thing to do?' We read all the literary works that bear the title, *The Right Thing* before we launch into a verbal attack on the world's handling of the finances, on the world's handling of basic virtues, on the world's handling of our civilisation which goes from one hell to another, without even having a coffee-break, according to the well-known tradition. We align our emotions, our bodies, our souls with a number of right things that turn out to be wrong, in the long run; which is normal, more or less. And we realise this truth when studying the statistics they show us on television, on many other visions, and even our inner vision is subjected to their vision of the world's infrastructure.

What do our emotions attach to? Their attachments are often wrong, being linked to, being in love with wicked persons, beings, perverse substances whose charisma and sex destroy us completely, which reminds me of a story told by a Russian friend of mine. He said that at some point the Minister of Soviet Culture said upon watching *Anna Karenina*, the ballet created by Plissetskaya. She said, the minister of the culture, 'In the Soviet Union we have neither sex nor God.' Is it the right moment to speak of the virtue of the Soul or even of the Body which plays an important part in our relationships with men and women? An important network? An important nexus?

Ribbentrop said something before being hanged, and he was right that, by talking on the verge of eternal tears, he offered enough material to journalists and other artists on which they could repose their luxurious inspiration. You know how it works, don't you? Our opulent inspiration lies on a Louis the XIV bed and paint arabesques on the nearest wall. Then it dances along with some arabesques on the wall opposite. One is astonished to note that the arabesques we have been attentively watching so far can travel in the cosmos, which allows us to discover new stars, nebulae and what not.

But you are supposed to resist a temptation – and you have no idea what temptation they are talking about – and you yield to the temptation. You become a sinner for life unless your neighbours and relatives pay a lot of money to God to atone for your sins. Your sins are atoned for – you hear the tonality of your atoned sin – and you take a walk somewhere, not necessarily in your garden. In what garden then do you take your walk? In

the Garden of Eden, needless to say. You say it nevertheless; and you repeat incessantly, 'My Garden of Eden, my Garden of Eden, my Garden of E.' That is enough, considering you are already welcome in Paradise – not only with open arms, mind you. You are welcome with the open body. Everything is open in this body: arms, legs, ankles, calves, shoulder blades. That is what openness means in the domain of liberty.

After a while, you notice, however, that your bench, the one you are allowed to enjoy in the Garden of Eden – its smoothness, velvet, temperature and tenderness – has a motherly disposition (in spite of a truant one for which Shakespeare's Hamlet is acclaimed all over the world) and caress, both furtively and openly, the bodies kissing and cuddling on it day and night. But let us suppose, if only for the sake of argument – of what argument, pray? – that one of the lovers grows jealous, which seems to demonstrate its (benche's) love with far more panache, certainly due to the quality of its wood. The lover draws a knife from his pocket – a woman is unlikely to commit such a crime – and begins to cut the bench into pieces or write on it obscenities – the obscenities of such vulgarity and unbearance (unbearable unbearance) that his mistress wrenches the knife from his hand and points it to her own body, saying, 'Your making love to this inanimate creature proves to what extent you neglect *my* body, for all its loveliness. I demand your attention, your caresses, your sadism – your attention, for God's sake. Don't you feel responsible for your actions in the presence of God?'

That is when a real attention often comes to the fore because nowadays you are supposed to use the maximum of your ingenious love apparatus to vie with actors who, in many sadism-oriented films, kill their partners so brilliantly that, instead of blood, a lot of sexual liquids I am too fastidious to enumerate traverse the screen and drop on the heads of cinema lovers who do not believe their eyes or rather skulls. How could you believe your skull that informs you you get a quantity of someone's sperm without really seeing it? Of course you can rise; you are actually welcome to do it. But in this case you will receive the same quantity of sperm in your eyes, which would prevent you from enjoying the representation to the utmost. And you may regret this failure all your life, considering that not many artists are willing to shed such a quantity of their vital liquid for the sake of some provincial theatre where only amateurs, not to say tramps and downs-and-outs and outs-and-downs applaud your generosity and skill. Not to say your *maestria*.

Only if he is not even tempted in the first place, or if he is able to dismiss the temptation easily, will he be contented and happy. But how could such an exploit be achieved? In the first place, in the second place? You feel a drop of sperm on your skull and you say to yourself quite honestly, 'This is a real temptation. I should resist it at all costs. And the costs I'm dealing with are high, I must admit. Every drop of this sacred, live-giving liquid is delicious and exciting. The more I drink, the more excited and delicious I become; and probably more sacred as well. Who knows? A friend of mine usually puts a lot of questions – to the Almighty, of all substances or figments of imagination. "This is an elixir," he says. "Could I please have another glass of it? After all, it's not as pernicious as a glass of vodka, drinking a glass of vodka." Frankly speaking, the Almighty never hears such questions, but you continue to ask them, assured they successfully replace a prayer you forgot a long time ago, at the door leading you out of your childhood where your mother took care of your prayers and of your Pamperses, if I remember them rightly. 'Here's your Pampers,' says your mother. 'And here's your prayer. Don't confuse them please. And yet it doesn't really matter – everything and everybody are God.'

'And what about the liquid I receive on my head, on my face, from time to time?' asks the child.

'This is a sort of morning dew,' answers the mother. 'You can find it – in the morning, mind you – on flowers, on leaves.'

‘I tasted the liquid you’re talking about, Mother,’ answers the child. ‘The taste is not the same.’

‘The dew you get on your skull is a little bit older,’ answers the lady. ‘It often tastes like sour milk, a sour glass of wine. You don’t have to love a glass of sour wine. But if you succeed in this undertaking you’ll find a real happiness.’

Each virtue is a ‘mean’, on average, set between two vices – one of excess and one of deficiency. Generosity is an important virtue that bonds us to each other. Life would be much bleaker without it. It is obviously possible to be insufficiently generous. Such a person would have the vice of meanness. You see a virtue – at least you see a cube on which they wrote the word ‘virtue’ – and you make a few steps to find out where a vice hides itself. Usually vices do not hide themselves, unless we are confronted with deep, almost incurable vices that aim at our heart, at the destruction of our heart by means of a knife or a bullet. So we walk from a vice to generosity and knock our head against little vices, little generosityes – on our way to the great, exemplary generosity which offers you, sometimes offhandedly, mind you, trinkets and also Bentleys, odd as it may appear. You install yourself in one of the Bentleys – you are weary of walking between the poles of human existence – and drive straight towards the vice you left some time ago. And you see a beautiful woman instead of the cube you frankly disliked some minutes ago. What happens? What to choose? Can you choose anything at all? Everything is in front of you, around you. The woman stretches her arms in your direction and you succumb to the temptation all the more easily since your Bentley do not act at all. And then Bentley does not really stroke you – between ourselves, it might have stroked your hand lying on the steering wheel; several times, in the course of your journey – and you choose the woman who strokes every member of your body and even take some of them in her mouth, although you warned her, ‘I have no candy either in my pockets nor on my body.’

And yet you eat a lot of chocolate together and many years suffer from diabetes which was incorporated in the sweets, in whatever was sweet in your life. Now you realise you should have switched to bitter tastes and ways many years ago. Now it is too late: you drink too much water; and you drink it too frequently for a normal person, whoever he or she is. Even if you drink a cup of tea without sugar – ‘No sugar, please’ – your organism, as they say now everywhere, adds a few lumps of sugar to your relatively small cup, looking rather like a cup decidedly destined for coffee.

You destroy your health at every step, with every rap you sing or say, sometimes unconsciously – it is under your skin and inside your throat. Such is today’s (or yesterday’s) fashion and you cannot get rid of it unless you are prepared to get rid of both today and yesterday. You sing, you talk, you sing and you die as if nothing had happened; as if you had never sung, never talked, never uttered the word ‘rap’. And what about chocolate? I have a friend, a half-friend, a half-mistress, who spends her days in a clinic where they look after semi-permanent mads. (Not maids, mind you – aristocrats.) She likes chocolate and I intend to buy her a box of chocolate to sweeten her existence, if any. Provided there are any sweets conceived and designed for this kind of temporary cure; or happiness, so to speak. We so to speak very often and sometimes someone says to us, ‘Yesterday you said “so to speak”, while talking about an important project. Well, our project is on the agenda and so we earned a fortune – in every sense of the term, mind you. Every one of our member married a beautiful lady or man and now we are all extremely happy, rich, clever and illustrious.’

But before becoming illustrious you have to be virtuous, and that is not as easy as you can imagine as you think about your parents who are, according to you and many other children, virtuous – almost automatically, mind you. Yes, your parents are virtuous for the reason you do not even have to elucidate,

explain in detail and insist upon: it is obvious. They are your parents and consequently they are virtuous or barbaric, according to the disposition of your mind and body. If your father beats you on a regular basis you hate him and never say, 'My father is the most virtuous man in the world.' Your father is a virtuoso in the domain of beating – that's for sure. Your body knows a lot about this virtuosity, and your mind does not succeed in forgetting all the blows you received in the course of your childhood and even during your adulthood. Your father used to say, 'I know, you're an adult now. So you're supposed to understand what is wrong, but you don't understand it. You don't understand the difference between what is right and what is definitely wrong. Unfortunately I have to teach this difference to your body which understands the world and its manners much better than your mind and brain and so-called psychology do. Actually, I'll give your psychology or metapsychology the same lessons – just for the hack of it.'

What could you have answered? What kind of answer could you have given to your father, had you been more intelligent and knowledgeable? Here is the answer you ought to have given your father, 'My dear Father! I'm grateful to you for being attuned to virtue and the means that allow human beings to reach it in no time at all. But allow me to contradict you by putting an emphasis on the role of the state – in the process under discussion. Are you aware of what Aristotle said on the subject? I know you're deeply versed in philosophy in general. But even Wittgenstein used to say or admit he'd never read Aristotle. So I don't think you merit bad marks for your ignorance of this great philosopher. That's what he said on the subject and also on the object of our discussion, "The purpose of law is not so much the punishment of wrongdoers, but the urging of people in the direction of virtuous action." Let us take notice of words – for once. All right, you're on the point of beating me with a stick – with your walking stick, to be precise. Could you apply the word "urge" to this stick of yours? Don't you think it merits a more vigorous definition? A torture, for instance? Or an example of how the Holy Inquisition punished its slaves? Let us try and find another, more humane and *dolce* – you know Italian, don't you – method. Why? To get closer to the word or verb "to urge"? Why don't you quote Aristotle's works, for instance? Aren't they better than your stick? Is your stick as beautiful as the philosophy I'm trying to introduce into our relationship? Far be it from me to affirm that our relationship is absolutely deprived of philosophical motives and nuances. But this time you're about to forget philosophy for the sake of your whip. I'm afraid I don't approve of this substitution. Allow me to prefer Aristotle to the bruises with which you wish to cover my life, my adult unfledged life. Actually, Plato would also have approved of what I've just said. I'm sure he would have sided with your future, present and past victim.'

So, in accordance with Aristotle's testimony, the state is supposed to push us in the direction of virtuous doings, such as charity, valour on a battlefield and so on. The Russian state offers you a sort of prayer in which you mention the glory of your motherland and your willingness to leave your head and the rest of your body in a lot of battlefields; although one battlefield is quite enough for your life and even for your immortality. The Russians receive a lot of emails from the state where the war in Ukraine is touched upon rather despotically. You must, you must, you must, say the letters. But do we really have to speak about Russia in this connection? Or any other connections? In *Anna Karenina* Tolstoy spoke about the predicament faced by his hero in his estate where a sort of election had been organised. For what purpose? No one knows, given that election, the very system that presides over this notion is still unknown in Russia. So let us forget this unorganised, medieval group of people who push the world towards an atomic war. As if this were the real and only aim of humanity.

What else could we speak of? 'By repeatedly doing virtuous things, even if we don't want to, we can turn ourselves into virtuous people.' Aristotle again. What else, who else are we allowed to speak of within this essay?

Aristotle again. Of course we might say a few words about St Thomas, but that moment will come sooner or later. Any moment, this one, that one will come once upon a time, and once it will be death, another time a sort of resurrection. We resurrect and think we have found a comma on our eternal way to Eternity. And then we realise it is a semi-colon. We are not very fond of the word 'semi' so we choose 'colon' as if we could choose anything or anybody in this or any other matter. We see a column and a lot of smoke that never goes anywhere without being born of fire. We cannot see the fire for an obscure reason, and that does not worry us, for a guru we saw in another century said we should not pay attention to anything with the exception of nirvana. We look for nirvana and find 'ni, ni, ni, ni' which means 'neither nor' in French and probably some other languages. And Aristotle continues to talk for the sake of talking, needless to say; or to talk. 'Every virtue is a "mean", or average, set between two vices – one of excess and one of deficiency.' What is my deficiency? I ask myself and find too many answers which do not help me in the domain of virtues. I get away from them, one by one. In other words, I get away from vice and then knock down another; and another, and another. They all lie in a lot of dust and I go on; I go towards perfection. Wait a minute! What am I talking about? I am supposed to knock down some kind of deficiency associated in my mind with a particular vice. Because it *is* a vice, isn't it? Every deficiency is a vice in its own right; or wrong, as the case may be: everybody is aware of this truth. All right: I seem to have found a solution to this problem; at least for a while. I take off my trousers and say, 'I'm deficient, am I not? And my deficiency lies near my feet, touching one of them.' Half-naked I proceed towards one of my shelves on which there are two or three pairs of trousers. Suddenly I realise I am already virtuous: wearing trousers is an excess which leads one and almost everybody to the vice called 'Being excessively generous.' Towards yourself, obviously. Can't you walk along the streets, up and down the streets of your native city without one of the pairs of trousers you rightly own and have in your house, on numerous, opulently furnished shelves? But by having your trousers on – any pair of them, to be exact – you run the danger designated as 'being excessively generous', as I already pointed out in one the previous sentences. But if, on the other hand, you decide to moon around your native city stark naked, you would incur wrath/anger of Aristotle who writes abundantly about 'the vice of meanness'.

You do walk stark-naked around your native city, and some pedestrians stop in their tracks and say to you, 'I've known you for many, many years. But I could never have accused you of meanness, if two minutes ago my glance wouldn't have encountered this appearance of yours. Stark-naked, if you please. Well, I'm not pleased at all, if you must know. And you *must* know that, otherwise you'll go on and on – stark naked, if you deplease.' What else does he talk about, our Aristotle? He says you should not give away too much of your money that you do not have enough for yourself. No one has enough money for oneself and for one's family. So one wonders when one can stop or start? Start what? Giving money away non-stop. No, no, no – this is a vice: we should never forget that. '*Non*' is wrong and 'stop' is correct. But when do you have to stop? 'The mean is not mathematical,' says Aristotle. So if you say '200', no one can tell you whether it is mean or not. And what about '300'? The same goes for '300' and even for '3000'. The same goes everywhere, and you have no idea whether this 'same' goes naked or half-naked; or third-naked, for this matter. And this matter is endless, endless, I'm sorry to say. That's why it is better not to say it.

We go on as if we were a show. In some respect we *are* a show, considering that we show something of what we are doing, sometimes when hiding from something else. We always hide from something, even if no danger lies in wait for us behind a boulder or a mere stone. And then we come into the open and this open may become closed at any second, depending on some authorities or other. Well, we do depend on these authorities because we cannot do otherwise. Sometimes we are close, sometimes open. They say, 'This is an open work of art.' And others say, 'You're wrong – it's a closed work of art because you don't understand its contents. You don't even understand its contours.' What *do* you understand in the final analysis? A Christmas Tree.

These discussions lead nowhere; as any other discussions, to tell the truth You go on telling the truth and say, after much soul-searching that nothing leads anywhere, simply because nothing cannot lead anywhere. Nor can a zero. What does a zero lead you to? A number of zeros that you might enjoy if you love zeroes in the first place and also in the second place. Sometimes you are asked, 'Do you like zero in the third place?' and you reply, 'Frankly speaking, I'm weary of zeros. I prefer millions, billiards, frankly speaking. And if you think I should be more modest, I'll say I prefer three roubles.'

Someone who is well-off should give more than someone who is poor. You say, 'I'm poor,' and they begin to search you – literally and almost mystically – to find out if you have more than what every poor man or woman are allowed to possess. Allotted to, as they say all the time. 'Allotted to when and where?' you are asked. And all disintegrates, once again. It literally falls apart and as a result you find a rouble here and a euro somewhere else, probably in the kitchen, Why? Because supposedly you were charged with a mission you did not accomplish, for some reason or other. You had – it was your duty – to buy a lot of potatoes, and you did not know how many potatoes you had to buy. But you knew that these potatoes were meant and ordered to nourish the whole population of two villages, of three villages and even of a small city called Klin where Tchaikovsky found his last refuge. Or the one before last.

This is a problem apart which should be tackled separately. What is your one-before-last refuge that precedes your deathbed? You say to yourself your *Winter Reise* or the way of all flesh, assuming that you still have a few morsels of flesh to call your own, is under way. Of course you ask yourself an obvious question, 'Should I keep this flesh for myself or give it to the needed – to children, in the first place?' Actually, you are prepared to offer this flesh to the needy and children and the old in the second place as well, but you are not sure you will safely reach this second place, and in this case you have to give whatever you have right now and almost to everybody. So you give your underwear to many people among whom you notice a few females who say, 'We'll never wear this nonsense.' Men do not usually pronounce the word 'nonsense', at least in this respect, but they say, 'Pfui, pfui,' or something else along these lines, following this vein. It does not mean that masculine taste in the domain of underwear varies so much: they are just determined to say 'pfui', to express their utter disgust with what happens in the world, and unless you show them a masterpiece from the Louvre collection, they will go on repeating 'pfui' until midnight, when they usually recall Shakespeare and his dreams. Luckily for them. This last item proves it is better to know Shakespeare almost by heart, otherwise you may be confronted with the horror of a non-Shakespearian world. (But Shakespearian world is not all beer and skittles either.)

Let us not forget that by repeatedly doing virtuous things, even if we do not want to, we can turn ourselves into virtuous people. I have no wish to give you ten roubles, but I do give them to you. Why? Because I think that my repeats will turn me into a virtuous man; my virtuous repeats, that is. It is as if I held a sheet of

paper on which someone, God perhaps, wrote 'virtuous'. What kind of thing can be related to this piece of paper? I give it to someone – instead of giving to this someone a million of dollars – and simply say, 'Here you are.'

'What do you mean?' asks the simpleton. (That is who you are talking to – unavoidably.)

'This is a ticket that allows you to take part in the show called "Virtue". If you win, you'll be virtuous, you know.'

'And if I lose?'

'You'll be vicious. Isn't that clear?'

You lose, but you nurse a covid victim, running the well-known danger, and finally the God-presided committee resolves to bestow an honour upon you; a medal, in other words. You put this medal on your chest and have a walk throughout your city, showing off your honours and achievements, instead of putting on display your nakedness; or half of it, as the case may be. And the case is always 'maybe' or 'be' or 'not to be', and so on.

You should get inspired from older people who point their sticks to almost everything and everybody, saying, 'You should give, you should give,' and 'otherwise' always accompanies these speeches, which confirms once and for all that 'otherwise' is part and parcel of our life. And you cannot remove these parts and parcels without destroying your life, which needs all these others and wises.

How many virtuous things have you repeated since last Sunday? Two or three, according to your calculation. Well, plunge into your arithmetic once again and find geometry or something else: semiology, for instance. I said, 'The world is beautiful,' which is virtuous enough to fill to the brim my claim for virtuousness. Indeed, I draw everyone's attention to the beauty of the world which enables them to survive in this world. They manage to surmount all opposition/objections to their plans. However, there are still a few technical problems/obstacles/hurdles to be surmounted before the product can be put on sale to the public. What product, what sale? What a question to ask! In this world – and everyone is aware of this state of affairs – everything is a salesman (even women, even women) and everyone is a product. (Is this the other way round?) What kind of product? What does it matter! You know you are a product – even if no one buys you. Even the people who show no interest in your persona, in your body and so on are capable of saying, from time to time, 'I know he or she is a product, but I don't need it. I have enough of worthy, expensive products within my reach both at home and also outdoors.'

This time we are talking about the product called (or entitled: there are so many books written about it): *The Beauty of the World*. This subject is vast indeed, almost gigantic, because some people just show you their watches, saying, 'Beautiful, isn't it?' Of course you can always answer thus, 'It's certainly expensive and in some respects beautiful, but I prefer that tree over there.' On this and other occasions the Russians point to birch trees, whereas others think in terms of Christmastide and the things they can hang on their Christmas trees. Actually these things count much more, given that children seldom admire a tree on which these things hang rather indifferently as if there were simply exhibited in a shop. The children do not seem to admire the smell I took advantage of in my childhood, which did not prevent me from enjoying the things I am talking about right now. Probably at length. Frankly I do not know how much time I wish to sacrifice for the sake of these things on which I counted in my childhood. I thought the world was just a thing, a plaything – something hanging from a Christmas tree; from *my* Christmas tree, preferably. From which tree does the world hang? Not from the Tree of

Life, that's for sure. From the Tree of Death? Perhaps, perhaps. Let us leave the question open. I am not keen on open works of art, considering that most of them, most of masterpieces are closed forever. But an open question does not really disturb me; not really, not beyond all measures.

Shall we go on enlarging upon virtues? Beyond all measures, so to speak? Everybody will air his and her grievances upon the matter, saying that acts speak louder. Suppose you notice a child – in a Siberia, of all places. (Even in Siberia, in this inhuman land you come across children, now and then.) Understandably enough, this child freezes to death; or starves to death, if you prefer. (Of course you prefer the life of this child and this goes without saying.) Well, you take notice of this child, draw a box of matches from one of your pockets and strike a match. This is called a 'virtuous act' or a 'virtuous deed'. If you strike two matches – in the same set up, within the same winter – you double the number of your virtues. If you walk around Siberia in search of freezing-to-death children, your pockets full of matches and boxes, automatically, almost mechanically you grow as virtuous as mothers and Therasas. What is the lesson we can draw from this narration? Never leave your house without matches. I mean, you have to fill your pockets with matches – to the brim, if possible – and begin your walk through your native city; even if it is not located in Siberia, contrary to all the stories told about matches.

And if you see a lonely child, you should assume he or she has no parents to take care of. What I mean boils down to this: no one takes care of this child. So you should bend over and put your finger on this child's shoulder. Why not put your *hands* on his or her shoulders? While you are at it? If you put your both hands on this child you will be accused of an act associated with paedophilia. So you limit this effusion of tenderness and humanness to a mere murmur, such as, 'Tu-tu-tu' or 'su-su-su'. What happens next is quite foreseeable: there is a man who reproaches your nature for not giving free expression to your natural feelings, meaning, 'You're a father by nature, considering your age and experience. Why don't you welcome this child to your open arms and carry him to your wife who'll certainly give him enough chocolate to tide him over the weekend?' And you answer logically and self-defensively, 'Don't you know our police? Do you have no idea what our justice department is capable of?' It is capable of justice – that is the only comment you can hear under the circumstances.

Someone who is well-off should give more than someone who is poor. And someone who is poor should give more than someone who eats everything he can lay his hands on. He lays hands – so does she – on a morsel of fish, and a bystander whispers a word in his ear, 'Why don't you give this morsel to a starving child?'

'This child isn't really starving, according to my analysis of the situation,' says the man enjoying the morsel of fish; of sturgeon, in all probability.

'I bet you anything you like it.'

'Can you bet your boots? Can you boot your bets?'

'With pleasure.'

'Well, let's watch and see what happens.'

At the end of the week the child dies of starvation. Who won this game of bets and deaths? I have no remembrance of this incidence or rather of its details, and so one had better consult a few newspapers which concentrate their efforts on children and their deaths from the lack of morsels of fish, of meat and so on.

Some of the journalists bet on quantity and not on quality. Of course you can always say the morsel under discussion is so succulent you might consume a hundred kilos of it. But the child does not seem to enjoy

the quality, the taste of the morsel because you do not really relish anything on the threshold of death; except your own paradise-oriented hopes. So the child dies and you say to yourself, 'I'd give anything to know if he thought about Paradise on the point of passing away. This is so important for my article centred upon children and their mortality. Or immortality, if you prefer. Not their morality, mind you.'

You follow your elders and Aristotle does not seem to question this ritual because every year adds something to the amount of knowledge you are supposed to accumulate in the course of knowledge. St Peter walks towards or flies towards your knowledge and asks you the ritual question, 'Is that what you've unashamedly bring to Paradise? Do you think there are no treasures to offer its Guardians?' You empty your pockets and find a piece of gold or silver; or just a piece of anything or a piece of nothing. St Peter looks at this piece, studies it for a while and says at last, 'This piece is far more precious than all the gold they found in Charlie Chaplin's film *The Gold Rush*. Bravo!' And you make yourself comfortable in Paradise. That is what life is about.

How can we be sure we are doing the right thing? You cannot find the answer to this question in Aristotle's books because the only answer he can give is, 'Read my books.' You go on reading his books and find the following sentence: 'Doing the right thing.' Well, let us admit – for the sake of argument – that I do the wrong thing. Let us go a little bit further. Let us admit I do three wrong things, four wrong things. And even five wrong things, why not? What danger do I run when I admit I do five wrong things? Your judges say, 'Five things are not a crime in itself, admitting you did commit them and are fully responsible for them. And let us not get entangled in the calculus of sacred numbers within which we seldom find five, contrary to what happens with three, four and six.'

You do five wrong things. Contrary to what might be admitted (officially) more or less accurately, you do not use a heavy object, when getting closer and closer to the head of a child you have no wish to harass and submit to your boundless desire; contrary to all sorts of documents. But what *do* you do? You step forward or backward or outward; and every step, according to the protocol, leads you to a crime. This crime can be less or more, or most, or gigantic, or minuscule. It is a crime, nevertheless, and you should suffer as a result of this crime and its punishment, its roubles spent for nothing. 'Such people might know in great detail, for example, which vitamins and minerals are conducive to healthy living.' You find this sentence in a book (*Introducing Aristotle*.) Well, you follow the advice to the letter and the letter is A, and also B and Z. You take all these vitamins and feel much better: you are capable of mounting any number of stairs without being short of breath. At some point you even think you are short of *steps*. And then you become a victim of your own optimism (your doctor never said anything of the kind.) You sit down on a step and feel a desire that grows within you every minute as if it had nothing else to do – the desire to take the last step in this life, whatever its measurements, virtual and real. You really want to take leave of this life, even if there is no step under your feet. You say to yourself or any passer-by who happens to be within your hearing, 'Can you see my foot? It is installed on the last step of my life. I'm not sure you can see it – this kind of vision is reserved for the dying, not for the living, but this doesn't really matter – here's my foot, my death and immortality, whether you agree with me or not. Farewell, my dear pedestrian.'

And that is done. So many things are done, and you know them by heart, if you do have a heart after all. What happens next? You discover you have another foot to lean upon, and you lean upon it, forgetting all your previous experiences, tests in the this domain and many other domains which communicate to you the only truth

we are allowed to come across, 'You'll fail, whatever you do and are. So you'd better sit ensconced in your armchair and take your time, your rest, your life and even the rest of your life. Take the rest, the r, the s and whatever can be found under your feet that accumulated a lot of objects during your wandering.

What sounds appropriate, in your opinion? You cannot pretend to hear Mozart's or Haydn's quartets. What do you actually hear? Blam, blam, blam; blam, blam. But the chief thing is: you can survive all these blam, blam, blams and live happily ever after. And even after happily, you know. And even after 'after'. That is what counts, that is what you can rely upon.

And then Aristotle talks about rulers of all kinds. Of course a monarchy would be an ideal solution except that a king can turn out to be fool – and he often is, our king; fool, fool, fool – and his benevolence is always accompanied by a big question mark. This mark is almost as big as the monarch himself; and sometimes it is even bigger, so this question often hits the ceiling during his numerous and senseless speeches. First it lifts its crown and carries it as far as the biggest chandelier. Then the chandelier begins to tinkle and twinkle – like the proverbial little star. Everybody looks at the chandelier and they say to each other, 'This is a good omen. God must have heard our prayers.' But one cannot even be sure their prayer was heard by the chandelier in question, let alone by the crown. The taxes continue to grow as if lifted by the same question mark, and everything, everybody are questioned from now and on. Some people are questioned by the police and by judges. They are sent to prisons and concentration camps where they concentrate on their labours. And judges concentrate on the denunciations that float through various halls accusing this and that and him and him.

'Monarchs will almost certainly rule to promote their own advantage.' What kind of advantage could be discussed in the context? Monarchs say to almost everyone, 'One crown isn't enough. I wish I could wear three or four crowns.'

'But Your Majesty! With all due respect we doubt whether your head will be capable of wearing so many crowns at the same time.'

'They float, you know,' answers the monarch. 'They float in the air and elsewhere. And the air and also elsewhere are capable of wearing as many crowns as necessary to maintain my Absolute Rule.'

'An aristocracy might work but, again, the small number of rulers probably could not be trusted.' Well and good: you trust a small number of rulers who surround you on all sides – to protect you from bullets and bombs. But for no obvious reason one ruler leaves his post and leaves a hole instead – a hole through which a bullet can squeeze as easily as a pea. As easy as a pea, say the people who are allowed to witness the situation or rather the monarch's predicament. (We are still talking about a monarch. About whom could we talk? By whom could we replace him? No one else is worthy of our praise, blame and attention.) The group of courtiers grows smaller and smaller and finally a few bullets turn into a number of peas and penetrate the circle where the ruler, alias the monarch, makes yet another speech. The speech is interrupted by a bullet that gets stuck in the monarch's tongue. From now on he will speak only about bullets, canons, tanks and pilots. That is how wars traditionally start: a bullet turns into a pea and flouts all conventions. It even snaps its fingers at the dangers associated in every mind with the assassination of a king. It snaps its fingers once, it snaps its fingers twice, and the monarch collapses in front of his (or her) prime minister.

But let us continue our talk about small number. (This discussion has nothing to do with nanotechnology.) This small number of rulers turns into an oligarchy – in no time at all, mind you. (No time for bullets to introduce themselves into the king's inner circle.) These oligarchs make decisions to serve their own

ends rather than those of the community as a whole. And their own ends have no ends, as everybody knows, whereas the ends of the community stop, having no time to gain any momentum. A lot of conversations burst into existence because of this discrepancy. No, no, no – discrepancy. Let us follow one of the ends that belongs to community – rightfully, for once. This end is at the end and the whole community deplores this fact of affairs understandably enough. (We understand everything, don't we?) You see an end – of a cable, for instance – and say to whom are interested or not interested. 'This is the end, you know.'

'The end of what?' they ask you.

'The end of everything,' you say.

'Or everything? Look at this bit, for instance. It doesn't seem to me that this bit is the end of everything. This bit is probably the end of itself, which doesn't mean your world has come to an end and all our volcanoes erupt at the same time and probably even earlier, probably earlier. So we may erupt at any moment. Aren't we erupting right now?'

'No, I don't. I don't think you're erupting right now. But nothing prevents you from erupting in two minutes. Do you feel anything in your stomach?'

They would turn into an oligarchy? You turn into oligarchy? You stop at some point and ask, 'Is it oligarchy?' They don't answer you. But why should you turn into oligarchy? That's not necessary. You just turn into Oli and life begins as if nothing had ever happened. So many times, so many happenings. But you just say 'olli' whenever they turn their faces to you and open their mouths. You say 'Oil, I am Oil' and they accept you as if no crimes had ever been attached to your substance.

They ask you, 'What's your name?' and you say oil, oil, oil. And they put you into their machines, saying to their spouses, 'Do you know who helps us during our journey to the Riviera? It is oil, and she is very nice, very beautiful into the bargain.'

But Aristotle appreciates psyche in terms of its capacities. But what is psyche capable of? She is capable of crying, 'I'm Psyche, I'm Psyche, I'm Psyche.' So what? Or what else? We have lived without psyche for many, many years. Why should you put this burden on our backs at this particular moment? Let us speak rather of the soul which, according to some specialists, is tantamount to the psyche. Some of us say to others, 'You have no soul,' whereas the others did not nod their heads, contrary to what may be expected by polite people. They shake their heads and say, 'We do have our soul, but it is called "psyche".' 'Really?' 'Really.' 'What do you call psyche?' 'Psyche.' 'And what do you call that tree over there?' 'Psyche.'

You write a text and put semi-colons from time to time, when you feel like it. Psyche is the world, says someone. Someone also says someone, and that is also someone and probably psyche as well. But let us listen to Aristotle, instead of talking nonsense or rubbish. 'This is the ability to grow, to thrive and to carry out basic biological functions' What? What? What? My ability to grow is dependent on my basic growth, but my basic growth, I'm sorry to say, is too basic so you cannot grow. It can only jerk and that is apparently enough for healthy, Olympic, basic, growth,

It goes without saying that you can obey a set of rigid (not rich, no way) rules which are often contradictory. You obey one rule, and another rule knocks you on the head and says, 'You contradict. Yet I've never been impolite or otherwise unpleasant in your presence.' You do not wish to hear all sorts of nonsense without being able to answer your adversary, and so you say, 'Once – I think it took place five months ago – you touched your nose in a quite unpleasant, not to say vulgar manner. I was deeply offended by your behaviour

and actually everybody present – and many people were in assistance on that particular occasion – were as offended as I was. Do you think you can pick and choose in the matter of your nose and other overtures, other holes you possess for some reason I ignore?’

Fiddling with one’s nose or fingering it – God forbid! – does not belong to the domain we unanimously call ‘ethical’. *Et encore, et encore*. I don’t know. What *do* I know? Let us choose another, ‘righter’ moment for the dissection of this problem. Ethical action is almost always about negotiation and compromise. But let us leave the nose aside, its problem, its picking which, in my opinion, lives outside of all other questions, ethical or not. It is merely disgusting, and that is what I have to say on the subject, rounding it off, once and for all. Or all and for once. So you do not negotiate in this domain, if I am understood rightly; once and for all. Let us analyse a few sentences I picked up at random in newspapers bought by everybody in the streets and elsewhere. ‘The government has refused to negotiate with the strikers.’ All right, we encounter this piece of information every day, especially if we live in France. And sometimes (mostly, I must admit) we just do not care about these negotiations and their results. But one thing is accepted by everyone, without any exclusion: they were not negotiating about your nose and the way you maltreat it, more often than not. After all, you are not Gogol who devoted a short (or rather long) story to this problem which can leave you noseless, so to speak.

‘I’m negotiating for a new contract.’ Who cares about your new or old contracts? Unless we are vitally involved in the projects, anxious to protect our families from famines and other disasters strewn all along our paths. What’s the use discussing the ethical side of the problem; if any?

‘I’ve managed to negotiate (= get by discussion) a five per cent pay increase with my boss.’ Is this an ethical question? If it is, I should negotiate and discuss it with my boss. But I have no boss except myself. Sure enough, I could discuss this problem with myself, saying, for instance; ‘What do you think about this clause and that clause?’

‘Let’s leave all these clauses alone,’ I might answer to myself.

‘All right, all right. But wouldn’t you leave me alone?’

‘Myself?’

‘Wouldn’t you wish to listen Haydn’s quartets alone, on your own, undisturbed in any way?’

‘Yes.’

So I leave myself alone.

Bringing up our children to be ‘virtuous’ will better suit them to this kind of decision-making. What children? What kind of decision-making? What unkind of decision-making? (This is often the case, mind you.) First you have to find out what kind of decision-making is alluded to in this all-comprehensive book. All answers related to all sorts of problems are treated magnanimously, and yet I cannot find in it the decision and the making emphasised in the above sentence. There are doubtless many sentences situated *below* the sentence I am enlarging upon, but what is below is also above – everybody knows that.

But what do they say about Hokusai with whom I have been involved (have evolved) ever since I realised to what extent water and mountain play the game of my life within my ego? It is easy to find a text where they tell you that Hokusai is accessible – admired by – not only to the Westerners who see Western girls and Western boys and mountains and fountains we see not only within our landscapes, but also in Nabokov’s *Pale Fire*. They show you the *real* Hokusai, but what you see amounts to this, I’m afraid: M – meaning ‘mountain’, V – meaning ‘vague’, H – meaning Hokusai, J – meaning Japanese, B – meaning beautiful. Of

course you see old men and old, young women, but what does it mean? We live in different countries. Suppose Hokusai were still alive. Well, we live in different countries. He paints a mountain, and we say, 'This is a mountain.' But we say, 'A mountain' and he says 'Moutunogiub-shi.' What do we see, when studying his picture? We see 'Mout' and we say to ourselves in jubilant tones, 'Mountain, mountain. We understand the beauty of this magnificent work.' And what about the rest? What *do* we understand or feel? 'Tuno', 'gee',. Tuno means a 'tune' inside our vocabulary, so we start singing and that is the only reason we can give for our sudden 'bursting into song', as we define it. And what about 'gee'? 'Gee, honey, is that all your own hair?' That is all we can add to Hokusai's famous painting, and this is unfair, frankly speaking. It is better not to say anything at all or remain silent, which amounts to the same thing. It is better to mount to the same thing many times – to this *same* thing – so as not to commit a fearful, dreadful blunder which might consist of being disrespectful towards one of the most respectful painters in the history of this art. And in the history of many museums located all around the world.

If I am not mistaken, I had a talk about virtue, and Hokusai's painting belongs to this facet of human existence. It is true that, when you look at his mountains, you might say to yourself, 'I wish I could climb this mountain one of these days.' But his women and men are of another kind. They are inaccessible, so to speak. You never say to yourself – and not even to your best friends – 'I wish I could...' No, you don't wish. No, you cannot. All sorts of sexual harassment are excluded from the museum where you have an incredible opportunity to scrutinize these pictures. What's more, this particular kind of harassment is excluded even from the books you contemplate at ease in your library; or any other library for that matter. Even if you pick up the book in question and begin to fiddle with it, finger it, using occasionally your feet in the process, you *cannot*. Nothing doing. You fiddle, finger, fiddler, foodler, moodler – whatever you like. The picture remains innocent, virtuous, pure – virgin, if you wish. (And you do wish it – at the bottom of your heart. Because you are created in the image of God.)

So what could you do with Hokusai? You are sure to enlist him in the army of your supporters. Why? Because he does not care: he is dead and nothing can move him anymore. You move him and he does not move – that is his reaction to your moving. Move him if you wish; play a few Chopin nocturnes for him. Do you think he would shake a few tears, while listening to your cadenzas? What can move a dead man? Even a *great* dead man? Of course you can whisper into his ear, 'You're great, and you must know that. You're immortal and you know that as well. If you're immortal, you're sure to hear your descendants or any other descendants. Your great-great-great-great-great-great-great. They say to you, "Your pictures are beautiful. Your mountains are beautiful, your waters, whatever their sources, are beautiful. Your lines and colours are beautiful. We faint, when looking at your pictures. They – the attendants of all kinds – come to our rescue, we resume our postures and go on looking at your pictures, your waves, your Merus, your Hokusais. We even look at your kus and ais. Could you please admire the size of our admiration?"'

But what do we have in common with Hokusai and his waves? We just say, 'He's a great painter. We feel the world so profoundly, thanks to him, to his waves. We follow his waves and the world gets profound, and even more profound than before, a few seconds before. And then we aspire to heights and his mountains appear before our eyes as if summoned from some nebula of existence. Existence exists and there are waves in it; the waves of fury, for instance. But the wave we are engulfed by has nothing to do with fury. What we experience is a *pure* engulfment. By the way, we should repeat these words as often as we can: nothing to do,

nothing to do, nothing to do, nothing to do, because nothing has to do with anything. You see a painting or just a wave, a real wave, and you don't even have to say to yourself, 'nothing to do', because it has nothing to do with whatever you have seen before. Everything is anew, but it is not a brave new world – God forbid. It is a new *timid* world that accepts a timid beauty symbolised by a leaf and a nonsensical world – certainly not love. This word might have significance somewhere, but what does it matter? It does have significance; in other words, it signifies something or somebody or nobody. Most frequently. But it is just a word and that is what counts. A word. Or an ord. Rd. How beautiful it is! Almost as beautiful as Hokusai's painting.

And what about Rousseau? What about the world in general? Rousseau says, 'We live in constant and constantly changing relationships with other people, and so we do need also to be well-disposed towards them.' We are well-disposed towards them. And what about *them*? They are also well-disposed towards us, for they read Rousseau in their childhood and even in their youth when very few people read Rousseau, with the exception of Derrida and some other philosophers of note. But we are neither philosophers nor of note, so we do not have to read either Derrida or Rousseau. We do not have to read anything, not even newspapers which talk nonsense and rubbish all the time, even if they do not belong to what they call 'tabloid papers' or something of the kind. Something of the kind is always of the kind because it is nearer to the truth; to kindness.

Constantly changing relationships with other people. My God – how true this is! Truth itself, I must say! Today you are my friend, so to speak; tomorrow you are not even my enemy. Tomorrow you are my awfulness, perniciousness, terribility, horribility, territerriterriawful. Or just fool. Why should I be well-disposed towards horribility or terribolity? All right, you are well-disposed towards terribolity. After studying this nonsense for a while, you conclude that terrib is threatening because it is 'terrible', in disguise. But the rest of the word seems rather benevolent. Olity. This reminds you of oil and you imagine the world where you could slide from one oily Hokusai-inspired mountain to another and really enjoy yourself, which seldom happens in our and other worlds. You slide, you slide, you slide, you glide, and – wonders of wonders, marvels of marvels, karmas of karmas – you enjoy yourself, which has never happened since 1999. You seem to take advantage of both Hokusai's mountains and his wave – his fountains, in other words. What else do you need? A piece of cake?

And then you find yourself in front of all sorts of questions related to cakes, and you resolve not to plunge into this chaos, for the simple reason that it is not simple, this reason, the number of cakes and chaos in general, although, at some point you were interested in the theory attached to chaos. But what is attached to chaos nowadays? Everything. That is why it has grown so uninteresting. You point to Putin and say, 'He is a good example of chaos.' And everybody applauds. Then Putin strips his clothes off and throws them anywhere, any, any, any, any how. And any, any, anyhow where. And everybody applauds. Why? Because they say the following. They say, 'We understood his inner nature. He is anyhow and anywhere. And we wish he were nowhere.'

We live in complex and constantly changing relationships... Let's stop for a while sometimes, otherwise we are likely to go on forever, which is tiresome, to say the least. You can go on and on until you trip over something, be it a root or your own problem. You do it several times in the row, and the row grows too long; and you grow weary as well. So both you and the row grow weary and you say to yourself, 'It's enough, I've gone a long way and the tether is just in front of me. So I'd better stop. I know nothing about my row's tether, my path's tether, my life's tether and my tether in general.'

What do you know about anything? You know that the word ‘tether’ starts with the letter ‘t’. But where is this tether of yours? Is it here, is it there, is it anywhere? Apparently you have a tether, otherwise you would not be able to get to the end of it. But can you be in the middle of your tether? In the middle of anywhere, of nowhere? You can say that; yet you have no idea what you are talking about. You do not know any middles so you cannot say, ‘I’m in the middle of nowhere.’ What’s more, you do not know anything about nowhere. You know ‘no’, vaguely. If you ask for a cup of tea and they say to you, ‘No,’ you know you will not have your cup of tea, even if you pay for it. Of course if you pay a hundred dollars for your cup of tea, they will give something to you, but does this really count? They say that Aristotle’s arguments in favour of slavery and subjugation of women are not very convincing. He says, ‘You have no wish to work so you look for someone who can perform this task for you. You see someone in the streets and say, “He’ll do nicely for the job.” And this person becomes your slave. The same goes for women. You see a woman and say to her, “You’re my woman so you’ll have to wash my dishes and also my body, from time to time. And then you’ll wash my house which will never be yours because you’re a woman and nothing else; nobody else. Anyway, you’re not a man. That’s why you’ll wash everything, while I’ll catch forty winks and forty sweet dreams. And I don’t even ask you whether this suits you or not. That suits me. Can’t you hear me?” Of course she hears you. At least that is what happened in the times when Aristotle wrote his books on philosophy, women, men and washing.

Another question is on our agenda: ‘How should people act so as to meet their obligations to their community?’ What kind of community are you talking about? There are pedestrians and they choose to walk beyond my windows. (Luckily for me they do not walk *within* my windows. When someone walks within your windows you really feel his or her presence. And that is unbearable.) What kind of obligations, for God’s sake? What do I owe you? Do you think I owe you this chest of drawers I bought 20 years ago in Paris? I do admit there are some people somewhere. Can they be called ‘community’? All right – call them what you wish. But what do *I* have to do with all these nominations, designations and nonsense? You can have my chest of drawers on condition that you promise to leave me in peace for the rest of my life. And if, at some moment of this rest of my life, you interfere with the course of this life of mine, I will have my chest of drawers – I will. Why? Because that’s my will. And, according to Aristotle, you should meet your obligations to my will.’

People are essentially social and can be *be^rpà^permua* in a community. That is what I wrote after being involved with a group of people who were social, to all appearances, and my dearest wish eventually focused on their disappearance. How could they disappear? I might say to them, to everyone, ‘Please, disappear. You’re unwelcome in this house and probably in Paradise, at the famous gate about which our folk talks abundantly in their deathbed speeches. They clear their throats and begin to talk to those whose bodies they can see in spite of their pre-death blindness. What do they say? ‘I depart.’ That’s what they and we usually say, but that is not necessary: everyone knows our life is a series of departures and arrivals. Sometimes you see a napkin or whatever it is; sometimes you see a sort of smile, meaning I’m happy to get rid of you. As for life, it is happy to get rid of you too. That is how all this comes to an end. And we are happy when it *crawls* to an end.

We have an unavoidable obligation to take part in community life, bear responsibility for its decisions. They go somewhere and decide what should be done, whereas I stroll along the path I see and feel in front of me. I don’t really know if that path belongs to life or to a park. Let them belong to whatever they wish if they have this wish: belonging, belonging, belonging. Some women or men just throw themselves into your closed arms, shouting, ‘I belong to you.’ What does it mean? Are you a Russian serf? Probably not. Do you want me to

take advantage of your body at once, proving to you and everybody else you do belong to me, *corps et âme*? Body and soul, soul and sinews? Nothing means anything; everything just happens. What is happening now? Some man fiddles with a female body. He fingers it and also toys with it. He says to it, 'You're not only my wife but also my sister. We play hide and seek every day. You hide and I seek. I find you at once, but before proclaiming my victory I slap your face several times, and I do it as long as I wish. Sometimes I no longer wish to do it, but *noblesse oblige*, or something else obliges: there are many somethings and obligations we have to deal with; I in particular. So I slap, slap, slap and at one point – I don't remember where it is located – you say 'Enough'. In other words, I stop slapping your face. Of course I don't stop other action I triggered off at some point (at another point). What are these actions directed at? Several cheeks are aligned in front of you. Do you necessarily have to slap them? (It is better to slip them, to sleep, as Hamlet used to say.) To allow to turn the other cheek, Well, if you wish to turn your cheeks you do it at leisure. And if you don't have enough leisure to turn your cheeks or even your head or even your thumbs, you just do not turn anything and say to anybody, 'Go to Hell.' And everybody goes to hell. How remarkable it is, this obedience, this law, this command, this sentence. You say, 'Go to Hell' and people follow your advice as if they were sure you are right. Are you right? Don't ask too many questions, especially if they are directed at yourself.

We do take part in communities. So we arrive to a community, after knocking profusely at the door, and say, 'I wish to become a part and probably even a parcel of this community.' They say 'all right', even when they do not say anything and nothing happens. That is their custom. Then they show you a part of their community and say, 'Do you like this part?' You answer, 'No.' They say, 'Doesn't matter. Otherwise you won't have anything.' So you have anything, and this anything does not look worse than what they suggested you should have in the first place. Whatever one might think, sometimes the second place is even superior to the first one. You pick up this place or part of it and carry it somewhere, and you do not always know where you carry it. From time to time you hear a voice, 'Where to?' But you do not answer this voice because answers mean confusion, and confusions should be avoided at all cost. The cost is high, but it does not really matter, given that confusion is avoided.

You carry this part; well, you carry something and you honestly think you carry a part of the community. And you may carry it as far as the ear of communism, but then someone whispers into your ear, 'Carry it towards socialism, and that will be enough.' 'How much? How much?' You begin to negotiate your communism or socialism or whatever.

'Ten thousand.'

'Ten thousand roubles?'

'Ten thousand dollars.'

'Ten thousand...'

'Thirty thousand...'

No one is capable of rounding off this dialogue, so it goes on and on. And then someone walks round this group of people and the conversation is rounded off. What is the result? **FOURTY THOUSAND, SIXTY SOMEWHAT!** What some, what what? Who cares.

The limit of the state's power is that beyond which it ceases to serve its citizens. Do you serve me? Do you serve me? Do you serve me? You hear these questions all the time. A representative of the state walks down the street; or up the street – habitually these representatives walk *up* the streets. A passer-by stops in his tracks

and asks the following question addressed to the representative of the state (or stake) who, let us not forget it, walks *up* the same street. ‘Do you serve me?’ asks the passer-by.

‘In what sense?’

‘In every sense of the term.’

‘How many terms does my servitude contain?’

‘Around 80. I haven’t really counted.’

‘Please, do count my servitudes. Then come to my office and we’ll analyse your arithmetic.’

‘It is geometry I’m talking about.’

‘We could also talk about quadrometry.’

‘Why not?’

‘And quidrometry.’

‘Why not?’

What the point? The community is still there and chimney pipes seem to be in order. What else can count in the life of an ordinary man? He studies Wittgenstein and often talks when it is better to keep silent, probably forever. I have always wondered how the people – monks, chiefly monks – inaugurate their vow of silence and keep their mouth shut until the day of their death or another life. Sometimes they need the help of their hands: their mouth wishes to come into the open. It does come, but at the last moment a hand or a finger makes it to behave in such a way that it comes to a standstill. There is no openness they speak so often of on the Internet. Openness, openness. Sometimes they even go so far as to pronounce the word ‘transparency’. Well, the mouth is open, but it is not transparent, not in the least.

And a town, any city are open to. To whom? To bandits, to billionaires? This city is open and I enter it just for the fun of. Of it, of it. All these its look and sound alike. And together, sometimes. What do we know about our own house? We know a table, but this table knows us much more thoroughly. And that irritates us beyond measure. Why does this inanimate thing knows me better than whatever I can know, after studying in three or four universities? How come? How come? It comes, it comes and no one knows *how* it comes; or whether it comes at all. This phenomenon has taken place so often in the history of humankind. Some of them shout, ‘Here he is. He’s finally come!’ And others murmur, ‘I don’t understand what they’re talking about.’

‘Can’t you see?’

‘Whom?’

‘Him.’

‘Kim? Kim Bassinger?’

‘What are you talking about?’

‘Who are you talking about?’

‘Him, Him, Him, Him.’

‘It is her, isn’t she?’

‘Why should I become virtuous? It’s so hard. It’s much easier to earn several millions. And you know what I’m talking about. So what’s all this fuss for?’ ‘For nothing,’ you reply. ‘Nothing is also for nothing.’ And what about rationality, for God’s sake? Who is rational? A mathematician, a billionaire? Look at them closely and the rationality will vanish into thin air, as I usually say; together with Shakespeare. At the beginning the air says, ‘I’m too thick for your vanity, ridiculousness and other nonsense you harbour within your substance and

your thick head and skull. Why can't I welcome you in my thin air? Because your thick head and skull are too thick to squeeze into it. Can't you hear this whistle, sort of whistle? That's how they do their best to penetrate into my thin air. SHGS – this is the aria of their penetration.'

Why should I live well with other people? If an enemy betrays you, you say to yourself, 'He's my enemy and his profession is betraying me, understandably enough.' So you applaud his deed and offer him a bunch of flowers. Let us take another case. You live virtually, rationally, in a lovely manner with other people you call 'my friends, my dear friends, my beloved guests'. (*Invités?* Did I wish to say *invités?*) And then one of these beloved guests betrays you then and there, all of a sudden; and his betrayal comes out of the blue, as usual. 'It comes, it comes, it comes,' they shout. For once they think about a betrayal (Judas), not of Jesus Christ. You see the blue, but you do not see anything special, anything out of the ordinary. 'What has come out of the blue?' you ask your guests. 'Have you grown blind or not?' they ask you.

'I don't think I've gone blind, considering that I can see the score of Beethoven's *Hammerklavier Sonata*.'

'This sonata isn't the only item we can enjoy or destroy in this world, you know.'

Why should I live with other people? This question remains, whatever you can do to remove some or someone from wherever you happen to be, not to be. Sometimes you just see a lot of people and say to them, 'Why should I live with you together? In some proximity or other? Why do we have to rub shoulders with each other, one another? Rubbing shoulders is an unpleasant ritual. You see a person and think you should treat her friendly, otherwise someone might think wrongly about you. So you begin to rub shoulders with this individual. You rub one shoulder with him, another shoulder. You begin to see the difference between these two rubbings. You say to yourself that the first rubbing is better than the second. But on second thoughts you begin to think (or to feel) that the second rubbing is not so bad as you thought only five minutes ago. But why do you have to choose between these rubbings? You like the first; at least you liked it at the very beginning of your rubbing exercise. And then you voted for the second rubbing, but nothing prevents you from enjoying both rubbings alternatively. You decide to enjoy the first rubbing for five seconds. If it is not enough, you enjoy it for six seconds, for eight seconds – for as many seconds as you wish, for God's sake! (What wouldn't you do for God's sake, my God!). Then there comes the second shoulder – if you are weary of the first one. You begin your operation and suddenly you realise you are tired – not only of rubbing, but also of everything else. Of living, among other things. Of listening to Beethoven's quartets. What aren't you tired of?

Are you tired of writing the following sentence? 'I go for a walk and I am tired already.' All right. Were you really tired at the end of your labour which consisted of writing this short sentence? Yes, you must acknowledge the following fact, 'You were half-tired when you got to the end of the first half of this sentence, namely, "I go for a walk."' When you represent the ritual you submit yourself to – willingly or not – you might not feel anything yet; not the fatigue at least. Perhaps a sort of joy and liberation. But then there comes the frustration I am talking about. What frustration am I talking about? You have to raise your foot and put it somewhere. Actually you cannot put it anywhere because if you do, you may collapse, and it is much harder to rise from the Earth then to fall on it. Anybody can fall on the Earth: you just do it. Nothing doing, so to speak.

But what about the thought that accompanies the ritual, the process and the tedium of all this? First you have to put one of your feet somewhere. One of your feet. Which one? Assumingly you must know which feet (or leg) of yours is more appropriate for this task. If you are left-handed, you might think it is your left foot you

have to choose for this kind of exploit. All right, you choose your left foot, but it is not apparently up to your left hand's standards. After all, a hand is not a leg or foot – everyone knows that. So you choose your right leg – you have no choice, anyway. How many legs or feet do you have? Well, let us not become entangled in the maze of eternal problems.

LIFE ALIVE

This expression or mythology or just a saying of no importance – life *is* without importance, but not without toil – is quite fashionable in some societies where death is regarded as a boon, a gift, a happy end to any enterprise. And what is life? Just a pointless enterprise whose entertainer has probably always been dead. But what does all this mean? Isn't any life alive? As soon as you pronounce the word (or notion) 'life', everything comes to life, down to dead leaves, to the stretches of earth strewn with dead leaves. A few discussions may spring to life in this context, given that many people still believe – in spite of atom bombs and smashers – that the Earth, our dear irreplaceable planet, is still alive. What kind of proof can be voiced in support of this ludicrous theory? The supporters of this thesis point out that volcanoes continue to erupt, uncompromisingly threatening populations, dogs and even foliage which have never done any harm to anybody or anything. (With the exception of a hundred allergies which do not count in the majestic context called 'human life'.) Well, is our Earth alive or not? We could live on a dead body, and every stone is dead to some extent, especially when compared with our jumps and banquet halls overgrown with dishes and speeches. Yes, you take a floor, any floor and begin to walk on it as if nothing had ever happened. (There are many dangers related to floors and their fundamental fragility. You put your foot on some patch of the floor you are surrounded with and, in the twinkling of an eye, this patch turns into a hole. And your leg becomes a sort of pillar. Not a pillar of society, though.)

If someone says that everything and everybody are dead, this individual – assuming we are talking about an individual, not about a machine and its dead letters – we can quote a verse from Shakespeare's sonnet or play a Beethoven sonata, paying attention to all e and d sharps. And if someone goes on contradicting our speeches and arguments, we can show him or her a dozen LPs on which a producer of sorts engraved the following letters 'Live Recording'. Sometimes they say that everything is alive, provided you can touch it, meaning that only invisibility does not belong to this life of ours. On the other hand, phantoms are part and parcel of invisibility; at least during certain periods, until the fatal moment when they depart from this invisibility and kill us either with a dagger or with their little fingers which are even more powerful, sharp and lethal than daggers. They are even mightier than Othello's clutches. Apparently the idiom (or expression) 'touchy-feely' has its origin in the quarrel that often takes place when a group of non-believers-in-life and believers-in-it find themselves within a space, an enclosed sort of space; not necessarily a prison, mind you. One group has the following slogan, 'No touch, no feely – nothing.' The members of the other group limit the manifestation of their wrath to the words, 'You – touchy, you – feely, you – feely-wheely, you – willy, you – teachy, you – fake teachers, you – ignoramuses, you – scoundrels, you – nothingnesses.' A member of the first group comes up to a representative of the second opinion, touches her (they never touch men) and says, 'Do you think you're alive?' Then the latter says to the former, 'Until further notice.' 'And here's this further notice,' says the former, opening his fly and showing his penis. 'And let me remind you that my penis is thickly smeared with poison.' Then the rape begins and ends. And that is the end of it.

We should not forget dialogues, should we? Their absence might lead to our total isolation from both humanity and God, and His celestial consort. We do not mind being removed from the sphere and context called humanity; even without penises it would poison our life to such an extent that no yardstick, however gigantic, not to say measureless, would help us fathom the depth of our obnoxious fatality. But God is good and everybody knows that. Even atheists are somehow aware of His benevolence, for all the famines, plagues and

wars He had not prevented in the course of our (and His) history. Some of those atheists say, ‘Well, we are allowed to nourish ourselves from time to time. And that’s what we should call “happiness”, according to the saints, Mother Teresas and all other representatives of celestial bodies.’ Yes, we are offered a glass of whisky and a piece of bread – from time to time (I am obliged and duty bound to repeat this maxim), but what do we need apart from these pieces and glasses? A Mercedes? Is that what you really need? And what about your inner treasure – Baudelaire whom you can recite at any hour of day and dawn; even at night, during your sleep?

When walking around Russia – what for, I wonder? – you see a lot of bifurcations and some of them are made of human flesh, human bones and human brains. A brain continues to bifurcate, even if it is dead and buried. Why? Because brains never stop: they engender their maxims and the maximum stupidity they are capable of *eternally*. In other words, life on Earth and elsewhere is eternal: there is nothing apart from eternity. If you hear a stupid, revolting remark, you say, shrugging your shoulders, ‘What do you expect them to do? Eternity is to blame.’ From time to time, they and their governors decide to hang eternity – once and for all, mind you. And on the eve of the execution, they say to each other, ‘Let us keep an eye on eternity, otherwise it may swallow some poison – as Goering did.’ One may wonder why it is so important to *hang* eternity, instead of just killing it? The point is it is not enough just to *get rid* of eternity without appending *something* to this torture. You must humiliate it, to make everyone understand to what extent its importance and status have been overvalued, overloaded and overworshipped. They think that, if allowed to live eternally, they will become Beethovens and Rockefellers – all of them; without exception, without exception. Alas, there are only a few American producers walking up and down Broadway and Fifth Avenue. And the filth, the eternal filth is still everywhere.

In a Soviet film an officer asks his charwoman a trivial question, ‘What time is it, please?’ And she answers without looking at any clock, at any hands and minutes, ‘It’s around seven, I suppose.’ ‘You suppose? What else do you suppose? Do you suppose this chest of drawers is in this room or somewhere else? Where, in your opinion? And what about my arm that can stroke your face at any time, provided you’re not too far away - in your native village, for instance? What else do you suppose? Where can one find a series, a collection of your suppositions? In your bed, under your mattress? In your kitchen, behind your coffee grinder?’

By the way, a similar collection of Tertullian’s thoughts was found under *his* mattress. Here it is:

I believe in the world because what I see and hear is incredible, just incredible.

I believe that all children are born with equal intelligence.

I believe in the absurdity of intelligence. Even intelligent agencies are absurd. What is more, they are even more absurd than the rest.

I believe in intelligent agencies, in their inborn intelligence and wisdom.

The point is it does not really matter what time it is now or what time it will be in two thousand years because it will always be the same filthy eternity about which I have already talked at length here and also elsewhere, almost everywhere. The Soviet officer is a Soviet spy and therefore he must know exactly what time he is dealing with; or rather what time is about to destroy him forever or just for several years. (Soviet spies were destroyed on a regular basis.) If you concentrate on the time which adorns your watches and probably your life,

you let go a lot of concomitant shows that deflect you towards shows based on non-time recruitments, participants, clowns. Instead of a well-adjusted joke or even mockery, you see a nose that detaches itself from the face to which it seems to belong and undertakes a journey to the end of the world. It grows, grows, grows, pierces a number of ceilings and goes on growing beyond galaxies. What's more, galaxies continue to expand in accordance with the pattern suggested by the nose. What does that mean?

Down-to-earth individuals approach our nose and also our psyche in terms of their capacities. What can a nose do? It can admire a bunch of flowers you receive as a present from one of your visitors. It can also appreciate the perfume you are offered by the same visitor or somebody else. You can also stick your nose into someone's life, but such practices are frowned upon and the same nose can express its condemnation of spying, especially that, contrary to what usually happened to Soviet spies, social spies are seldom, if ever find themselves in prisons and in the courtyards where one can see a lot of corses – the visual victims of well-meant executions. But, oddly enough, our nose can also carry out the duties attributed to the psyche, to its capacity to know whatever happens beyond curtains, thrones and frowns. Usually, instead of answering a boring, unnecessary question, some individual – he can be different from the one I was talking about a few seconds ago – shrugs off questions, obligations and other chores, saying, 'Ask my psyche. She knows and feels everything, even what may be called unknown, unfelt worlds.'

Some sages used to say, 'The soul is what it can do.' But our gurus deny such an approach to the problem of knowledge and its fruitfulness. They shrug their shoulders, set their heads in motion and say, 'The soul can do everything, everybody, every every and a lot of dys. The whole world, in other words. That's what our soul can do, otherwise it would be useless to live on this Earth and even on its satellite.' Tertullian believed in his soul, but not on account of its absurdity, contrary to what may be assumed in the light of what I have exposed in the course of this treatise. He said, 'The soul is the only instrument that may allow us to treat successfully the opaqueness of the world. We look at an object or subject and say, "This is absurd, and it doesn't really matter whether I believe in it or not. Let it disappear in the twinkling of an eye, of its own accord."' But the soul explains to us all the ins and outs of the matter or of the individual standing in front of us as if he or she were our guardian and concludes as follows, 'In the light of what I've just explained to you, you no longer have to believe in this individual, be he your friend or foe. And if you don't believe in him, if you don't trust him, in other words, you'd better get rid of him or her, without waiting for his eye and its twinkling. Let the little star do the twinkling – that would be enough.'

The sense organs of the body are essentially what they can do, as they say. But we are supposed continually to overspring ourselves, to *überspringen* or whatever they say in German to that effect. Actually it is Nietzsche who is supposed to have said that on some occasion or other. Between ourselves, he might have jumped several times, instead of talking his head off. By dint of springing, he might have reached the state depicted in his philosophy with the aid of super, super, super, superterms. Be that as it may, when asked about the 'way to superman' he invariably blurted out, 'Jump, jump, jump.' As one of his admirers said reproachfully, 'He blurted everything out about the superman, though we'd agreed to keep it a secret for a while.'

As a result of such discussions, we often see the jumpers – not the professional jumpers, though – who cannot walk normally, decently up or down the streets they put their feet and bodies on. They see a puddle in front of their legs and, understandably enough, jump over it, anxious to avoid any contact with it. But instead of walking on, pursuing their train of thought – the train of their body, rather – they take a few steps in the opposite

direction and execute another jump, with the same purpose in their minds. They repeat the exercise a dozen times and then ask any idle observer, 'Do I look like a superman now?'

'Yes, but the superman I saw last night was even more super than you.'

'I suppose the puddle he had to conquer was larger.'

'No, no – he himself was larger and his jumps were higher. More majestic, if you see what I mean.'

We are talking about talking and others as if there were such things as talking and others for whom democracies created their paradises. Yes, there are others, we are others, we think otherwise, we are otherwise, and so on and so forth. (So forth is not less important than so on; and yet it comes after so on. Does that mean that in a democracy there are neither after nor before? Everything and everybody are before.) How *could* you talk to others, for God's sake or any other sake? (For a glass of sake, as many of us say.) What is the point, assuming there are not any; any point, so to speak? You jump because you like the procedure, the method of becoming superhuman; not in no time at all, I'm afraid. You jump and someone you have not invited to the party says in passing, 'Not great? Is it?' Of course you do not have to say anything, not even – what is said traditionally, under any circumstance – 'what are you talking about?' Nobody knows what anybody else is talking about either on this occasion or under any other circumstances. The only thing you can say about the whole problem or enigma is, 'Someone is talking.' Of course you could add (in the same breath, mind you), 'To no purpose,' which goes without saying. At least this goes without saying 'to no purpose'. You could just say 'to no' if you cannot restrain yourself. But your opponent – there are only your opponents on the Earth, but there are no others – is sure to answer thus, 'You should try to restrain your ambitions and be more realistic.' What ambitions are you talking about, pray? It is better not to go any further, any deeper into the subject.

So you jump because you feel like jumping; for no reason at all, you admit it rather willingly. But any unbiased or biased observer – they are all biased, basically and basely biased – just says, without waiting for permission or an invitation, 'Do you really think that, by jumping higher and higher, you'll become a superman? In the long run or rather in the high jump?' You shout many words, injuring your neighbours and even the nature you are in love with, and suddenly a new life thrusts upwards into the sky and you see a lot of cathedrals where you can fall on your knees and pray to our Lord for pain, for the absence of pain, for joy which, in your Russian mind, you easily confuse with 'voy' meaning howl. Some unbiased observer comes in and asks another traditional question, 'Is there someone outside, or is it just the wind howling in the trees?'

That is how they usually get off the hook. They hear a lot of *voy*, people asking for Bestadine (whatever its name is) or a painkiller, or a lifekiller – I can't! I can't! I can't! – and some observers, dressed modestly and for the occasion, just walk around saying to each other, 'What do you hear? Can you hear anything? Do you hear any sort of *voy*?'

'What is *voy*?' asks another observer or rather unobserver.

'Vo-o-o-o-o-o-o-o - that's what it is.'

'No, I just hear the wind howling in the trees.'

'Is the wind you hear inside the church?'

'I don't think so.'

'So you go out and help the wind you hear so distinctly.'

‘What am I supposed to do with this wind, once I manage to catch it?’

‘You should take it to a hospital.’

‘To the casualty department?’

‘That’s right.’

‘And what if it is the wind?’

‘What of it?’

‘The suffering unit may turn out to be the wind, not its victim. Not the trees, I mean.’

‘Then put two or three trees on your back and go to the same hospital.’

‘They must be heavy, these trees.’

‘Don’t you remember Christ? Didn’t he carry his Cross, patiently, patiently?’

‘For a while, yes.’

‘You have to have enough patience, at least for this while.’

In this connection one inevitably recalls the patience exhibited by Jesus Christ in his mother’s womb. Anybody might think that Christ did not really need this womb of hers, given his unnatural birth and miraculous predestination. Do you really have to go through the motions (fire and water, the floor) if you are just there for everybody to see? There is a painting entitled *The Appearance of Christ to the People*. He has already his age and his clothes, and one can hardly imagine a woman drawing his body from another woman’s womb, saying, ‘Don’t shout so loud, my dear. Do you want me to go deaf on account of your screams? Take it easy. It’s almost done. I’ve got his feet already. Now I can feel his left knee. He’ll be a very handsome boy, I can assure you. Many women will fall in love with him. By the way, have you already given a thought to what his bride will get upon marrying him? The dowry, I mean. You know, my memory isn’t what it used to be when I was young and danced with my Vania. Do you remember him? You don’t? What a pity! He was a handsome young man. Not very young at the time when you *might* have seen him, I must confess.’ Christ’s Mother listens to this rigmarole with a view to teaching her the basic notion of what is called ‘patience’. And, according to many observers, patience is the main quality of human beings. Of course you can talk as well about the cheeks you are supposed to turn as if they were roundabouts or something of the sort. But patience includes both roundabouts and the sorts of all sorts, because you do not really have to turn anything to show how magnanimous and Christian you are. You just stand there, in the middle of a room, of a street and someone – or two, three persons at once – slaps your face and also other parts of your body which do not turn, contrary to what a Christian might expect under the circumstances. Of course you can say to this so-called Christian, ‘I don’t really have to turn anything, any part of my body, because they are all easily accessible. Let *them* turn, if they wish. Aren’t they a gang of dervishes in disguise?’

To tell the truth, we should take into consideration many aspects of the notion called ‘patience’ or many patiences, if you prefer. Let us take an ordinary, family situation. A boy looks at his mother imploringly, but she says firmly, in the once-and-for-all tone of voice and its timbres, ‘You’ll have your bar of chocolate at 8 p.m. Not a minute before. The boy bursts into tears but soon realises the futility of his undertaking. So he no longer undertakes anything: he just puts his fingers on the table and waits, waits, waits as he looks at a grandfather clock. One minute elapses, another follows on the heels of the first minute, of the one we talked about a minute ago. The boy spends his time in this fashion until the grandfather clock strikes eight. The boy jumps for joy and receives the bar of chocolate he has been waiting for so patiently, so stoically and imperturbably. But there is a

difference between this bar of chocolate and any sermon Our Saviour gave vent to in the course of his life or career. Does it really matter whether the boy in question eats his bar of chocolate three minutes later, four minutes later? Even if he is deprived of this chocolate, no one will really suffer, on condition that we believe in this boy's good nature. If his nature is evil, perverse and intrinsically bad, even worse than that, he may murder a few people on account of this bar of chocolate he was deprived of at the age of seven or six. 'Injustice reigns in this world,' he might have said to himself at the age of nine. 'And it's not my fault.'

The point is there must be a point when everyone grows aware of what the presence of Jesus Christ represents on our globe at least; and everywhere else. But you need his word, and you need it *badly*, according to the Scriptures. You cannot wait until 8 p.m., whatever your mother says on the subject. She is even capable of comparing Jesus to a bar of chocolate, saying, 'His sermons are as sweet and adorable as this bar of Swiss chocolate.' But are you prepared to renounce the world for the sake of this chocolate, however smooth and sweaty? Yes, Jesus said unambiguously, 'Either you follow this bar of chocolate, eating it as you progress on your sinful path, or you follow me.' Of course, at this particular moment, you hear a chorus of children conducted by an old professional conductor, 'Can't we have both, the best of the both worlds, as they say, or are they just lying through their teeth, even if they have none? By the way, can you lie through your implants?' Of course the Americans can say, 'It depends on the quality of the implants,' which means that there are implants through which you lie even better than if your teeth are in perfect working order. So many patients go to their dentists, even if their teeth are working miracles within their mouths and brains in general. 'What kind of problem can you have with your teeth?' their dentists enquire. And they answer, almost unanimously, 'We don't care about the food we have and swallow in the long run. We need to lie *cleanly*, if you see what I mean. We must get rid of dirty lies, of all these packs of lies they accuse us of.'

So their dentist pulls all their teeth out and puts Jesus's sermons in where those teeth used to display their brilliance and independence. (The independence of Christ's teaching, that is.) Whenever those persons eat in the presence of their colleagues and friends, in addition to their customary wisdom they display the wisdom of God just by eating a leg of mutton or a haunch of venison.

So can you compare a boy waiting for his bar of chocolate with Jesus who, by virtue of his human nature (and his own inborn virtue and structure), has to spend nine months in his mother's womb? Jesus has to say to us, 'Thou shalt not kill.' (Or something of the kind. There will always be something of the kind – this all amounts to the same truth.) Of course many other people know this truth, and they can voice it in different ways, for instance, 'What are you doing, you scoundrel? Stop it or I'll call the police.' Or you just recall Don José who kills Carmen and surrenders himself and his knife to the police, saying, 'You should arrest me because I've killed her, you know. O Carmen, O Carmen.' But we might omit the rest of his dying dialogue. (Is it really dying? He might have been pardoned in the days when feminism did not hold its sway over the planet.)

We are all aware of the fact that it is pernicious and painful (for everyone) to kill a human being. Even a bystander about whom I have talked already on many occasions – and I often do this in other publications as well to show that neither men nor women are really isolated: they all belong to human society, to put it mildly. Well, even this new bystander of ours is quite aware of how awful death feels and sounds, especially if you witness it at close quarters. Everything is so perversely close: a vulnerable body, an instrument of doom, the unquenchable desire to kill, to destroy, to deprive, to squeeze. A woman faints already, although no drop of blood has spoiled the beauty of the cityscape so splendidly renovated in recent years. You know that, before

passing away, the victim will speak about his aging mother, about his children, their incurable illness and notorious lack of money. You know that at the very last moment the victim will draw as much air into his lungs as all these volumes put together – the volumes involved in the respiratory process – so that he actually becomes a real airbag. Ask any other bystander (or the same one) what he or she thinks about the figure standing or partly lying in front of him or her, and they will all say in unison: ‘What a marvellous airbag. I wish my car had something similar.’ And yet the victim is allowed to do everything – even writing his testament – but then the knife does its job, while its owner mutters under his breath, ‘It’s not for nothing I’ve sharpened it.’ So first he sharpened his mind. Then he sharpened the edge of the stick to a point. (Yes, there was a stick by his side – just in case. Anyway, knives do not always perform their duties to the utmost. What is more, the victim may turn out to be a vampire.)

So, in days of yore, people were killed without the slightest hesitation. And even if the killer’s hand trembled at some point, the revolver or the stick did the deed on their own: so joyful killing was represented in human minds. By whom? By Satan, of course. And during these massacres Jesus was still in his mother’s womb, according to Tertullian. And when Tertullian’s colleagues dared to point out that Jesus was to be drawn out of his mother’s womb – like Macduff, Tertullian invariably answered. Macduff wasn’t our saviour.

According to today’s statistics women live longer than men. But in those days, in days of yore, neither women nor men could enjoy a long fruitful life. There were knives and sticks almost everywhere, and even if there were no hands to hold them, they acted on their own and we had to climb over corpses, even when doing our ordinary shopping. But then Jesus Christ was let out of his mother’s womb; and we know nothing about his sojourn in there. He never spoke about it because, in the first place, it was a personal matter: no one could even ask permission to spend some time in his mother’s womb. And then a crowd had already gathered around the Saviour’s knees and he had to talk to all those people about their future, not about his own past.

So he said, ‘Thou shalt not kill’ and at this particular moment one could hear a lot of ‘pums’: the sound associated in our minds with daggers, knives and sticks falling to the ground. Then the Saviour smiled and said, ‘You can keep the sticks – there are many vampires in your midst. And you can’t distinguish them from ordinary citizens with your unarmed eyes.’ Could you imagine such a thing? In those days, in days of yore, they were selling arms for eyes – the instruments which enabled one to tell a vampire from an ordinary whore or spinster. But even hag-ridden men did not always kill their wives: they recalled our Saviour’s words. And if their neighbours or close friends dared comment, ‘I’d kill her, if I were you,’ the husband in question always answered. ‘He said.’ Unfortunately, in our present-day world where nothing looks or sounds like what they call the days of yore, this formula, this slogan or incantation, is chiefly used in the spheres connected to tyrants, demagogues and other semi-gods whose insistence and self-assurance (I know better) makes everybody’s life hell. ‘He said’ is said about a petty devil who talks from rostrums and shouts ‘Hurrah!’ even when his soldiers fall on their knees and take an oath of allegiance to public enemies number one, two, three, four and so on; and so forth.

We often talk about ends, but mostly these ends concern our own life, the life of our civilisation, of mammoths and other animals, savage or domestic, or just depicted in a book. We often speak about the end of books, saying, ‘Computers will kill books. Something similar happened in one of Hugo’s novel. I think in that novel a printer killed a book, a mere printer.’ ‘This kills that’ is a sacred formula we are prepared to apply to any phenomenon as if two things could not exist at the same time and even in the same space. Let us take a tea cup

and a lump of sugar. Of course they will tell you at once, upon seeing your hand search for this lump which is supposed to sweeten your tea, coffee and your very life, ‘What are you about to do? Don’t you know that sugar is bad for your health, not only diabetes thrives in the presence of sugar. It endeavours – the sugar, I’m still talking of sugar – it endeavours to create an illusion which leads you astray, making you think that life is sweet. It’s a sort of candy floss. They flog, while repeating, muttering under their breath, ‘Candy floss, candy floss.’ ‘Candy flog,’ you retort, but they don’t listen to you, overwhelmingly absorbed in their flogging ritual. And they often quote Nietzsche in the course of this torture.

There is an important question placed, in my opinion, at the very centre or core of human existence. Can one say *everything*? ‘He said that’ is related to this question unquestionably, whatever they can say in defence of the opposite thesis. Many great artists – Michelangelo was one such – often ask themselves whether they blaspheme or not as they create their masterpieces. ‘Our Lord has already created everything we need. The same goes for birds and even for ants. Why bother about these limbs? Why exhibit them in the centre of Florence?’ On the other hand – there is another facet to this problem – one may wonder if there are subject matters one had better not touch upon. As someone put it, ‘If you throw a mud pie in the direction of a hostile face, you may miss your aim, your moment of bliss. But the mud will remain on the palm of your hand. Not forever, though.’ Well, could Michelangelo create his David with impunity, without crying in the dead of night, without damaging his hair and cheeks? You cannot blaspheme – at least not in this sphere – because *everything* has been *said*. Not *everything* has been done, mind you. (The Bible cannot even lift a brick, let alone construct some World Trade Centre. It can construct the Tower of Babel, though.)

Let us return to Jesus who is still confined to his mother’s womb, according to Tertullian. The only question he asked himself in this confinement was linked to this totality, to the complete version of the universe. ‘Everything should have been said. And yet I’m still in my sacred, blessed prison.’ He even undertook to transmit his message through the barrier interposed between him, his lungs, and the open air. He shouted his message, he recited his sermons by heart well before his departure from his mother-provided refuge. Alas, he already knew that there was no real refuge for him in the real world – or rather outside his mother’s womb. (Our mother’s womb – the only real world we are permitted to know, to get acquainted with, if only partly, unconvincingly.) Yes, you ask yourself continually – I am still talking of great artists – if you are entitled to revelation, if you are up to this challenge you focus attention upon. I am still talking about great artists. And the artist I have in mind right now lived three or four centuries ago. (Time travels very fast and you cannot always catch up with it; even if you have a heap of encyclopaedias on your writing desk.) At the end of his life – but on the brink of death, contrary to what might be imagined and concluded, after getting acquainted with this peace – Beethoven composed a piano sonata entitled *Hammerklavier*. This is a real tour de force, the Babel Tower of force. What followed was a kind of destruction: never again did Beethoven venture into the domain of utterness, as I call it. Utter this, utter that, utter everything.

In his mother’s womb he knew he was in possession of incredible powers, but these powers could not be transmitted by radio or television, let alone computers and so on. He just knew this power was there, surrounding him and everybody on all sides, being in all minds. But should we not leave some room for other people’s ideas – for other sonatas? Something is still lurking behind a distant bush and you cannot just walk past it, muttering to yourself and the trees, ‘I don’t care about this bush. Even it can save humanity thanks to the juice exuded by its twigs or whatever they are. I can’t stop and spend a few hours on my knees to make the most

of my encounter with this bush. I can't proceed in this fashion; otherwise I'll stop every five metres, because even in a desert you come across living creatures such as lizards. I can't squeeze every lizard until it yields the last drop of its life for the sake of future generations. Who are they, anyway, these future generations? Suppose you have just the future, nothing else. But the word 'future' is linked in your brain to the word "generations". They have become inseparable so to speak, in spite of atomic bombs that fail to lead them to utter destruction. Our destructions are always on the 'brink of', and then some secretary of state comes along with his peace-plan that annoys everybody. But you listen to him out of politeness and etiquette and, some people applaud as usual. Some of them think they are listening to Beethoven's *Hammerklavier* which often resounds everywhere. The utter destruction is still on the agenda, but it never happens because somebody wishes to save the Earth at all costs. The costs are so high that one begins to wonder whether the Earth costs all this money – really. 'Look at my necklace,' says a woman. 'Do you really think that the Earth is as costly as all that?' There are also hysterical people who fall on the earth and start kissing it frantically as if there is nothing else to kiss; not a silver cup of tea, for instance.

Kisses count a lot in the history of humankind. Some are so fond of kisses that they write lists of what can be kissed or not. Rightly they presume there are poisonous kisses and so you should shy away at the approach of such a kiss to your lips or any other part of your body. After all, you can be kissed on the thigh! But do you really have to kiss anyone, even en passant? You pass, see a candidate for a future fleeting kiss and bend your body in accordance with the other body's trajectory. You kiss this individual's vulnerable spot and the deal is done. As for the consequences, you have to wait for at least 48 hours to find out whether you are already entombed in a faraway cemetery. (Yes, yes, as soon as they see a corpse they rush it towards the nearest rubbish bin or cemetery – to avoid catching a deadly disease,.) And even when you begin your series of cheek-turnings, you may notice – if you take the trouble to look right or left – a funeral procession that is patiently waiting for the end of your funereal rite. The rite of spring, they call it; the rite of autumn, rather. The rite of death, in other words. Are there other words?

But what is *Hammerklavier*? In the final analysis? You often say, 'in the final analysis'. But what about Beethoven's final analysis? Is it really final? He went home, unless he was at home. He did not commit suicide, which he ought to have done *logically*. Beethoven has said everything, but he is not the Bible. No one can say, 'Listen to *Hammerklavier* and you'll find answers to every question you've ever thought off.' But *Hammerklavier* has nothing to do with the Mountain where Jesus's most famous sermon resounded so many centuries ago. So what? You just put your apparatus (whatever it is) on your back and transfer it to the mountain in question, under discussion. (The Mounting Discussion.) You are not supposed to resort to amplifiers, otherwise you may disappoint not only the deaf but also the hard of hearing. Of course you can tell them, before starting your séance, 'How can you be hard of hearing at such a moment? Your hardness is unbearable. You're much harder than Thomas Hardy.'

Unfortunately the promoters of this historic séance could not care less about the impact of the sermon: they do all they can to avoid embarrassing questions such as, 'Why didn't we hear this hit before? Are you really what they call a lazy bones? Are you also a lazy brain, lazy skin, lazy spine, lazy scoundrel?' And you have to put them in the picture about technologies and their role in the spiritual life of the planet. 'Spirituality has nothing to do with technology,' their adversaries answer at once. The promoters cannot bring themselves to tell everybody the unvarnished truth: 'This sermon wasn't available before a certain point, a certain moment, a

certain minute. How come? It's eternal, isn't it? This sermon was born at the same time as the Big Bang. They quit their respective wombs arm in arm. What's more, I'm absolutely sure they shared the umbilical cord. And the same womb.'

'You're right – we had some problems with the umbilical cord. At some point we didn't even know where the sound was coming from, and we didn't wish you to be taught by a mere machine.'

'It's better to be taught by a machine than by you, nincompoops that you are. Good-for-nothings.'

'At least we're good for bringing some machines to the mountain.'

We have no idea when we really begin to measure anything – our fingers, among other things. First, we look at our fingers and ask ourselves what they are for. For taking a piece of chocolate? Then we realise that, with the aid of two fingers, we can pinch our mother's one finger, and consequently she will give us two pieces of chocolate. We go further and further, as do our wishes, our ambitions, and our sense of impunity. Understandably enough, your mother scolded you when you asked her for *three* pieces of chocolate. So you decided immediately, on the spot, not to ask your mother for threepieces of chocolate at the same time. So, on the spur of the moment (actually, it was not really on the spur of the moment, was it?) you voiced your wish in a slightly different way, 'Mummy, could I have two halves of the same piece?'

Patience is always in trouble – the gift we are waiting for never arrives on time. Either it is too late and we say disappointedly, 'Too late. I don't want it any more. I have other, far more mystical aspirations within my field of vision.' Mostly, however, it arrives exactly on time. You unwrap the parcel and a moan of disappointment escapes your lungs.

Why do we always wait for gifts? Sometimes, rather often as a matter of fact, we just stop in our tracks – if we stubbornly adhere to this ritual, there will soon be no tracks at all – and wait, wait, wait; rather patiently, I must admit. For what? For manna, for mamma, for another mamma: one mamma is not enough for one individual, and even for one country. One mamma dies or just marries for the third or fourth time; and the first baby needs another mamma. He moons around the house left to him by his former father, moons around the photographs in which his numerous fathers or stepfathers kiss his only mother and says to his new mamma, 'Let us go to a restaurant and have the meal of our lives. Nothing else seems to attract my attention. What about you?'

Rather often, we hear the question addressed to a figure whose immobility may astonish even trees, if they were still capable of being astonished; and surprised after what *they* have been through. What is this question I am alluding to? 'What are you doing here?' A trivial question; no use to allude to it: it is not worth a simple, ordinary, run-of-the-mill allusion. It is an illusion, one of them, and we just walk by it without saying anything encouraging or reproachful. No, they wait for manna, all these people. And if they receive a quantity of manna, as a result of their hopes and prayers, they burst into tears and say, 'I've been waiting for precious stones and fabulous contracts, fabulously rich duchesses. For the Duchess of Gerolstein, Herolstein, Greenstein, for instance. I've got none of these duchesses. What's the matter with you? With thou? If you prefer.'

Some of them grew angry and set about throwing apples at the Almighty. Why apples? one may wonder. Because in the famous novella written by Franz Kafka the father hurls apples at his disobedient son who refuses to become an ordinary humans being. He is an insect, if you please, and his father is convinced it is *his* fault.

(Whose?) Why? Because an insect instead of a son may be regarded by all and sundry as blasphemy, and in a Christian milieu they do not like blasphemy. ‘How did you do it?’ asks the father.

‘I didn’t do anything,’ says the son.

‘Did you push your members with such force that they grew miniscule, until they grey minuscule? One might take you for a collection of little fingers. Are you a collection of little fingers?’

‘I am,’ said the son, after much soul searching. ‘If you wish to make some money out of my deplorable state,’ added the son, ‘you can open a museum of little fingers. Something unheard-of, you know.’

The father smiled at last – it was his first smile since the incident or accident, and sent their chambermaid for a huge sheet of paper. She resolved to improve upon God’s creation by means of scissors. Sure enough, some members of his son’s new body were not beautiful or curious enough – curious enough to attract our tourists’ attention and money. A huge sheet of paper and a few drawing pins. But his wife stopped him in his tracks, saying he should not use other material – ‘only skin, only your son’s skin,’ she concluded. So the father punctured a few holes in the body of his former son and began to hang on them all sort of threads. ‘Actually you could try and play a game of volley-ball, using your paws. And you could also play a gorgeous game of basketball, using your head. Wait a minute, I’ll drill a suitable hole in your skull, otherwise we’ll never know the winner. In general tourists don’t like the games without winners.’ This time, the mother put her foot down, saying, ‘Do you know I’m of Russian origin? We used to say, “A head full of holes,” moron. Your son is a moron, and you’re perfectly aware of that. We’ll make the balls smaller.’ ‘They *are* small,’ said the father, looking at his son’s private parts.

In the Soviet Union some pupils resisted such epithets (the biggest fool, the smallest brain) and did all they were capable of to escape such nicknames – or names, simply and purely. They even indulged in what Hamlet called truancy or a truant disposition – at the risk of getting a bad mark and being expelled from school. And if they flew in the face of public opinion and walked around calmly, even majestically, some truant (Horatio himself, no doubt) would seize this opportunity and put in their brains some balls stuffed to the brim with poisonous gases.

But why talk about foul things, something foul, unpleasant to touch and smell and even to see in the distance? The more I think about my life, the longer I delight in delights, in delicious, succulent synonyms which mean only happiness, nothing else; just happiness. You relish the prospect of eating a pastry or something, no matter what. You just relish it, the word itself and, strange as it may seem, relishing the very word – provided it is the *very* word – is often the paroxysm of happiness, even if you forget the whole thing half an hour later.

‘And where’s the end of the world?’

‘At point D. You see, point B is for second-raters. But, contrary to what you might suppose, point C is *not* for third-raters. It is meant for first-raters. But we are super-raters, can’t you understand this simple, simplitisimus truth? Let’s go, anyway.’

They often speak of starting points which are simple, otherwise they would not allow you to start. I think we all fly, whether we are actually flying or crawling. It is a permanent flight from the centre to which we are attached somehow, in spite of the eternal loss of this centre. Sometimes you feel it, sometimes you do not, as may be guessed, confirmed, justified.

I remember a Soviet actress whose beauty was above all suspicion. She played Ophelia in a Soviet adaptation of Hamlet. She was fragile, beautiful, exquisite, but she had the feeling she was not gorgeous enough. She went to the USA and underwent plastic surgery. As a result, she lost her centre and probably the universal centre, the one around which even the letters turn as they attempt to compose the word 'centre'. I am not sure she doubted her beauty attested to by so many *soupirants*, sighers, those who used to sigh in her presence because they knew she was inaccessible. She merely had an irresistible urge to get away from the centre; or from herself, as people sometimes say, rather simplistically, not to say vulgarly. How do you get away from yourself? You look at yourself in a mirror and then walk away. Or you fall when trying to get to the bottom of your staircase. You get a black eye and, whenever you look again at yourself in a mirror, you realise you went away from yourself, reaching blackness, eyelessness.

A black eye is not tantamount to the black universe, and even if you have a dozen black eyes, you may not realise to what point blackness is omnipresent, unavoidable. You watch a recent film and you see a black-and-white version of it dating back to the Twenties or Thirties. But patience is an important element in our life, as we all know despite our undistinguishable desire to forget this truth. If we wait long enough, the colours will return, due to the forward movement of time. But often time contradicts itself and goes backward; and the point is, it is a wrong back it finds on its way. There are many backs and one should not confuse the right back with the wrong one. For instance, you would like to play the game you were fond of in your early childhood. You would come up to a boy (or a girl) and say, 'I am your cavalier.' And your chosen one (or victim) bends down and becomes your horse. But during the ride you suddenly realise you chose the wrong back. Before choosing the right back – no use choosing the wrong one – you should ask the person standing before you to turn round and even say a few words. And suppose this person does turn round and even sings a song that reminds you of your grandmother or your aunt.

And every ride reminds you of Keats, of his *La Belle Dame Sans Merci*. If you are determined to take a ride, you have to accept the conditions. The first condition is '*sans*'. Whatever happens is *sans* – something is lacking; not necessarily a member of your body. The absence may be related to a thought, but this thought is essential, vital, and without this thought no ride has a meaning, let alone a substance. If asked, 'What is *sans*?' you may answer, 'A substance, a substance of what is painfully needed.' Then you point to a portion of the air and say, 'This portion of the air is *sans*.' Then you realise this portion is no longer in front of you, in close proximity to your lungs. And your ride is cancelled, almost automatically. You are told you should say '*merci*' to whatever or whoever you see around you – to the whole Earth, to the whole universe. You see a falling star and say '*merci*' to the star itself and also to its fall. But the colours do not return and you curse everything and everybody.

But before uttering your curses, you had better re-read Tertullian, the words he devoted to patience and Jesus Christ 'whose patience knew no bounds,' he adds somewhere. We know already that Jesus awaited the time of his birth. What can you do in this situation that everyone knows by heart? Spending nine months in one's mother womb. (Many writers never miss an opportunity to play on the 'family-resemblance', as they say. What family resemblance? There are so many of them in the world. You select two brothers and talk about their affinities with their parents for hours on end. And during these interminable hours a sort of smile does not leave the faces of the parents. And if it does, for some obscure reason, you should call in their sister or their cousin, for want of anybody better, and the smile I have already touched upon, is sure to re-appear; unless you say

something inappropriate. What? For instance, you begin to analyse Kierkegaard's leap or something of the kind. The parents frown and you realise the grandiosity of your blunder. So you switch to sports, to gymnastics and say something to the effect that jumping higher and further is important for the young and also for the old. The higher you jump, the longer you live – such is the wisdom that comes to us directly from our ancestors, direct and indirect. And you add something in a similar vein, 'I'm sure that your daughter and your son jump in the same way, reaching approximately the same height.')

Well, I am not sure Tertullian enlarged upon athletics and jumps of all kinds – in the works that have reached our understanding and libraries. He *might* have devoted a series of treatises to jumps or leaps, but even specialists can shed no light on this aspect of his art. Well, well, well. Let us turn towards what he did discuss in his writings; at length or otherwise. Jesus was aware of his predicament: he was to be born into our world overburdened with perditions, petitions and stupid acts. And of course he realised at once he had no choice. What are you allowed to do in your mother's womb? Suppose you are dead set against your appearance in this world of perdition and nonsense. You read in Agatha Christie's novels about characters who fall at the wrong moment and take a long tumble down a staircase; on their back, if you please. And then a doctor says, 'Unfortunately your future son is dead.' What blasphemy! Even an ordinary citizen cannot conceive such a plan – this version of suicide. You are permitted to use as many sleeping pills or bullets as you wish, but leave your mother alone. Unfortunately she is no longer alone; your sinful body is inside her, in her womb. And if your guru says to you, 'Leave your mother alone,' you can answer thus, 'Be patient! I'll be born pretty soon.'

Why does Tertullian talk about what follows your sojourn in your mother's body? Because Jesus could really boast about his *double* patience. How come? Not only did he wait for the time of his birth, but he also bore the delay of growing up. Let us not forget that he knew everything at the very moment of his conception. Even before this moment, well before the moment of his conception, he knew everything about the world, the underworld and the aboveworld. Now we are faced with the following dilemma: either we admit that somehow Jesus was not *fully* aware of what lay in store for him, or that his patience was much greater than what we habitually call 'the double patience'. Suppose you know every second of your future life, of the life following your birth, your cries for help and so on. You say to yourself, 'In two minutes my mother will reveal to the world one of her breasts and I'll suck it to my heart's content.' Sure enough, two minutes later (no three minutes, mind you) your mother reveals to you and to the room where you carry out this sacred ritual one of her breasts. You know *which* breast she will reveal, but you nod when you realise that your prediction is about to come true. Many other things come true; everything comes true, as a matter of fact. Surprises (good surprises) make our life bearable; to some degree. Jesus was cruelly deprived of surprises. Even Judas's betrayal did not surprise him; far from it. According to many theologians, he went so far as to organise it meticulously, rehearsing the kiss for a week or so.

For Jesus' followers the continuous testing of patience may become unbearable, if they are gourmets. Living in our world, they are incapable of removing from their lives all five-star restaurants. In some of those restaurants they just say, 'All right, you'll have your menu which shouldn't be disclosed to you before, otherwise the ingredient called "surprise" will be dramatically absent from your food. You just say to us what you can't eat at all. In other words, you're kindly asked to disclose to us the contents of your allergies, of the diseases you suffer from on account of your bad behaviour in the sphere of food because most of those allergies come from food, not just from the air or out of the blue, contrary to what many of you believe.' But those

followers, those Christ's little brothers – not to confuse with little flowers, so-called *fioretti* – begin to wave their arms, saying, 'We're aware of your consideration for our respective diets. All this was arranged right before the Big Bang. You might have spared us this séance, had you given thought to our yearning for surprises. You salute us, lead us to our chairs, but ask no questions as to our allergies, cancers and so on. We are surprised – you always begin with this question-stuffed formula – and this surprise is the best appetiser one can stumble upon in this predictable, utterly boring world.'

Patience. You know what dishes you will be served in a few minutes, in five minutes, to be precise. You feel no saliva in your mouth: the situation did not put any water in it. (*L'eau à la bouche*.) How could you enjoy a meal if you have no water in your mouth? Of course you can ask for a glass of water – some doctors prescribe a glass of *tepid* water – and hold its contents in your mouth for more than five minutes. Then you ask for a bucket and get rid of the tepid water that begins to get on your nerves and even on your taste buds. You get the feeling that your meal is spoiled already, in spite of the oysters your destiny promised you in St Peter's footsteps. Yes, from time to time, you are told by a mysterious voice, 'This comes in St Peter's footsteps,' and you consume something you have never heard of. 'To hell with words, notions and definitions,' the same voice informs you. 'Just enjoy your life and mission.'

Of course you are aware that every morsel you swallow is a building block, so to speak. What are they building, pray? you say all of a sudden, addressing nobody. 'Your growth, you silly goose. Have you forgotten Tertullian?' 'He bears the delay of growing up.'

'Who?' asks the same voice.

'I do.'

'You're right – it's your turn.'

'Does that mean there'll be many Jesuses after my Crucifixion?'

'Mind your own business.'

'But what is my mind?'

'To be a *kind* of Jesus. All the books devoted to the imitation of Jesus Christ are devoted to this aspect of the problem.'

'But what's the problem, pray?'

'The salvation of humanity. Six people were rescued by helicopter from a fishing boat in distress off the Cornish coast. Have you heard the news? Your task is much bigger and far more solemn. You have to rescue all those who live on coasts, on seas, in the air, in prehistoric caves, in historic caves and so on.'

The point is you do not always have enough instruments for rescuing people and their souls which count even more than their bodies, as everyone knows. Suppose you wish to take care of those whose boat approaches one of Niagara's falls. (Niagara-like falls – there are many of them.) I think this happens in one of Buster Keaton's films. Well, you have never taken swimming lessons in your life. (In this respect you are quite similar to Ludwig II of Bavaria.) You shout of course, you do your best to warn the future victims of the fall. (For once we are not talking of Adam's Fall whose victims we are, all of us. 'Fall of us,' as some preachers say.) You shout, 'Niagara! Niagara!' Apparently, according to some sayings, the French are not very fond of geography; but they adore bread and croissants. So they do not realise what danger is in store for them; a hundred meters from their boat, to be precise. So you begin to shout 'Adam,' strongly accenting the second syllable.

A huge stir results from your cries, for some so-called Adams do their best to find a suitable Eve, which means they look at every woman they have in their field of vision from head to foot and then try to rape them to find out if it is *their* Eve they are mishandling, mismanaging or whatever. In short, whatever you do with this woman corresponds to our universal impression or representation of Eve, or even the biblical story that admits a huge fault connected not only with the fruit, one fruit, with some other fruit, far more pernicious than the one we concentrate our attention, nerves and ethics on. So you cry ‘Adam!’ and the havoc you produce may remind one of the Creation of the World where Eves were mixed with Marions and Mozarts with Beethovens. How do you get away from the primordial chaos? It is still in our midst, I’m sorry to say, except that the primordial chaos was more organic, given the purity of the air of our morals which were pure to the extent of forbidding us to make love everywhere, even on the top of a trolleybus. Well, either you have a primordial, early-Christian chaos, or depravity that has no bounds, no unbounds – no uns, only ons. They come together and shout, ‘On?’ and the others, the other gang of the same youngsters or elders shout, ‘On, by no means!’ And they on, they on, they on, for hours on end; or for hours on on.

So you are determined to save humanity, being one of Jesus’s imitations. Which imitation are you, by the way? The one who prevents a lot of people making love on the top of a trolleybus? Or a bus, for that matter? Another group of imitators wages a war against those who fornicate under buses and ordinary cars, even if these cars’ intrinsic value does not allow me to enjoy their fornication to the utmost.

What could you do under the circumstances? One of Jesus’ imitators dismantled a few cars to see what the problem was, but could not put them back together again: neither the cars nor the bodies. The bodies cried, almost in unison, ‘Who are you taking yourself for? I’m Adam, for God’s sake.’ Or ‘I’m Eve, for God’s sake.’ Or ‘I’m Mary, for God’s sake.’ Or ‘I’m Jesus, for God’s sake.’ And one of them even shouted, ‘I’m God, for God’s sake.’ And then, something stirs in the back of the room and a bottle of sake comes unacknowledged, unrecognised and even unappreciated in the sphere where only divinities voice grievances, disagreements and ecstasies. How can a divinity voice his or her ecstasy? The first syllable that comes to your mind is RA, the Egyptian God, and for a while all our organs repeat this syllable, for it is easier to pronounce RA than to enter the intricate world of secret names of God. So you say, ‘Ra,’ and you are quite satisfied, especially if you repeat it several times, ‘Ra, Ra, Ra, Ra, Ra.’ Unavoidably you burst into song or begin to dance. As a result, you have this diagram of your life:

RA RA RA RA	
RA	RA
CAR CAR	

The poem is entitled *Raven*. Nothing to do with Edgar Allen Poe.

And then I come across someone who does nothing at all. That is not good, you explain to him to the best of your abilities. This is not the good meant by God, you say. It is probably just good: you feel comfortable for the moment. But the moment is not good either, you know. Nothing is good under the circumstances. You are cross-legged, but your legs denote no sacred exercise recommended in yoga. You just do it for nothing better, for doing nothing better: you are out of your imaginative resources. Your imaginative resources dwindled to this sort of speck – to this cross-legged position which means nothing because it has nothing in common with the Cross. You cannot hang anyone on this position of yours, can you?’

You upbraid your opponent for hours on end, but the hours end somehow and in the end you are left just in the centre of your predicament. You have a cross-legged individual – in front of you, mind you, just a metre or so away; or out, or down, or up. Let him put a lot of hope in heaven. Perhaps heaven and our stars hold a solution for this cross-legged individual.

And then you do something unusual and unexpected. (And please do not say to me that in the world of God everything is expected. You just mutter, ‘Cross, cross, cross.’ You continue to mutter (and consequently to matter) and what comes from your lips resembles, ‘Moss, moss, moss.’ You try to build the Tower of Babel, using these syllables, words or whatever. And you get this:

CROSS

CROSS

CROSS

MOSS

MOSS

MOSS

Do you need the cross? Of course. But what about the moss? Do you really need it? You know that the rocks near the river were covered with moss. Well, you do not even know which river this someone is talking about. You can climb on a cross – that’s for sure. But what are you supposed to do with the moss? You climb, climb, climb, getting higher, higher, higher. And finally you install yourself on the top of the cross. So what? What could you do now? You imitate Jesus Christ or some Olympic champion. But *ça rime à quoi?* I think there was a gentleman called Jules Rimet. Why did he receive this name at the hour of his birth? Because he was destined to rhyme everything with everything, creating a world harmony, one of them. You jump, get a medal and that is called ‘harmony’; not *world harmony* perhaps. But one little harmony is enough in our world. You create this harmony, collect it, go out and show it to everybody, saying, ‘Beautiful, isn’t it? Let us live like this, forever and ever.’

Well, you live like this little harmony, for a while. And then you say to yourself, ‘It’s not my ideal, my ultimate aim, is it? Besides, it’s too small. I’ll make it grow quickly and obstinately.’ It does grow quickly and obstinately, and soon you have a huge harmony on your back. And you have no idea what to do with it. Is it the beginning of a new Beethoven’s *Ninth*, for instance? So many people understand the world literally: if you mention their tack, for some obscure or clear reason, they explain to you in detail why it is gross or small as if their whole life depended on it, not only the life of their spine. If you are convinced that your happiness depends on the growth of your back where you put the harmony on which the world stands, stays and lies for centuries to come, you do your best to allow your back to grow in all directions; not only horizontally, mind you. If the harmony of the whole world is hidden at the centre of your back – which should grow to become everything – you will feel you are charged – you will never be discharged – with a worldwide mission. (Compare your charge with the one mentioned in almost every dictionary: He was charged with taking care of the premises. In your case, the premises include the whole Cosmos.)

So your back continues to grow and you become first an ordinary hunchback, and then you become a character from Hugo’s famous novel that one can see on television, whenever someone sings something appealing to you and everyone. Your back continues to grow and they say, when passing by or just looking from their windows, ‘There’s another hill in our region. Do you think it’s one of the Moscow hills? There are seven

of them, if I'm not mistaken?' Whereupon you realise one hill is not enough to save humanity from all the ruins mentioned in the Apocalypse. (Four horsemen, among other things and horsemen; and horses.) So you pass an order and soon you have another harmony – on your back, on your legs. If you have a harmony on your legs, they say, when looking at your gait – he walked with a slow stiff gait – 'He's very harmonious, perhaps too harmonious. At least that's what I think and believe.'

You say to yourself continuously that what counts is your solidarity with the needy – with everybody, to tell the truth. (Even with so-called oligarchs.) You say to yourself and confide this truth to your diary that your beauty or handsomeness, as you put it sometimes, is of no importance. One ugly man added to the immensity of the world. One Quasimodo. Put him in the back row so as not to disturb beauty-oriented individuals. And he will continue to back up everybody, while staying on the dark side of the moon, so to speak. Modesty is the keyword in this situation, in his predicament, in the hunchback's predicament and horror. 'I don't wish you to see my hunch and also my magnanimity. I'm just a dwarf from a fairy tale where a snow-white maiden beautifies the world.'

All right: now they are in the know, in spite of your inborn modesty, your silent ways, your *bouche-cousue* attitude. One of them says with a broad, almost generous smile, 'You know, last week I received several million dollars. I'm almost sure they came from his hunch.'

'But his hunch is as big as before,' someone answers.

'This is a good sign,' answers the first individual 'Those who give money to others, receive the money from their donors who always require a sort of proof of your benevolent disposition. You show them a large number of receipts, whereupon they give you a medal and a few bags stuffed with banknotes. "For others," they say, smiling ironically. "Of course you can help yourself – within reason. Never disobey this rule: within reason, within reason." "My reason is very large," you answer with a proud shake of your head. "It is as large as my generosity, benevolence, empathy and so on."'

Do you really need legs and arms? The needy will always find you: they have a lot in common with dogs who look for criminals of all kinds. At customs, dogs are used to smell out drugs in passengers' luggage. It is customary for dogs to use their sense of smell at customs to detect drugs in passengers' luggage. But a poor man who watches TV from time to time knows that the best way of earning money overnight is to sell drugs (drugs, as the Russians say: dogs, dogs). So what you really have to train yourself for is finding drugs in suitcases, in pockets and even in people's mouths. Many of them try to smuggle drugs by putting them in their mouths and pretending to chew gum – for hours, for days and nights. You are not likely to land up in prison for chewing gum, are you? So you should take advantage of this missing link in the chain of laws. Of course, sooner or later they will come with this idea: searching culprits' mouths for drugs. Naturally they will start with socks and underpants, but little by little they will come to the mouths we are talking about. 'Can you please open your mouth?' says a police officer. The future (or the present) culprit draws his smartphone from his pocket and writes on its screen the following sentence, 'I've an excruciating toothache.'

'Does it really prevent you from opening your mouth?'

'It does. My mouth is a bundle of nerves. And when you move a nerve it breaks. And the breaking of a nerve is painful, believe me. Do you wish to try?'

'How *could* I experience this torture?'

‘I’ve got a spare bundle of nerves in my pocket. I’m a very nervous individual, you know. I live on my nerves, you know. Do you know why I repeat “you know” all the time? Because I’m nervy, and I’m always nervy, not only before exams or meeting a woman I’m in love with.’

‘What do I have in common with a woman you’re in love with?’

‘I think that, if you were a woman, I’d fall in love with you. But unfortunately I’m not a homosexual.’

Talking for hours on end leads you nowhere. So it is better not to have a mouth – you can put your meals straight into your belly – and hang instead a letter on your jacket; addressed to the needy and the others. Why not? The others may occasionally need money, may they not? In this letter you say to all those unfortunate, truly miserable Hugo-inspired people, ‘Please take as much money from my hunch, as you wish. But leave a certain quantity of this money to your brothers and sisters. Don’t forget our brotherhood, sisterhood and nephewhood.’

But there are so many perverse people who use their hunches (and also mouths) for illegally carrying a lot of drugs, jewels and other sources of their income or rather their fortunes. Do you know why police officers say to their students, ‘Sometimes you have to be prepared to follow a hunch.’? Whipping revolvers out of your pockets and even your underpants is old-fashioned. Just follow a hunch: this hunch, that hunch. From this hunch you will take a hundred roubles. From that hunch over there you will fish out a thousand dollars. Do you realise that every skyscraper is a hunch in disguise? And those skyscrapers who, in their childhood or babyhood, learnt how to walk are called hunchbacks: yet another homage to Victor Hugo. And to Notre Dame, occasionally.

And what about patience? All our lives we always ask ourselves the same question: ‘What about?’ We forget something, remember something, something different no doubt, and then we ask ourselves the crucial question, ‘What about death?’ Or what about our life, as they usually say. Usually, after touching upon death, ever so slightly, they say or rather shout, ‘Life, life, life!’ and everything seems to be in order, even your destiny which, until further notice, does not depend on your silly wills and deals. But patience allows you to live from one day to another day or night because you know (approximately) that you will live for another 20, 30 or 35 years. And each time you come to your senses after a period of sleep induced, encouraged, created *de toutes pièces* by a new brand of sleeping pill (by all pieces, no matter how small or big or high) you say, ‘There’ll be another day. And I hope I’ll have enough patience for that other day, if only till 10 p.m.’ Then you crack up (and also down, which is far worse) and mutter somewhere, not necessarily in your bedroom or bathroom, ‘That’s enough. I’ve suffered as much and even longer than Jesus Christ. Put me on a cross, on any cross.’ And you stop in the nick of time because, right after this nick, you may have been damned forever and forever; and even for nevernevernever. Nevermore, as the famous raven put it. But why should we write to a raven’s dictation?

You must use every second to the utmost to get humanity out of a mess, or a fix – out of everything, preferably. All right, they tell you: you are out of everything. ‘Not out of my money, I suppose.’ ‘No, not out of your money nor of your pony whom you like as ecstatically as your money.’

‘All right, all right. What next?’

‘Another day.’

‘What am I supposed to do with day, if any?’

‘God proposes, you dispose.’

‘God proposed me another day.’

‘Why such an honour?’

‘Do you really think an additional day is really an honour; or a burden?’

You dare to look at the stars. What do you see? A lot of useless or wonderful worlds which amount to the same thing. They amount, amount, amount, while looking at each other suspiciously. One world is slightly higher than the other one; at this particular moment. Then this moment passes and another moment *prend le dessus*, takes the top or the hot: you can never trust translations. You do not trust them. For instance, you write: ‘take the middle’, instead of what I have just suggested. They say, ‘You’re a Buddhist adept. The Middle Way. We all know that by heart. There is a puddle on the right-hand side; there is one on the left-hand side. You walk in the middle side to avoid dirty water.

You live a life, a wholesome, a whole life to which nothing should be added with the exception of a multitude of pleasures, beaches, benches saturated with kisses. And then they say you should add five roubles to the amount of money you put somewhere, on some counter or other. You add five roubles and you feel happy, but you cannot be happy because of these roubles which come from the country you dislike intensely. At least you dislike its rulers, its tsar and the hatred you experience spoil your dinner, one of your dinners. But one spoiled dinner spoils a dozen of them: that’s the rule (the golden rule) of our life. What is the other chief ingredient of our life? One superfluous spice can spoil a dinner as well. And this dinner can spoil all other dinners you will have in your life, because you will remember that particular dinner, whatever happens. Try as you may to forget this mishap, you will always say to yourself, ‘Fortunately, luckily for me – it is important to say both fortunately and luckily to protect yourself from bad omens and mishaps of all kinds, not only of the kind we described several minutes ago – fortunately and luckily this spice is not part and parcel of the dish I’m enjoying tonight.’ And then this spice appears in the air, for no reason at all, out of the blue, out of the black, and you do your best to protect your dish from this moribund spice which, if swallowed and digested, will lead to your death and funeral carried out as usual in your family abode, in your tomb, in a series of coffins which bear the names of your uncles, aunts, nephews. And so on? And you have no idea who they were or still are because you did not live long enough to know them, to kiss them, to offer them chocolate or pastries or a glass of wine.

What did you live for anyway? To see and feel your death; luckily no one places your death in your coffin. You might think it is just another lease of life. What is the difference between death and life, physically speaking? You see a body and you may think, at least for a minute or so, it is alive or dead – like Schrödinger’s cat, if I’m not mistaken. As for this body, you begin to tickle it to find out if he is really alive or dead. Of course there are individuals who can grin and bear this séance – tickling, I mean – without showing any sign of displeasure; or pleasure, for that matter. You tickle them on and on, you tickle them to death, so to speak: in my opinion there is such an expression in the English language. You tickle them to death and they end up dying for it is still the purpose of your procedure and you are very purposeful. Your every purpose goes to the very end and ends up dying. Well, either the purpose itself expires, having accomplished its task, or it is your individual on whose body you spent some time. (He dies.) Or yourself: tickling someone to death is not only boring – it may be fatal. So many cancers stem from tickling.

You did not place your death, I mean, on your deathbed. At the last moment, at the crucial moment, someone called the priest or your brother and said, ‘Our doctor would like to give another injection. He’s not sure it’ll help, but he must carry out his duty.’ ‘Is his duty to kill our patient?’ asks your interlocutor. ‘It’s his life’s duty,’ says your interlocutor coldheartedly.

That is probably how we learn to speak and write. They throw all sorts of signs in our mother's womb and we invariably choose one or two whose significance denotes our attachment to this or that sphere of human activity. If among these objects or subjects you suddenly see a cross, you know what to do. Immediately you begin crying, 'Golgotha! Golgotha!' and then they embark upon their explanations of the lessons taught to us by the Bible. And if you place this cross in a box of matches they say you will become a famous fireman or a legendary pyromaniac, and in the latter case they often put you in prison – for no reason at all: you have not burnt anything yet, not even your Christmas Tree. Of course they always say, 'Prevention is better than cure' and consequently many innocent people are put to death in their cells or rather in the cells belonging to the nearest prison.

Among the objects you receive in your mother's womb may be found several books, and it is well-known that Beethoven, when answering the question related to his intelligence – some think you can compose *The Ninth* without departing from your pre-natal stupidity – Beethoven would invariably answer, 'I learnt Kant's categories in my cradle.' We admit their interference, so what? Yes, a supernatural force – or just a neighbour, why not? – made it a rule to put a book by Kant on the bed where Beethoven's mother took rest from her various labours. He could not help noticing that every morning the book would disappear, being replaced by another book, not necessarily issuing from Kant's pen. All this meant that the neighbour or the supernatural force I am talking about was not alone; he might have been on his own, but, generally speaking, he was not alone. Everybody knows that the world is brimful with supernatural (and natural) forces. When a tempest is needed, somebody – let us assume it is God – triggers a number of winds, drops (coffee granules, for instance) and Shakespeare writes his last play. Putting a book on someone's bedside is nothing in comparison with such a feat. But how did Beethoven read Kant's treatises? Did he have a special magnifying glass, a telescope? (Let us not forget he was still in his mother's womb.) Never mind – what counts is his acquaintance with these treatises.

You acquire the rudimentary knowledge of the world, even if you are not Jesus Christ himself or herself. But you are tempted to go further and further because your curiosity eggs you on. ('Don't egg him on! He gets himself into enough trouble without your encouragement,' says one Satan to another. To no avail. The apprentice gets into trouble, for he learns about how to construct an atom bomb.) Various doctrines get mixed up and you are not even born; not yet. What will you do when you eventually get to Washington and the Library of Congress puts itself at your service? And the Tower of Babel?

What is most annoying is the manner in which all those people – naming them would be pointless and even harmful – lead you astray as soon as you begin your calculations and reflexions. They say, 'You should avoid evil and its empire. Even a tiny village stuffed with evil can be destructive and becomes unbearable with the passing of time.' Actually, sometimes time cannot even pass: evil has replenished holes, crevasses and other outlets, habitually used by evil. And by time, to tell the truth. Now only evil makes its presence visible: it seeps through the ceiling and streams off the walls. And every drip, drop and stream ends up destroying your cells, instead of destroying your evils; a part of them at least. Evil is far more present than can be figured out. For instance, a sceptic or Peronist says, 'I doubt if this hand is really mine. What if it belongs to the Devil? Or my sister, for instance? She loves me so much – to the point of wishing to make love with me every two hours. And when her emotions reach their peak – and they have many peaks, believe me – she says, 'Don't be so shy. It's not my hand that handles your penis. It's your own hand because you're my own. And I am your own too.' Then she asks you to caress and kiss her fingers and this ritual becomes disgusting in the twinkling of an eye. Even

sooner, even sooner – my eyelids are mostly heavy so that I can't twinkle my eyes at the push of a button. Or at the push of an eyelid, if you prefer.

To avoid such an inconvenience – I am talking about your doubts, this time – you say to yourself firmly, 'This is my hand, and I won't allow it to sink into evil by toying with my genitals and other parts of my body – in search of doubtful pleasures. Yes, I admit that I doubt the usefulness and morality of these pleasures. I'd better get down to brass tacks, whatever they are. I'm sure, however, that they don't contain evil pleasures. My brass tacks can be found (in abundance) in my library, for example. Of course you can pick up a book and get engrossed in it for a while, while your hands touch your body in a polyphonic way, as if it were a fugue by Bach or any other composers infatuated with counterpoint.'

Well, you put your hands in your pockets – not in the presence of ladies or of churches, however, and then you decide – once and for all, mind you – that you are virtuous and no particle of evil is capable of soiling your hands, your heart and even your ears. And if several particles of evil take aim at your ears, you just buy a dozen ear plugs and begin to listen to Haydn or Monteverdi broadcast by your heart. Alas, evil oozes out of the wound we traditionally call 'the world' as if no other name could be found in our dictionaries for the horror we are living in. Why not just say 'word' because, as we all know, words and letters are at the origin of the world. You could also call the world 'Letter' – no matter which letter you have in mind. Any word would suit and thoroughly describe the filthiness I touched upon several minutes ago. (To tell the truth, I touch upon this filthiness, I really *touch* it, all the time; even now, at the present moment. Even when a beautiful young lady hands me a beautiful apple – either a real apple or an electronic appliance – I reject it with horror, saying to myself, 'Adam again, Eve again, the serpent again, this bloody old song.'

Can Tertullian be of any help? We read in his sacred books the following words related to Jesus Christ and his imitators, 'He did not strive. He did not cry aloud. No one has ever heard His voice in the streets.' So I wonder why our saints still wonder why people are not virtuous? Why do they continue to kill each other mercilessly? Why don't they kill each other *mercifully*, one wonders? Please, wonder no longer: just follow your path wherever it is making its way towards damnation and don't worry your head or any other part of your body. Take care of your head, shoulders, little fingers and forget about the world which surely, though slowly, leads you towards the lion's den. And to the lion's share of evil.

I am used to saying, 'As Tertullian said,' or anybody else said or wrote. But what do *I* care about these sayings, doings and wrongdoings? What does it have to do with *my* life? Let me live and lead my life in accordance with my own principles or their absence. Somebody says something and sometimes this somebody means well, but his or her meaning ricochets off my mind and returns to the sender. Sometimes it does, sometimes it does not. And once again all this really does not matter, as far as my own life is concerned. My life goes its own way and it sees and feels other meanings, whether well-meant or not, scatter around my body as if I had nothing else to do in the whole world – only protecting myself from foreign and often ridiculous meanings. These manifold and mostly meaningless remarks lie scattered around my body and soul, but they are not smeared on them, which proves their shallowness and ludicrousness. They do not take root, if you see what I mean. I don't even have to visualise a button and press it to make them disappear in the twinkling of anything, not only of the eye. You twinkle your little finger and they disappear as if the so-called body language was familiar to them. Besides, there are other problems in the world where we suffer so atrociously, and consequently I should not concentrate exclusively on evil; although some pessimists maintain there is nothing

else in the world. Pessimists or optimists? There are specialists who advocate the disappearance of the world – as the only remedy against evil which is the only concomitant of the world as such. (Are there other worlds? A world as much, a world as too much or too little, a world of indescribable filth and so on.) So you don't resist the evil you encounter, contrary to what your mother recommended throughout your childhood. What is more, you increase its quantity by putting more and more bags of evil on the hill you have already created in the course of the last thirty years. You hope that everything will burst and you will finally realise your long-standing dream: to sing a requiem to the world, borrowing a few melodies from Mozart and Verdi; and Berlioz, why not?

You listen to contemporary politicians and hope their words will turn into a bomb and burst at last, leaving you alone in the cosmos. No sooner said than done. Wait a minute! *Vous allez plus vite que les violons*. But how do they go, these violins? First you have to buy a dozen of them to find out what their tempo sounds like, which pace they are keen on. And of course you need a few violinists to handle them properly. (You yourself play only the piano.) And what if they don't go at all? Of course no Stradivari is required for this experience: it is not the beauty of the sound you are analysing so thoroughly. Just pace, just pace, just pace. You can shake them, if you wish; sometimes it is enough to wake them from their Kantian sleep. (What did he call it?) If this does not work, you can smash them to smithereens to warn others, to threaten them directly.

All things considered, it is much easier to jump the gun, especially that, in this linguistic case, more people will be aware of what you are doing your best to suggest, recommend and achieve. You go to the States, buy a gun and begin to jump over it – on Fifth Avenue, preferably. (Donald Trump is prepared to shoot people dead on Fifth Avenue – to prove how popular he is and will ever be, even in the 24th century. I wonder why Trump's words have not turned into a bomb yet? Hopefully one bomb will be enough to remove him from the surface of Fifth Avenue and also from that of Fourth Avenue. And so on and so forth. And so Fourth and so Fifth and so Sixth.)

I think I have already devoted too much time and space to evil which may grow perniciously obsessive with its own importance, with its so-called glory. What other subjects do I have in my chest of drawers? You can say that all your life you have known that evil governs the world; or Satan, as Gounod put it. And then, some old woman or other interferes with the flow of words going from your mouth towards the ceiling and also to the walls that surround your body; and your thoughts, needless to say. She says, 'Don't you remember the piece of chocolate I gave you on one of your birthdays? Was it a piece of evil, that piece of chocolate? In accordance with your present philosophy? Didn't you like it? It was a piece of Swiss chocolate, if my memory serves me right.' 'Yes,' you answer almost absent-mindedly, 'but I should have been introduced to a Belgian variety of this refinement. You delayed this knowledge, barring its way to my taste buds and my sensitive, refinement-oriented mind. You're a piece of evil, nasty old lady. May I ask you to leave this room once and for all?'

Berkeley deplores our incapacity to eat and drink ideas, sensations, categories which continue to dodge our attention on account of their volatility. Where is the idea you are trying to voice and even to explain to your multiple listeners? One of them asks you frankly, 'Where's the idea you're talking about? In your head? Well, pull it out of your head and show it to us. No, no, no – that won't do. Don't draw it on a piece of paper. There are enough picture galleries in the world, and the pictures exhibited in them say only two things, "Beauty", or "ugliness".' Suppose we see a beggar whose life depends on a piece of bread that can be found in one of the pockets flowing around the square where the beggar implores the Almighty and also some pedestrians to sustain

his life, if only for a few minutes. This beggar tries to persuade his listeners or rather half-listeners that the world is so magnificent one should do one's best to remain in it as long as possible. 'Don't you wish to offer me a short piece of this magnificence?' says the beggar reproachfully. Some pedestrians (and some gods) hear his reproaches or rather the tone of his voice, but their souls are impenetrable. They are impervious to reproaches of all kinds. They say to themselves and some other pedestrians or gods, 'I'm so weary of life that my ears and heart cannot react to whatever happens around me. I can't even triumph over my inner problems and worries. Yes, I have a few pieces of bread at home, and my fridge isn't far away, to tell the truth. No, I don't keep my bread in the fridge. What I have in mind when talking about this fridge of mine is a huge quantity of sausages – just in case, just in case. But this case doesn't seem to thrive and grow on this square. So the beggar we're talking about won't get anything either from my pockets, or from my fridge. And even if this fridge of mine was within my reach – within my mental fridge, so to speak – I wouldn't lift a little finger, let alone a big finger – to help this beggar out of his misery. Anyway, the only way out of human misery is death, and I'm not a killer, either born or unborn.'

So we can say to this beggar of ours, 'Have you ever heard about Berkeley? I'm not alluding to the university, you know. He denied the existence of corporeal things, and a slice of ham is corporal. Whether you wish it or not. Do you recall the existence of our priests? During their masses they distribute the body of Christ, although, on this occasion, they don't put into your mouth a slice of sausage. I don't know why, actually; by the way.' I know a woman who often dresses in black and, frankly speaking, for all her beauty – and she is really beautiful, believe me – I have no urge to approach her, touch, make love to her or spend a few nights in her company, notwithstanding her funeral attire. Yes, that is what I am afraid of. I am afraid her death, if only apparent, will make its way into my body, soul and other ingredients of my self. What shall I do with this impalpable, yet quite palpable, almost organic death? I might put a green jacket on and look only at it, while communicating with this woman. But I am not used to enjoying a body without looking at it; physically enjoying something I do not relish visually, not to say spiritually. Colours are spiritual. As we look at a patch of white colour, an angel pays us a visit and bursts into song or rather a hymn to praise everything, in spite of death, rottenness and overall perversity.

I think it was Voltaire who talked to his readers about our shouts, our screams. What were we screaming about? About our evil nature, it goes without saying. (What else could you scream about? The rest is of no importance.) So we scream, scream, scream. Evil! Evil! Evil! Sooner or later the evil we are talking or screaming about flies towards us and asks us the following question? 'Are you calling me? Do you want me to assist you in any way?'

'No, no, no!' we shout.'

'Why did you call me, then? Do you wish me to destroy you, physically and psychologically?'

'No, no, no!'

'Why did you call me, then?'

'To look at you for a second and say how ugly and unbearable you are. And perverse, of course.'

'But I'm born from the Devil. Shouldn't I show disrespect *à l'endroit du papa*, as the French put it? I'm learning French, you see. In my opinion, the French aren't as diabolical as the rest of humanity. So I'd like to offer them a huge amount of nastiness.'

'What about us?'

‘Oh, I think you’re born from God. But your behaviour is diabolical, for some obscure reason.’

Should we mistrust the people who are born of the Devil, although they do not always admit it sincerely? Of course if you take a cane and start beating their bodies, from head to foot, sooner or later, they will admit it – to get rid of you. Then they will run for ten minutes or so, stop in their tracks, turn back and shout, ‘We lied to you. We lied to you because we wanted to get rid of you and your cane. You’re Cain, Cain, Cain, Cain. So you were born of the Devil, whereas we are Abels, Abels, Abels, Abels.’

Yes, there are many people who give you a piece of advice for nothing: no money is asked for this particular piece. (There are other pieces and they are very expensive.) They just say, ‘Go back to yourself and find your divine origin.’

‘And what if I’m born of the Devil or Evil itself?’

‘Then you should deal with them rudely, upon your arrival at your essence. Beat them as long as necessary to make them disappear under the surface of the globe.’

‘But there are many pits in this area.’

‘Then dump their dismembered bodies in one of these pits.’

‘And if there aren’t enough pits for their bodies? Evils and devils are multiple, as you should know – they’ve studied the multiplication table thoroughly.’

So you take a garden spade.

They call it a ‘good action’ although neither this particular action nor any action brings about a metamorphosis we have been waiting for since the beginning of the world, since its outset. Upon opening our eyes we told our mummy, ‘That’s not the world I want.’ And your mummy, her voice full of understanding and of all sorts of vibrations, assures you: ‘It’s not the end yet, it’s not the end’. For a moment you feel elated and ask your mother to develop her thesis.

LIFE ALIVE

This expression or mythology or just a saying of no importance – life *is* without importance, but not without toil – is quite fashionable in some societies where death is regarded as a boon, a gift, a happy end to any enterprise. And what is life? Just a pointless enterprise whose entertainer has probably always been dead. But what does all this mean? Isn’t any life alive? As soon as you pronounce the word (or notion) ‘life’, everything comes to life, down to dead leaves, to the stretches of earth strewn with dead leaves. A few discussions may spring to life in this context, given that many people still believe – in spite of atom bombs and smashers – that the Earth, our dear irreplaceable planet, is still alive. What kind of proof can be voiced in support of this ludicrous theory? The supporters of this thesis point out that volcanoes continue to erupt, uncompromisingly threatening populations, dogs and even foliage which have never done any harm to anybody or anything. (With the exception of a hundred allergies which do not count in the majestic context called ‘human life’.) Well, is our Earth alive or not? We could live on a dead body, and every stone is dead to some extent, especially when compared with our jumps and banquet halls overgrown with dishes and speeches. Yes, you take a floor, any floor and begin to walk on it as if nothing had ever happened. (There are many dangers related to floors and their fundamental fragility. You put your foot on some patch of the floor you are surrounded with and, in the twinkling of an eye, this patch turns into a hole. And your leg becomes a sort of pillar. Not a pillar of society, though.)

If someone says that everything and everybody are dead, this individual – assuming we are talking about an individual, not about a machine and its dead letters – we can quote a verse from Shakespeare’s sonnet or play a Beethoven sonata, paying attention to all e and d sharps. And if someone goes on contradicting our speeches and arguments, we can show him or her a dozen LPs on which a producer of sorts engraved the following letters ‘Live Recording’. Sometimes they say that everything is alive, provided you can touch it, meaning that only invisibility does not belong to this life of ours. On the other hand, phantoms are part and parcel of invisibility; at least during certain periods, until the fatal moment when they depart from this invisibility and kill us either with a dagger or with their little fingers which are even more powerful, sharp and lethal than daggers. They are even mightier than Othello’s clutches. Apparently the idiom (or expression) ‘touchy-feely’ has its origin in the quarrel that often takes place when a group of non-believers-in-life and believers-in-it find themselves within a space, an enclosed sort of space; not necessarily a prison, mind you. One group has the following slogan, ‘No touch, no feely – nothing.’ The members of the other group limit the manifestation of their wrath to the words, ‘You – touchy, you – feely, you – feely-wheely, you – willy, you – teachy, you – fake teachers, you – ignoramuses, you – scoundrels, you – nothingnesses.’ A member of the first group comes up to a representative of the second opinion, touches her (they never touch men) and says, ‘Do you think you’re alive?’ Then the latter says to the former, ‘Until further notice.’ ‘And here’s this further notice,’ says the former, opening his fly and showing his penis. ‘And let me remind you that my penis is thickly smeared with poison.’ Then the rape begins and ends. And that is the end of it.

We should not forget dialogues, should we? Their absence might lead to our total isolation from both humanity and God, and His celestial consort. We do not mind being removed from the sphere and context called humanity; even without penises it would poison our life to such an extent that no yardstick, however gigantic, not to say measureless, would help us fathom the depth of our obnoxious fatality. But God is good and everybody knows that. Even atheists are somehow aware of His benevolence, for all the famines, plagues and wars He had not prevented in the course of our (and His) history. Some of those atheists say, ‘Well, we are allowed to nourish ourselves from time to time. And that’s what we should call “happiness”, according to the saints, Mother Teresas and all other representatives of celestial bodies.’ Yes, we are offered a glass of whisky and a piece of bread – from time to time (I am obliged and duty bound to repeat this maxim), but what do we need apart from these pieces and glasses? A Mercedes? Is that what you really need? And what about your inner treasure – Baudelaire whom you can recite at any hour of day and dawn; even at night, during your sleep?

When walking around Russia – what for, I wonder? – you see a lot of bifurcations and some of them are made of human flesh, human bones and human brains. A brain continues to bifurcate, even if it is dead and buried. Why? Because brains never stop: they engender their maxims and the maximum stupidity they are capable of *eternally*. In other words, life on Earth and elsewhere is eternal: there is nothing apart from eternity. If you hear a stupid, revolting remark, you say, shrugging your shoulders, ‘What do you expect them to do? Eternity is to blame.’ From time to time, they and their governors decide to hang eternity – once and for all, mind you. And on the eve of the execution, they say to each other, ‘Let us keep an eye on eternity, otherwise it may swallow some poison – as Goering did.’ One may wonder why it is so important to *hang* eternity, instead of just killing it? The point is it is not enough just to *get rid* of eternity without appending *something* to this torture. You must

humiliate it, to make everyone understand to what extent its importance and status have been overvalued, overloaded and overworshipped. They think that, if allowed to live eternally, they will become Beethovens and Rockefellers – all of them; without exception, without exception. Alas, there are only a few American producers walking up and down Broadway and Fifth Avenue. And the filth, the eternal filth is still everywhere.

In a Soviet film an officer asks his charwoman a trivial question, ‘What time is it, please?’ And she answers without looking at any clock, at any hands and minutes, ‘It’s around seven, I suppose.’ ‘You suppose? What else do you suppose? Do you suppose this chest of drawers is in this room or somewhere else? Where, in your opinion? And what about my arm that can stroke your face at any time, provided you’re not too far away - in your native village, for instance? What else do you suppose? Where can one find a series, a collection of your suppositions? In your bed, under your mattress? In your kitchen, behind your coffee grinder?’

By the way, a similar collection of Tertullian’s thoughts was found under *his* mattress. Here it is:

I believe in the world because what I see and hear is incredible, just incredible.

I believe that all children are born with equal intelligence.

I believe in the absurdity of intelligence. Even intelligent agencies are absurd. What is more, they are even more absurd than the rest.

I believe in intelligent agencies, in their inborn intelligence and wisdom.

The point is it does not really matter what time it is now or what time it will be in two thousand years because it will always be the same filthy eternity about which I have already talked at length here and also elsewhere, almost everywhere. The Soviet officer is a Soviet spy and therefore he must know exactly what time he is dealing with; or rather what time is about to destroy him forever or just for several years. (Soviet spies were destroyed on a regular basis.) If you concentrate on the time which adorns your watches and probably your life, you let go a lot of concomitant shows that deflect you towards shows based on non-time recruitments, participants, clowns. Instead of a well-adjusted joke or even mockery, you see a nose that detaches itself from the face to which it seems to belong and undertakes a journey to the end of the world. It grows, grows, grows, pierces a number of ceilings and goes on growing beyond galaxies. What’s more, galaxies continue to expand in accordance with the pattern suggested by the nose. What does that mean?

Down-to-earth individuals approach our nose and also our psyche in terms of their capacities. What can a nose do? It can admire a bunch of flowers you receive as a present from one of your visitors. It can also appreciate the perfume you are offered by the same visitor or somebody else. You can also stick your nose into someone’s life, but such practices are frowned upon and the same nose can express its condemnation of spying, especially that, contrary to what usually happened to Soviet spies, social spies are seldom, if ever find themselves in prisons and in the courtyards where one can see a lot of corses – the visual victims of well-meant executions. But, oddly enough, our nose can also carry out the duties attributed to the psyche, to its capacity to know whatever happens beyond curtains, thrones and frowns. Usually, instead of answering a boring, unnecessary question, some individual – he can be different from the one I was talking about a few seconds ago – shrugs off questions, obligations and other chores, saying, ‘Ask my psyche. She knows and feels everything, even what may be called unknown, unfelt worlds.’

Some sages used to say, 'The soul is what it can do.' But our gurus deny such an approach to the problem of knowledge and its fruitfulness. They shrug their shoulders, set their heads in motion and say, 'The soul can do everything, everybody, every every and a lot of dys. The whole world, in other words. That's what our soul can do, otherwise it would be useless to live on this Earth and even on its satellite.' Tertullian believed in his soul, but not on account of its absurdity, contrary to what may be assumed in the light of what I have exposed in the course of this treatise. He said, 'The soul is the only instrument that may allow us to treat successfully the opaqueness of the world. We look at an object or subject and say, "This is absurd, and it doesn't really matter whether I believe in it or not. Let it disappear in the twinkling of an eye, of its own accord."' But the soul explains to us all the ins and outs of the matter or of the individual standing in front of us as if he or she were our guardian and concludes as follows, 'In the light of what I've just explained to you, you no longer have to believe in this individual, be he your friend or foe. And if you don't believe in him, if you don't trust him, in other words, you'd better get rid of him or her, without waiting for his eye and its twinkling. Let the little star do the twinkling – that would be enough.'

The sense organs of the body are essentially what they can do, as they say. But we are supposed continually to overspring ourselves, to *überspringen* or whatever they say in German to that effect. Actually it is Nietzsche who is supposed to have said that on some occasion or other. Between ourselves, he might have jumped several times, instead of talking his head off. By dint of springing, he might have reached the state depicted in his philosophy with the aid of super, super, super, superterms. Be that as it may, when asked about the 'way to superman' he invariably blurted out, 'Jump, jump, jump.' As one of his admirers said reproachfully, 'He blurted everything out about the superman, though we'd agreed to keep it a secret for a while.'

As a result of such discussions, we often see the jumpers – not the professional jumpers, though – who cannot walk normally, decently up or down the streets they put their feet and bodies on. They see a puddle in front of their legs and, understandably enough, jump over it, anxious to avoid any contact with it. But instead of walking on, pursuing their train of thought – the train of their body, rather – they take a few steps in the opposite direction and execute another jump, with the same purpose in their minds. They repeat the exercise a dozen times and then ask any idle observer, 'Do I look like a superman now?'

'Yes, but the superman I saw last night was even more super than you.'

'I suppose the puddle he had to conquer was larger.'

'No, no – he himself was larger and his jumps were higher. More majestic, if you see what I mean.'

We are talking about talking and others as if there were such things as talking and others for whom democracies created their paradises. Yes, there are others, we are others, we think otherwise, we are otherwise, and so on and so forth. (So forth is not less important than so on; and yet it comes after so on. Does that mean that in a democracy there are neither after nor before? Everything and everybody are before.) How *could* you talk to others, for God's sake or any other sake? (For a glass of sake, as many of us say.) What is the point, assuming there are not any; any point, so to speak? You jump because you like the procedure, the method of becoming superhuman; not in no time at all, I'm afraid. You jump and someone you have not invited to the party says in passing, 'Not great? Is it?' Of course you do not have to say anything, not even – what is said traditionally, under any circumstance – 'what are you talking about?' Nobody knows what anybody else is talking about

either on this occasion or under any other circumstances. The only thing you can say about the whole problem or enigma is, 'Someone is talking.' Of course you could add (in the same breath, mind you), 'To no purpose,' which goes without saying. At least this goes without saying 'to no purpose'. You could just say 'to no' if you cannot restrain yourself. But your opponent – there are only your opponents on the Earth, but there are no others – is sure to answer thus, 'You should try to restrain your ambitions and be more realistic.' What ambitions are you talking about, pray? It is better not to go any further, any deeper into the subject.

So you jump because you feel like jumping; for no reason at all, you admit it rather willingly. But any unbiased or biased observer – they are all biased, basically and basely biased – just says, without waiting for permission or an invitation, 'Do you really think that, by jumping higher and higher, you'll become a superman? In the long run or rather in the high jump?' You shout many words, injuring your neighbours and even the nature you are in love with, and suddenly a new life thrusts upwards into the sky and you see a lot of cathedrals where you can fall on your knees and pray to our Lord for pain, for the absence of pain, for joy which, in your Russian mind, you easily confuse with 'voy' meaning howl. Some unbiased observer comes in and asks another traditional question, 'Is there someone outside, or is it just the wind howling in the trees?'

That is how they usually get off the hook. They hear a lot of *voy*, people asking for Bestadine (whatever its name is) or a painkiller, or a lifekiller – I can't! I can't! I can't! – and some observers, dressed modestly and for the occasion, just walk around saying to each other, 'What do you hear? Can you hear anything? Do you hear any sort of *voy*?'

'What is *voy*?' asks another observer or rather unobserver.

'Vo-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o - that's what it is.'

'No, I just hear the wind howling in the trees.'

'Is the wind you hear inside the church?'

'I don't think so.'

'So you go out and help the wind you hear so distinctly.'

'What am I supposed to do with this wind, once I manage to catch it?'

'You should take it to a hospital.'

'To the casualty department?'

'That's right.'

'And what if it is the wind?'

'What of it?'

'The suffering unit may turn out to be the wind, not its victim. Not the trees, I mean.'

'Then put two or three trees on your back and go to the same hospital.'

'They must be heavy, these trees.'

'Don't you remember Christ? Didn't he carry his Cross, patiently, patiently?'

'For a while, yes.'

'You have to have enough patience, at least for this while.'

In this connection one inevitably recalls the patience exhibited by Jesus Christ in his mother's womb. Anybody might think that Christ did not really need this womb of hers, given his unnatural birth and miraculous predestination. Do you really have to go through the motions (fire and water, the floor) if you are just there for everybody to see? There is a painting entitled *The Appearance of Christ to the People*. He has already his age

and his clothes, and one can hardly imagine a woman drawing his body from another woman's womb, saying, 'Don't shout so loud, my dear. Do you want me to go deaf on account of your screams? Take it easy. It's almost done. I've got his feet already. Now I can feel his left knee. He'll be a very handsome boy, I can assure you. Many women will fall in love with him. By the way, have you already given a thought to what his bride will get upon marrying him? The dowry, I mean. You know, my memory isn't what it used to be when I was young and danced with my Vania. Do you remember him? You don't? What a pity! He was a handsome young man. Not very young at the time when you *might* have seen him, I must confess.' Christ's Mother listens to this rigmarole with a view to teaching her the basic notion of what is called 'patience'. And, according to many observers, patience is the main quality of human beings. Of course you can talk as well about the cheeks you are supposed to turn as if they were roundabouts or something of the sort. But patience includes both roundabouts and the sorts of all sorts, because you do not really have to turn anything to show how magnanimous and Christian you are. You just stand there, in the middle of a room, of a street and someone – or two, three persons at once – slaps your face and also other parts of your body which do not turn, contrary to what a Christian might expect under the circumstances. Of course you can say to this so-called Christian, 'I don't really have to turn anything, any part of my body, because they are all easily accessible. Let *them* turn, if they wish. Aren't they a gang of dervishes in disguise?'

To tell the truth, we should take into consideration many aspects of the notion called 'patience' or many patiences, if you prefer. Let us take an ordinary, family situation. A boy looks at his mother imploringly, but she says firmly, in the once-and-for-all tone of voice and its timbres, 'You'll have your bar of chocolate at 8 p.m. Not a minute before. The boy bursts into tears but soon realises the futility of his undertaking. So he no longer undertakes anything: he just puts his fingers on the table and waits, waits, waits as he looks at a grandfather clock. One minute elapses, another follows on the heels of the first minute, of the one we talked about a minute ago. The boy spends his time in this fashion until the grandfather clock strikes eight. The boy jumps for joy and receives the bar of chocolate he has been waiting for so patiently, so stoically and imperturbably. But there is a difference between this bar of chocolate and any sermon Our Saviour gave vent to in the course of his life or career. Does it really matter whether the boy in question eats his bar of chocolate three minutes later, four minutes later? Even if he is deprived of this chocolate, no one will really suffer, on condition that we believe in this boy's good nature. If his nature is evil, perverse and intrinsically bad, even worse than that, he may murder a few people on account of this bar of chocolate he was deprived of at the age of seven or six. 'Injustice reigns in this world,' he might have said to himself at the age of nine. 'And it's not my fault.'

The point is there must be a point when everyone grows aware of what the presence of Jesus Christ represents on our globe at least; and everywhere else. But you need his word, and you need it *badly*, according to the Scriptures. You cannot wait until 8 p.m., whatever your mother says on the subject. She is even capable of comparing Jesus to a bar of chocolate, saying, 'His sermons are as sweet and adorable as this bar of Swiss chocolate.' But are you prepared to renounce the world for the sake of this chocolate, however smooth and sweaty? Yes, Jesus said unambiguously, 'Either you follow this bar of chocolate, eating it as you progress on your sinful path, or you follow me.' Of course, at this particular moment, you hear a chorus of children conducted by an old professional conductor, 'Can't we have both, the best of the both worlds, as they say, or are they just lying through their teeth, even if they have none? By the way, can you lie through your implants?' Of course the Americans can say, 'It depends on the quality of the implants,' which means that there are implants

through which you lie even better than if your teeth are in perfect working order. So many patients go to their dentists, even if their teeth are working miracles within their mouths and brains in general. ‘What kind of problem can you have with your teeth?’ their dentists enquire. And they answer, almost unanimously, ‘We don’t care about the food we have and swallow in the long run. We need to lie *cleanly*, if you see what I mean. We must get rid of dirty lies, of all these packs of lies they accuse us of.’

So their dentist pulls all their teeth out and puts Jesus’s sermons in where those teeth used to display their brilliance and independence. (The independence of Christ’s teaching, that is.) Whenever those persons eat in the presence of their colleagues and friends, in addition to their customary wisdom they display the wisdom of God just by eating a leg of mutton or a haunch of venison.

So can you compare a boy waiting for his bar of chocolate with Jesus who, by virtue of his human nature (and his own inborn virtue and structure), has to spend nine months in his mother’s womb? Jesus has to say to us, ‘Thou shalt not kill.’ (Or something of the kind. There will always be something of the kind – this all amounts to the same truth.) Of course many other people know this truth, and they can voice it in different ways, for instance, ‘What are you doing, you scoundrel? Stop it or I’ll call the police.’ Or you just recall Don José who kills Carmen and surrenders himself and his knife to the police, saying, ‘You should arrest me because I’ve killed her, you know. O Carmen, O Carmen.’ But we might omit the rest of his dying dialogue. (Is it really dying? He might have been pardoned in the days when feminism did not hold its sway over the planet.)

We are all aware of the fact that it is pernicious and painful (for everyone) to kill a human being. Even a bystander about whom I have talked already on many occasions – and I often do this in other publications as well to show that neither men nor women are really isolated: they all belong to human society, to put it mildly. Well, even this new bystander of ours is quite aware of how awful death feels and sounds, especially if you witness it at close quarters. Everything is so perversely close: a vulnerable body, an instrument of doom, the unquenchable desire to kill, to destroy, to deprive, to squeeze. A woman faints already, although no drop of blood has spoiled the beauty of the cityscape so splendidly renovated in recent years. You know that, before passing away, the victim will speak about his aging mother, about his children, their incurable illness and notorious lack of money. You know that at the very last moment the victim will draw as much air into his lungs as all these volumes put together – the volumes involved in the respiratory process – so that he actually becomes a real airbag. Ask any other bystander (or the same one) what he or she thinks about the figure standing or partly lying in front of him or her, and they will all say in unison: ‘What a marvellous airbag. I wish my car had something similar.’ And yet the victim is allowed to do everything – even writing his testament – but then the knife does its job, while its owner mutters under his breath, ‘It’s not for nothing I’ve sharpened it.’ So first he sharpened his mind. Then he sharpened the edge of the stick to a point. (Yes, there was a stick by his side – just in case. Anyway, knives do not always perform their duties to the utmost. What is more, the victim may turn out to be a vampire.)

So, in days of yore, people were killed without the slightest hesitation. And even if the killer’s hand trembled at some point, the revolver or the stick did the deed on their own: so joyful killing was represented in human minds. By whom? By Satan, of course. And during these massacres Jesus was still in his mother’s womb, according to Tertullian. And when Tertullian’s colleagues dared to point out that Jesus was to be drawn out of his mother’s womb – like Macduff, Tertullian invariably answered. Macduff wasn’t our saviour.

According to today's statistics women live longer than men. But in those days, in days of yore, neither women nor men could enjoy a long fruitful life. There were knives and sticks almost everywhere, and even if there were no hands to hold them, they acted on their own and we had to climb over corpses, even when doing our ordinary shopping. But then Jesus Christ was let out of his mother's womb; and we know nothing about his sojourn in there. He never spoke about it because, in the first place, it was a personal matter: no one could even ask permission to spend some time in his mother's womb. And then a crowd had already gathered around the Saviour's knees and he had to talk to all those people about their future, not about his own past.

So he said, 'Thou shalt not kill' and at this particular moment one could hear a lot of 'pums': the sound associated in our minds with daggers, knives and sticks falling to the ground. Then the Saviour smiled and said, 'You can keep the sticks – there are many vampires in your midst. And you can't distinguish them from ordinary citizens with your unarmed eyes.' Could you imagine such a thing? In those days, in days of yore, they were selling arms for eyes – the instruments which enabled one to tell a vampire from an ordinary whore or spinster. But even hag-ridden men did not always kill their wives: they recalled our Saviour's words. And if their neighbours or close friends dared comment, 'I'd kill her, if I were you,' the husband in question always answered. 'He said.' Unfortunately, in our present-day world where nothing looks or sounds like what they call the days of yore, this formula, this slogan or incantation, is chiefly used in the spheres connected to tyrants, demagogues and other semi-gods whose insistence and self-assurance (I know better) makes everybody's life hell. 'He said' is said about a petty devil who talks from rostrums and shouts 'Hurrah!' even when his soldiers fall on their knees and take an oath of allegiance to public enemies number one, two, three, four and so on; and so forth.

We often talk about ends, but mostly these ends concern our own life, the life of our civilisation, of mammoths and other animals, savage or domestic, or just depicted in a book. We often speak about the end of books, saying, 'Computers will kill books. Something similar happened in one of Hugo's novel. I think in that novel a printer killed a book, a mere printer.' 'This kills that' is a sacred formula we are prepared to apply to any phenomenon as if two things could not exist at the same time and even in the same space. Let us take a tea cup and a lump of sugar. Of course they will tell you at once, upon seeing your hand search for this lump which is supposed to sweeten your tea, coffee and your very life, 'What are you about to do? Don't you know that sugar is bad for your health, not only diabetes thrives in the presence of sugar. It endeavours – the sugar, I'm still talking of sugar – it endeavours to create an illusion which leads you astray, making you think that life is sweet. It's a sort of candy floss. They flog, while repeating, muttering under their breath, 'Candy floss, candy floss.' 'Candy flog,' you retort, but they don't listen to you, overwhelmingly absorbed in their flogging ritual. And they often quote Nietzsche in the course of this torture.

There is an important question placed, in my opinion, at the very centre or core of human existence. Can one say *everything*? 'He said that' is related to this question unquestionably, whatever they can say in defence of the opposite thesis. Many great artists – Michelangelo was one such – often ask themselves whether they blaspheme or not as they create their masterpieces. 'Our Lord has already created everything we need. The same goes for birds and even for ants. Why bother about these limbs? Why exhibit them in the centre of Florence?' On the other hand – there is another facet to this problem – one may wonder if there are subject matters one had better not touch upon. As someone put it, 'If you throw a mud pie in the direction of a hostile face, you may miss your aim, your moment of bliss. But the mud will remain on the palm of your hand. Not forever, though.'

Well, could Michelangelo create his David with impunity, without crying in the dead of night, without damaging his hair and cheeks? You cannot blaspheme – at least not in this sphere – because *everything* has been said. Not *everything* has been done, mind you. (The Bible cannot even lift a brick, let alone construct some World Trade Centre. It can construct the Tower of Babel, though.)

Let us return to Jesus who is still confined to his mother's womb, according to Tertullian. The only question he asked himself in this confinement was linked to this totality, to the complete version of the universe. 'Everything should have been said. And yet I'm still in my sacred, blessed prison.' He even undertook to transmit his message through the barrier interposed between him, his lungs, and the open air. He shouted his message, he recited his sermons by heart well before his departure from his mother-provided refuge. Alas, he already knew that there was no real refuge for him in the real world – or rather outside his mother's womb. (Our mother's womb – the only real world we are permitted to know, to get acquainted with, if only partly, unconvincingly.) Yes, you ask yourself continually – I am still talking of great artists – if you are entitled to revelation, if you are up to this challenge you focus attention upon. I am still talking about great artists. And the artist I have in mind right now lived three or four centuries ago. (Time travels very fast and you cannot always catch up with it; even if you have a heap of encyclopaedias on your writing desk.) At the end of his life – but on the brink of death, contrary to what might be imagined and concluded, after getting acquainted with this peace – Beethoven composed a piano sonata entitled *Hammerklavier*. This is a real tour de force, the Babel Tower of force. What followed was a kind of destruction: never again did Beethoven venture into the domain of utterness, as I call it. Utter this, utter that, utter everything.

In his mother's womb he knew he was in possession of incredible powers, but these powers could not be transmitted by radio or television, let alone computers and so on. He just knew this power was there, surrounding him and everybody on all sides, being in all minds. But should we not leave some room for other people's ideas – for other sonatas? Something is still lurking behind a distant bush and you cannot just walk past it, muttering to yourself and the trees, 'I don't care about this bush. Even it can save humanity thanks to the juice exuded by its twigs or whatever they are. I can't stop and spend a few hours on my knees to make the most of my encounter with this bush. I can't proceed in this fashion; otherwise I'll stop every five metres, because even in a desert you come across living creatures such as lizards. I can't squeeze every lizard until it yields the last drop of its life for the sake of future generations. Who are they, anyway, these future generations? Suppose you have just the future, nothing else. But the word 'future' is linked in your brain to the word "generations". They have become inseparable so to speak, in spite of atomic bombs that fail to lead them to utter destruction. Our destructions are always on the 'brink of', and then some secretary of state comes along with his peace-plan that annoys everybody. But you listen to him out of politeness and etiquette and, some people applaud as usual. Some of them think they are listening to Beethoven's *Hammerklavier* which often resounds everywhere. The utter destruction is still on the agenda, but it never happens because somebody wishes to save the Earth at all costs. The costs are so high that one begins to wonder whether the Earth costs all this money – really. 'Look at my necklace,' says a woman. 'Do you really think that the Earth is as costly as all that?' There are also hysterical people who fall on the earth and start kissing it frantically as if there is nothing else to kiss; not a silver cup of tea, for instance.

Kisses count a lot in the history of humankind. Some are so fond of kisses that they write lists of what can be kissed or not. Rightly they presume there are poisonous kisses and so you should shy away at the

approach of such a kiss to your lips or any other part of your body. After all, you can be kissed on the thigh! But do you really have to kiss anyone, even *en passant*? You pass, see a candidate for a future fleeting kiss and bend your body in accordance with the other body's trajectory. You kiss this individual's vulnerable spot and the deal is done. As for the consequences, you have to wait for at least 48 hours to find out whether you are already entombed in a faraway cemetery. (Yes, yes, as soon as they see a corpse they rush it towards the nearest rubbish bin or cemetery – to avoid catching a deadly disease,..) And even when you begin your series of cheek-turnings, you may notice – if you take the trouble to look right or left – a funeral procession that is patiently waiting for the end of your funereal rite. The rite of spring, they call it; the rite of autumn, rather. The rite of death, in other words. Are there other words?

But what is *Hammerklavier*? In the final analysis? You often say, 'in the final analysis'. But what about Beethoven's final analysis? Is it really final? He went home, unless he was at home. He did not commit suicide, which he ought to have done *logically*. Beethoven has said everything, but he is not the Bible. No one can say, 'Listen to *Hammerklavier* and you'll find answers to every question you've ever thought off.' But *Hammerklavier* has nothing to do with the Mountain where Jesus's most famous sermon resounded so many centuries ago. So what? You just put your apparatus (whatever it is) on your back and transfer it to the mountain in question, under discussion. (The Mounting Discussion.) You are not supposed to resort to amplifiers, otherwise you may disappoint not only the deaf but also the hard of hearing. Of course you can tell them, before starting your *séance*, 'How can you be hard of hearing at such a moment? Your hardness is unbearable. You're much harder than Thomas Hardy.'

Unfortunately the promoters of this historic *séance* could not care less about the impact of the sermon: they do all they can to avoid embarrassing questions such as, 'Why didn't we hear this hit before? Are you really what they call a lazy bones? Are you also a lazy brain, lazy skin, lazy spine, lazy scoundrel?' And you have to put them in the picture about technologies and their role in the spiritual life of the planet. 'Spirituality has nothing to do with technology,' their adversaries answer at once. The promoters cannot bring themselves to tell everybody the unvarnished truth: 'This sermon wasn't available before a certain point, a certain moment, a certain minute. How come? It's eternal, isn't it? This sermon was born at the same time as the Big Bang. They quit their respective wombs arm in arm. What's more, I'm absolutely sure they shared the umbilical cord. And the same womb.'

'You're right – we had some problems with the umbilical cord. At some point we didn't even know where the sound was coming from, and we didn't wish you to be taught by a mere machine.'

'It's better to be taught by a machine than by you, nincompoops that you are. Good-for-nothings.'

'At least we're good for bringing some machines to the mountain.'

We have no idea when we really begin to measure anything – our fingers, among other things. First, we look at our fingers and ask ourselves what they are for. For taking a piece of chocolate? Then we realise that, with the aid of two fingers, we can pinch our mother's one finger, and consequently she will give us two pieces of chocolate. We go further and further, as do our wishes, our ambitions, and our sense of impunity. Understandably enough, your mother scolded you when you asked her for *three* pieces of chocolate. So you decided immediately, on the spot, not to ask your mother for threepieces of chocolate at the same time. So, on

the spur of the moment (actually, it was not really on the spur of the moment, was it?) you voiced your wish in a slightly different way, ‘Mummy, could I have two halves of the same piece?’

Patience is always in trouble – the gift we are waiting for never arrives on time. Either it is too late and we say disappointedly, ‘Too late. I don’t want it any more. I have other, far more mystical aspirations within my field of vision.’ Mostly, however, it arrives exactly on time. You unwrap the parcel and a moan of disappointment escapes your lungs.

Why do we always wait for gifts? Sometimes, rather often as a matter of fact, we just stop in our tracks – if we stubbornly adhere to this ritual, there will soon be no tracks at all – and wait, wait, wait; rather patiently, I must admit. For what? For manna, for mamma, for another mamma: one mamma is not enough for one individual, and even for one country. One mamma dies or just marries for the third or fourth time; and the first baby needs another mamma. He moons around the house left to him by his former father, moons around the photographs in which his numerous fathers or stepfathers kiss his only mother and says to his new mamma, ‘Let us go to a restaurant and have the meal of our lives. Nothing else seems to attract my attention. What about you?’

Rather often, we hear the question addressed to a figure whose immobility may astonish even trees, if they were still capable of being astonished; and surprised after what *they* have been through. What is this question I am alluding to? ‘What are you doing here?’ A trivial question; no use to allude to it: it is not worth a simple, ordinary, run-of-the-mill allusion. It is an illusion, one of them, and we just walk by it without saying anything encouraging or reproachful. No, they wait for manna, all these people. And if they receive a quantity of manna, as a result of their hopes and prayers, they burst into tears and say, ‘I’ve been waiting for precious stones and fabulous contracts, fabulously rich duchesses. For the Duchess of Gerolstein, Herolstein, Greenstein, for instance. I’ve got none of these duchesses. What’s the matter with you? With thou? If you prefer.’

Some of them grew angry and set about throwing apples at the Almighty. Why apples? one may wonder. Because in the famous novella written by Franz Kafka the father hurls apples at his disobedient son who refuses to become an ordinary humans being. He is an insect, if you please, and his father is convinced it is *his* fault. (Whose?) Why? Because an insect instead of a son may be regarded by all and sundry as blasphemy, and in a Christian milieu they do not like blasphemy. ‘How did you do it?’ asks the father.

‘I didn’t do anything,’ says the son.

‘Did you push your members with such force that they grew miniscule, until they grey minuscule? One might take you for a collection of little fingers. Are you a collection of little fingers?’

‘I am,’ said the son, after much soul searching. ‘If you wish to make some money out of my deplorable state,’ added the son, ‘you can open a museum of little fingers. Something unheard-of, you know.’

The father smiled at last – it was his first smile since the incident or accident, and sent their chambermaid for a huge sheet of paper. She resolved to improve upon God’s creation by means of scissors. Sure enough, some members of his son’s new body were not beautiful or curious enough – curious enough to attract our tourists’ attention and money. A huge sheet of paper and a few drawing pins. But his wife stopped him in his tracks, saying he should not use other material – ‘only skin, only your son’s skin,’ she concluded. So the father punctured a few holes in the body of his former son and began to hang on them all sort of threads. ‘Actually you could try and play a game of volley-ball, using your paws. And you could also play a gorgeous game of basketball, using your head. Wait a minute, I’ll drill a suitable hole in your skull, otherwise we’ll never know

the winner. In general tourists don't like the games without winners.' This time, the mother put her foot down, saying, 'Do you know I'm of Russian origin? We used to say, "A head full of holes," moron. Your son is a moron, and you're perfectly aware of that. We'll make the balls smaller.' 'They *are* small,' said the father, looking at his son's private parts.

In the Soviet Union some pupils resisted such epithets (the biggest fool, the smallest brain) and did all they were capable of to escape such nicknames – or names, simply and purely. They even indulged in what Hamlet called truancy or a truant disposition – at the risk of getting a bad mark and being expelled from school. And if they flew in the face of public opinion and walked around calmly, even majestically, some truant (Horatio himself, no doubt) would seize this opportunity and put in their brains some balls stuffed to the brim with poisonous gases.

But why talk about foul things, something foul, unpleasant to touch and smell and even to see in the distance? The more I think about my life, the longer I delight in delights, in delicious, succulent synonyms which mean only happiness, nothing else; just happiness. You relish the prospect of eating a pastry or something, no matter what. You just relish it, the word itself and, strange as it may seem, relishing the very word – provided it is the *very* word – is often the paroxysm of happiness, even if you forget the whole thing half an hour later.

'And where's the end of the world?'

'At point D. You see, point B is for second-raters. But, contrary to what you might suppose, point C is *not* for third-raters. It is meant for first-raters. But we are super-raters, can't you understand this simple, simplitisimus truth? Let's go, anyway.'

They often speak of starting points which are simple, otherwise they would not allow you to start. I think we all fly, whether we are actually flying or crawling. It is a permanent flight from the centre to which we are attached somehow, in spite of the eternal loss of this centre. Sometimes you feel it, sometimes you do not, as may be guessed, confirmed, justified.

I remember a Soviet actress whose beauty was above all suspicion. She played Ophelia in a Soviet adaptation of Hamlet. She was fragile, beautiful, exquisite, but she had the feeling she was not gorgeous enough. She went to the USA and underwent plastic surgery. As a result, she lost her centre and probably the universal centre, the one around which even the letters turn as they attempt to compose the word 'centre'. I am not sure she doubted her beauty attested to by so many *soupirants*, sighers, those who used to sigh in her presence because they knew she was inaccessible. She merely had an irresistible urge to get away from the centre; or from herself, as people sometimes say, rather simplistically, not to say vulgarly. How do you get away from yourself? You look at yourself in a mirror and then walk away. Or you fall when trying to get to the bottom of your staircase. You get a black eye and, whenever you look again at yourself in a mirror, you realise you went away from yourself, reaching blackness, eyelessness.

A black eye is not tantamount to the black universe, and even if you have a dozen black eyes, you may not realise to what point blackness is omnipresent, unavoidable. You watch a recent film and you see a black-and-white version of it dating back to the Twenties or Thirties. But patience is an important element in our life, as we all know despite our undistinguishable desire to forget this truth. If we wait long enough, the colours will return, due to the forward movement of time. But often time contradicts itself and goes backward; and the point is, it is a wrong back it finds on its way. There are many backs and one should not confuse the right back with

the wrong one. For instance, you would like to play the game you were fond of in your early childhood. You would come up to a boy (or a girl) and say, 'I am your cavalier.' And your chosen one (or victim) bends down and becomes your horse. But during the ride you suddenly realise you chose the wrong back. Before choosing the right back – no use choosing the wrong one – you should ask the person standing before you to turn round and even say a few words. And suppose this person does turn round and even sings a song that reminds you of your grandmother or your aunt.

And every ride reminds you of Keats, of his *La Belle Dame Sans Merci*. If you are determined to take a ride, you have to accept the conditions. The first condition is '*sans*'. Whatever happens is *sans* – something is lacking; not necessarily a member of your body. The absence may be related to a thought, but this thought is essential, vital, and without this thought no ride has a meaning, let alone a substance. If asked, 'What is *sans*?' you may answer, 'A substance, a substance of what is painfully needed.' Then you point to a portion of the air and say, 'This portion of the air is *sans*.' Then you realise this portion is no longer in front of you, in close proximity to your lungs. And your ride is cancelled, almost automatically. You are told you should say 'merci' to whatever or whoever you see around you – to the whole Earth, to the whole universe. You see a falling star and say 'merci' to the star itself and also to its fall. But the colours do not return and you curse everything and everybody.

But before uttering your curses, you had better re-read Tertullian, the words he devoted to patience and Jesus Christ 'whose patience knew no bounds,' he adds somewhere. We know already that Jesus awaited the time of his birth. What can you do in this situation that everyone knows by heart? Spending nine months in one's mother womb. (Many writers never miss an opportunity to play on the 'family-resemblance', as they say. What family resemblance? There are so many of them in the world. You select two brothers and talk about their affinities with their parents for hours on end. And during these interminable hours a sort of smile does not leave the faces of the parents. And if it does, for some obscure reason, you should call in their sister or their cousin, for want of anybody better, and the smile I have already touched upon, is sure to re-appear; unless you say something inappropriate. What? For instance, you begin to analyse Kierkegaard's leap or something of the kind. The parents frown and you realise the grandiosity of your blunder. So you switch to sports, to gymnastics and say something to the effect that jumping higher and further is important for the young and also for the old. The higher you jump, the longer you live – such is the wisdom that comes to us directly from our ancestors, direct and indirect. And you add something in a similar vein, 'I'm sure that your daughter and your son jump in the same way, reaching approximately the same height.')

Well, I am not sure Tertullian enlarged upon athletics and jumps of all kinds – in the works that have reached our understanding and libraries. He *might* have devoted a series of treatises to jumps or leaps, but even specialists can shed no light on this aspect of his art. Well, well, well. Let us turn towards what he did discuss in his writings; at length or otherwise. Jesus was aware of his predicament: he was to be born into our world overburdened with perditions, petitions and stupid acts. And of course he realised at once he had no choice. What are you allowed to do in your mother's womb? Suppose you are dead set against your appearance in this world of perdition and nonsense. You read in Agatha Christie's novels about characters who fall at the wrong moment and take a long tumble down a staircase; on their back, if you please. And then a doctor says, 'Unfortunately your future son is dead.' What blasphemy! Even an ordinary citizen cannot conceive such a plan – this version of suicide. You are permitted to use as many sleeping pills or bullets as you wish, but leave your

mother alone. Unfortunately she is no longer alone; your sinful body is inside her, in her womb. And if your guru says to you, 'Leave your mother alone,' you can answer thus, 'Be patient! I'll be born pretty soon.'

Why does Tertullian talk about what follows your sojourn in your mother's body? Because Jesus could really boast about his *double* patience. How come? Not only did he wait for the time of his birth, but he also bore the delay of growing up. Let us not forget that he knew everything at the very moment of his conception. Even before this moment, well before the moment of his conception, he knew everything about the world, the underworld and the aboveworld. Now we are faced with the following dilemma: either we admit that somehow Jesus was not *fully* aware of what lay in store for him, or that his patience was much greater than what we habitually call 'the double patience'. Suppose you know every second of your future life, of the life following your birth, your cries for help and so on. You say to yourself, 'In two minutes my mother will reveal to the world one of her breasts and I'll suck it to my heart's content.' Sure enough, two minutes later (no three minutes, mind you) your mother reveals to you and to the room where you carry out this sacred ritual one of her breasts. You know *which* breast she will reveal, but you nod when you realise that your prediction is about to come true. Many other things come true; everything comes true, as a matter of fact. Surprises (good surprises) make our life bearable; to some degree. Jesus was cruelly deprived of surprises. Even Judas's betrayal did not surprise him; far from it. According to many theologians, he went so far as to organise it meticulously, rehearsing the kiss for a week or so.

For Jesus' followers the continuous testing of patience may become unbearable, if they are gourmets. Living in our world, they are incapable of removing from their lives all five-star restaurants. In some of those restaurants they just say, 'All right, you'll have your menu which shouldn't be disclosed to you before, otherwise the ingredient called "surprise" will be dramatically absent from your food. You just say to us what you can't eat at all. In other words, you're kindly asked to disclose to us the contents of your allergies, of the diseases you suffer from on account of your bad behaviour in the sphere of food because most of those allergies come from food, not just from the air or out of the blue, contrary to what many of you believe.' But those followers, those Christ's little brothers – not to confuse with little flowers, so-called *fioretti* – begin to wave their arms, saying, 'We're aware of your consideration for our respective diets. All this was arranged right before the Big Bang. You might have spared us this séance, had you given thought to our yearning for surprises. You salute us, lead us to our chairs, but ask no questions as to our allergies, cancers and so on. We are surprised – you always begin with this question-stuffed formula – and this surprise is the best appetiser one can stumble upon in this predictable, utterly boring world.'

Patience. You know what dishes you will be served in a few minutes, in five minutes, to be precise. You feel no saliva in your mouth: the situation did not put any water in it. (*L'eau à la bouche*.) How could you enjoy a meal if you have no water in your mouth? Of course you can ask for a glass of water – some doctors prescribe a glass of *tepid* water – and hold its contents in your mouth for more than five minutes. Then you ask for a bucket and get rid of the tepid water that begins to get on your nerves and even on your taste buds. You get the feeling that your meal is spoiled already, in spite of the oysters your destiny promised you in St Peter's footsteps. Yes, from time to time, you are told by a mysterious voice, 'This comes in St Peter's footsteps,' and you consume something you have never heard of. 'To hell with words, notions and definitions,' the same voice informs you. 'Just enjoy your life and mission.'

Of course you are aware that every morsel you swallow is a building block, so to speak. What are they building, pray? you say all of a sudden, addressing nobody. ‘Your growth, you silly goose. Have you forgotten Tertullian?’ ‘He bears the delay of growing up.’

‘Who?’ asks the same voice.

‘I do.’

‘You’re right – it’s your turn.’

‘Does that mean there’ll be many Jesuses after my Crucifixion?’

‘Mind your own business.’

‘But what is my mind?’

‘To be a *kind* of Jesus. All the books devoted to the imitation of Jesus Christ are devoted to this aspect of the problem.’

‘But what’s the problem, pray?’

‘The salvation of humanity. Six people were rescued by helicopter from a fishing boat in distress off the Cornish coast. Have you heard the news? Your task is much bigger and far more solemn. You have to rescue all those who live on coasts, on seas, in the air, in prehistoric caves, in historic caves and so on.’

The point is you do not always have enough instruments for rescuing people and their souls which count even more than their bodies, as everyone knows. Suppose you wish to take care of those whose boat approaches one of Niagara’s falls. (Niagara-like falls – there are many of them.) I think this happens in one of Buster Keaton’s films. Well, you have never taken swimming lessons in your life. (In this respect you are quite similar to Ludwig II of Bavaria.) You shout of course, you do your best to warn the future victims of the fall. (For once we are not talking of Adam’s Fall whose victims we are, all of us. ‘Fall of us,’ as some preachers say.) You shout, ‘Niagara! Niagara!’ Apparently, according to some sayings, the French are not very fond of geography; but they adore bread and croissants. So they do not realise what danger is in store for them; a hundred meters from their boat, to be precise. So you begin to shout ‘Adam,’ strongly accenting the second syllable.

A huge stir results from your cries, for some so-called Adams do their best to find a suitable Eve, which means they look at every woman they have in their field of vision from head to foot and then try to rape them to find out if it is *their* Eve they are mishandling, mismanaging or whatever. In short, whatever you do with this woman corresponds to our universal impression or representation of Eve, or even the biblical story that admits a huge fault connected not only with the fruit, one fruit, with some other fruit, far more pernicious than the one we concentrate our attention, nerves and ethics on. So you cry ‘Adam!’ and the havoc you produce may remind one of the Creation of the World where Eves were mixed with Marions and Mozarts with Beethovens. How do you get away from the primordial chaos? It is still in our midst, I’m sorry to say, except that the primordial chaos was more organic, given the purity of the air of our morals which were pure to the extent of forbidding us to make love everywhere, even on the top of a trolleybus. Well, either you have a primordial, early-Christian chaos, or depravity that has no bounds, no unbounds – no uns, only ons. They come together and shout, ‘On?’ and the others, the other gang of the same youngsters or elders shout, ‘On, by no means!’ And they on, they on, they on, for hours on end; or for hours on on.

So you are determined to save humanity, being one of Jesus’s imitations. Which imitation are you, by the way? The one who prevents a lot of people making love on the top of a trolleybus? Or a bus, for that matter?

Another group of imitators wages a war against those who fornicate under buses and ordinary cars, even if these cars' intrinsic value does not allow me to enjoy their fornication to the utmost.

What could you do under the circumstances? One of Jesus' imitators dismantled a few cars to see what the problem was, but could not put them back together again: neither the cars nor the bodies. The bodies cried, almost in unison, 'Who are you taking yourself for? I'm Adam, for God's sake.' Or 'I'm Eve, for God's sake.' Or 'I'm Mary, for God's sake.' Or 'I'm Jesus, for God's sake.' And one of them even shouted, 'I'm God, for God's sake.' And then, something stirs in the back of the room and a bottle of sake comes unacknowledged, unrecognised and even unappreciated in the sphere where only divinities voice grievances, disagreements and ecstasies. How can a divinity voice his or her ecstasy? The first syllable that comes to your mind is RA, the Egyptian God, and for a while all our organs repeat this syllable, for it is easier to pronounce RA than to enter the intricate world of secret names of God. So you say, 'Ra,' and you are quite satisfied, especially if you repeat it several times, 'Ra, Ra, Ra, Ra, Ra.' Unavoidably you burst into song or begin to dance. As a result, you have this diagram of your life:

RA RA RA RA	
RA	RA
CAR CAR	

The poem is entitled *Raven*. Nothing to do with Edgar Allen Poe.

And then I come across someone who does nothing at all. That is not good, you explain to him to the best of your abilities. This is not the good meant by God, you say. It is probably just good: you feel comfortable for the moment. But the moment is not good either, you know. Nothing is good under the circumstances. You are cross-legged, but your legs denote no sacred exercise recommended in yoga. You just do it for nothing better, for doing nothing better: you are out of your imaginative resources. Your imaginative resources dwindled to this sort of speck – to this cross-legged position which means nothing because it has nothing in common with the Cross. You cannot hang anyone on this position of yours, can you?

You upbraid your opponent for hours on end, but the hours end somehow and in the end you are left just in the centre of your predicament. You have a cross-legged individual – in front of you, mind you, just a metre or so away; or out, or down, or up. Let him put a lot of hope in heaven. Perhaps heaven and our stars hold a solution for this cross-legged individual.

And then you do something unusual and unexpected. (And please do not say to me that in the world of God everything is expected. You just mutter, 'Cross, cross, cross.' You continue to mutter (and consequently to matter) and what comes from your lips resembles, 'Moss, moss, moss.' You try to build the Tower of Babel, using these syllables, words or whatever. And you get this:

CROSS
CROSS
CROSS
MOSS
MOSS
MOSS

Do you need the cross? Of course. But what about the moss? Do you really need it? You know that the rocks near the river were covered with moss. Well, you do not even know which river this someone is talking

about. You can climb on a cross – that’s for sure. But what are you supposed to do with the moss? You climb, climb, climb, getting higher, higher, higher. And finally you install yourself on the top of the cross. So what? What could you do now? You imitate Jesus Christ or some Olympic champion. But *ça rime à quoi?* I think there was a gentleman called Jules Rimet. Why did he receive this name at the hour of his birth? Because he was destined to rhyme everything with everything, creating a world harmony, one of them. You jump, get a medal and that is called ‘harmony’; not *world harmony* perhaps. But one little harmony is enough in our world. You create this harmony, collect it, go out and show it to everybody, saying, ‘Beautiful, isn’t it? Let us live like this, forever and ever.’

Well, you live like this little harmony, for a while. And then you say to yourself, ‘It’s not my ideal, my ultimate aim, is it? Besides, it’s too small. I’ll make it grow quickly and obstinately.’ It does grow quickly and obstinately, and soon you have a huge harmony on your back. And you have no idea what to do with it. Is it the beginning of a new Beethoven’s *Ninth*, for instance? So many people understand the world literally: if you mention their tack, for some obscure or clear reason, they explain to you in detail why it is gross or small as if their whole life depended on it, not only the life of their spine. If you are convinced that your happiness depends on the growth of your back where you put the harmony on which the world stands, stays and lies for centuries to come, you do your best to allow your back to grow in all directions; not only horizontally, mind you. If the harmony of the whole world is hidden at the centre of your back – which should grow to become everything – you will feel you are charged – you will never be discharged – with a worldwide mission. (Compare your charge with the one mentioned in almost every dictionary: He was charged with taking care of the premises. In your case, the premises include the whole Cosmos.)

So your back continues to grow and you become first an ordinary hunchback, and then you become a character from Hugo’s famous novel that one can see on television, whenever someone sings something appealing to you and everyone. Your back continues to grow and they say, when passing by or just looking from their windows, ‘There’s another hill in our region. Do you think it’s one of the Moscow hills? There are seven of them, if I’m not mistaken?’ Whereupon you realise one hill is not enough to save humanity from all the ruins mentioned in the Apocalypse. (Four horsemen, among other things and horsemen; and horses.) So you pass an order and soon you have another harmony – on your back, on your legs. If you have a harmony on your legs, they say, when looking at your gait – he walked with a slow stiff gait – ‘He’s very harmonious, perhaps too harmonious. At least that’s what I think and believe.’

You say to yourself continuously that what counts is your solidarity with the needy – with everybody, to tell the truth. (Even with so-called oligarchs.) You say to yourself and confide this truth to your diary that your beauty or handsomeness, as you put it sometimes, is of no importance. One ugly man added to the immensity of the world. One Quasimodo. Put him in the back row so as not to disturb beauty-oriented individuals. And he will continue to back up everybody, while staying on the dark side of the moon, so to speak. Modesty is the keyword in this situation, in his predicament, in the hunchback’s predicament and horror. ‘I don’t wish you to see my hunch and also my magnanimity. I’m just a dwarf from a fairy tale where a snow-white maiden beautifies the world.’

All right: now they are in the know, in spite of your inborn modesty, your silent ways, your *bouche-cousue* attitude. One of them says with a broad, almost generous smile, ‘You know, last week I received several million dollars. I’m almost sure they came from his hunch.’

‘But his hunch is as big as before,’ someone answers.

‘This is a good sign,’ answers the first individual ‘Those who give money to others, receive the money from their donors who always require a sort of proof of your benevolent disposition. You show them a large number of receipts, whereupon they give you a medal and a few bags stuffed with banknotes. “For others,” they say, smiling ironically. “Of course you can help yourself – within reason. Never disobey this rule: within reason, within reason.” “My reason is very large,” you answer with a proud shake of your head. “It is as large as my generosity, benevolence, empathy and so on.”’

Do you really need legs and arms? The needy will always find you: they have a lot in common with dogs who look for criminals of all kinds. At customs, dogs are used to smell out drugs in passengers' luggage. It is customary for dogs to use their sense of smell at customs to detect drugs in passengers' luggage. But a poor man who watches TV from time to time knows that the best way of earning money overnight is to sell drugs (dogs, as the Russians say: dogs, dogs). So what you really have to train yourself for is finding drugs in suitcases, in pockets and even in people's mouths. Many of them try to smuggle drugs by putting them in their mouths and pretending to chew gum – for hours, for days and nights. You are not likely to land up in prison for chewing gum, are you? So you should take advantage of this missing link in the chain of laws. Of course, sooner or later they will come with this idea: searching culprits' mouths for drugs. Naturally they will start with socks and underpants, but little by little they will come to the mouths we are talking about. ‘Can you please open your mouth?’ says a police officer. The future (or the present) culprit draws his smartphone from his pocket and writes on its screen the following sentence, ‘I’ve an excruciating toothache.’

‘Does it really prevent you from opening your mouth?’

‘It does. My mouth is a bundle of nerves. And when you move a nerve it breaks. And the breaking of a nerve is painful, believe me. Do you wish to try?’

‘How *could* I experience this torture?’

‘I’ve got a spare bundle of nerves in my pocket. I’m a very nervous individual, you know. I live on my nerves, you know. Do you know why I repeat “you know” all the time? Because I’m nervy, and I’m always nervy, not only before exams or meeting a woman I’m in love with.’

‘What do I have in common with a woman you’re in love with?’

‘I think that, if you were a woman, I’d fall in love with you. But unfortunately I’m not a homosexual.’

Talking for hours on end leads you nowhere. So it is better not to have a mouth – you can put your meals straight into your belly – and hang instead a letter on your jacket; addressed to the needy and the others. Why not? The others may occasionally need money, may they not? In this letter you say to all those unfortunate, truly miserable Hugo-inspired people, ‘Please take as much money from my hunch, as you wish. But leave a certain quantity of this money to your brothers and sisters. Don’t forget our brotherhood, sisterhood and nephewhood.’

But there are so many perverse people who use their hunches (and also mouths) for illegally carrying a lot of drugs, jewels and other sources of their income or rather their fortunes. Do you know why police officers say to their students, ‘Sometimes you have to be prepared to follow a hunch.’? Whipping revolvers out of your pockets and even your underpants is old-fashioned. Just follow a hunch: this hunch, that hunch. From this hunch you will take a hundred roubles. From that hunch over there you will fish out a thousand dollars. Do you realise that every skyscraper is a hunch in disguise? And those skyscrapers who, in their childhood or babyhood, learnt how to walk are called hunchbacks: yet another homage to Victor Hugo. And to Notre Dame, occasionally.

And what about patience? All our lives we always ask ourselves the same question: 'What about?' We forget something, remember something, something different no doubt, and then we ask ourselves the crucial question, 'What about death?' Or what about our life, as they usually say. Usually, after touching upon death, ever so slightly, they say or rather shout, 'Life, life, life!' and everything seems to be in order, even your destiny which, until further notice, does not depend on your silly wills and deals. But patience allows you to live from one day to another day or night because you know (approximately) that you will live for another 20, 30 or 35 years. And each time you come to your senses after a period of sleep induced, encouraged, created *de toutes pièces* by a new brand of sleeping pill (by all pieces, no matter how small or big or high) you say, 'There'll be another day. And I hope I'll have enough patience for that other day, if only till 10 p.m.' Then you crack up (and also down, which is far worse) and mutter somewhere, not necessarily in your bedroom or bathroom, 'That's enough. I've suffered as much and even longer than Jesus Christ. Put me on a cross, on any cross.' And you stop in the nick of time because, right after this nick, you may have been damned forever and forever; and even for nevernevernever. Nevermore, as the famous raven put it. But why should we write to a raven's dictation?

You must use every second to the utmost to get humanity out of a mess, or a fix – out of everything, preferably. All right, they tell you: you are out of everything. 'Not out of my money, I suppose.' 'No, not out of your money nor of your pony whom you like as ecstatically as your money.'

'All right, all right. What next?'

'Another day.'

'What am I supposed to do with day, if any?'

'God proposes, you dispose.'

'God proposed me another day.'

'Why such an honour?'

'Do you really think an additional day is really an honour; or a burden?'

You dare to look at the stars. What do you see? A lot of useless or wonderful worlds which amount to the same thing. They amount, amount, amount, while looking at each other suspiciously. One world is slightly higher than the other one; at this particular moment. Then this moment passes and another moment *prend le dessus*, takes the top or the hot: you can never trust translations. You do not trust them. For instance, you write: 'take the middle', instead of what I have just suggested. They say, 'You're a Buddhist adept. The Middle Way. We all know that by heart. There is a puddle on the right-hand side; there is one on the left-hand side. You walk in the middle side to avoid dirty water.'

You live a life, a wholesome, a whole life to which nothing should be added with the exception of a multitude of pleasures, beaches, benches saturated with kisses. And then they say you should add five roubles to the amount of money you put somewhere, on some counter or other. You add five roubles and you feel happy, but you cannot be happy because of these roubles which come from the country you dislike intensely. At least you dislike its rulers, its tsar and the hatred you experience spoil your dinner, one of your dinners. But one spoilt dinner spoils a dozen of them: that's the rule (the golden rule) of our life. What is the other chief ingredient of our life? One superfluous spice can spoil a dinner as well. And this dinner can spoil all other dinners you will have in your life, because you will remember that particular dinner, whatever happens. Try as you may to forget

this mishap, you will always say to yourself, ‘Fortunately, luckily for me – it is important to say both fortunately and luckily to protect yourself from bad omens and mishaps of all kinds, not only of the kind we described several minutes ago – fortunately and luckily this spice is not part and parcel of the dish I’m enjoying tonight.’ And then this spice appears in the air, for no reason at all, out of the blue, out of the black, and you do your best to protect your dish from this moribund spice which, if swallowed and digested, will lead to your death and funeral carried out as usual in your family abode, in your tomb, in a series of coffins which bear the names of your uncles, aunts, nephews. And so on? And you have no idea who they were or still are because you did not live long enough to know them, to kiss them, to offer them chocolate or pastries or a glass of wine.

What did you live for anyway? To see and feel your death; luckily no one places your death in your coffin. You might think it is just another lease of life. What is the difference between death and life, physically speaking? You see a body and you may think, at least for a minute or so, it is alive or dead – like Schrödinger’s cat, if I’m not mistaken. As for this body, you begin to tickle it to find out if he is really alive or dead. Of course there are individuals who can grin and bear this séance – tickling, I mean – without showing any sign of displeasure; or pleasure, for that matter. You tickle them on and on, you tickle them to death, so to speak: in my opinion there is such an expression in the English language. You tickle them to death and they end up dying for it is still the purpose of your procedure and you are very purposeful. Your every purpose goes to the very end and ends up dying. Well, either the purpose itself expires, having accomplished its task, or it is your individual on whose body you spent some time. (He dies.) Or yourself: tickling someone to death is not only boring – it may be fatal. So many cancers stem from tickling.

You did not place your death, I mean, on your deathbed. At the last moment, at the crucial moment, someone called the priest or your brother and said, ‘Our doctor would like to give another injection. He’s not sure it’ll help, but he must carry out his duty.’ ‘Is his duty to kill our patient?’ asks your interlocutor. ‘It’s his life’s duty,’ says your interlocutor coldheartedly.

That is probably how we learn to speak and write. They throw all sorts of signs in our mother’s womb and we invariably choose one or two whose significance denotes our attachment to this or that sphere of human activity. If among these objects or subjects you suddenly see a cross, you know what to do. Immediately you begin crying, ‘Golgotha! Golgotha!’ and then they embark upon their explanations of the lessons taught to us by the Bible. And if you place this cross in a box of matches they say you will become a famous fireman or a legendary pyromaniac, and in the latter case they often put you in prison – for no reason at all: you have not burnt anything yet, not even your Christmas Tree. Of course they always say, ‘Prevention is better than cure’ and consequently many innocent people are put to death in their cells or rather in the cells belonging to the nearest prison.

Among the objects you receive in your mother’s womb may be found several books, and it is well-known that Beethoven, when answering the question related to his intelligence – some think you can compose *The Ninth* without departing from your pre-natal stupidity – Beethoven would invariably answer, ‘I learnt Kant’s categories in my cradle.’ We admit their interference, so what? Yes, a supernatural force – or just a neighbour, why not? – made it a rule to put a book by Kant on the bed where Beethoven’s mother took rest from her various labours. He could not help noticing that every morning the book would disappear, being replaced by another book, not necessarily issuing from Kant’s pen. All this meant that the neighbour or the supernatural force I am talking about was not alone; he might have been on his own, but, generally speaking, he was not

alone. Everybody knows that the world is brimful with supernatural (and natural) forces. When a tempest is needed, somebody – let us assume it is God – triggers a number of winds, drops (coffee granules, for instance) and Shakespeare writes his last play. Putting a book on someone's bedside is nothing in comparison with such a feat. But how did Beethoven read Kant's treatises? Did he have a special magnifying glass, a telescope? (Let us not forget he was still in his mother's womb.) Never mind – what counts is his acquaintance with these treatises.

You acquire the rudimentary knowledge of the world, even if you are not Jesus Christ himself or herself. But you are tempted to go further and further because your curiosity eggs you on. ('Don't egg him on! He gets himself into enough trouble without your encouragement,' says one Satan to another. To no avail. The apprentice gets into trouble, for he learns about how to construct an atom bomb.) Various doctrines get mixed up and you are not even born; not yet. What will you do when you eventually get to Washington and the Library of Congress puts itself at your service? And the Tower of Babel?

What is most annoying is the manner in which all those people – naming them would be pointless and even harmful – lead you astray as soon as you begin your calculations and reflexions. They say, 'You should avoid evil and its empire. Even a tiny village stuffed with evil can be destructive and becomes unbearable with the passing of time.' Actually, sometimes time cannot even pass: evil has replenished holes, crevasses and other outlets, habitually used by evil. And by time, to tell the truth. Now only evil makes its presence visible: it seeps through the ceiling and streams off the walls. And every drip, drop and stream ends up destroying your cells, instead of destroying your evils; a part of them at least. Evil is far more present than can be figured out. For instance, a sceptic or Peronist says, 'I doubt if this hand is really mine. What if it belongs to the Devil? Or my sister, for instance? She loves me so much – to the point of wishing to make love with me every two hours. And when her emotions reach their peak – and they have many peaks, believe me – she says, 'Don't be so shy. It's not my hand that handles your penis. It's your own hand because you're my own. And I am your own too.' Then she asks you to caress and kiss her fingers and this ritual becomes disgusting in the twinkling of an eye. Even sooner, even sooner – my eyelids are mostly heavy so that I can't twinkle my eyes at the push of a button. Or at the push of an eyelid, if you prefer.

To avoid such an inconvenience – I am talking about your doubts, this time – you say to yourself firmly, 'This is my hand, and I won't allow it to sink into evil by toying with my genitals and other parts of my body – in search of doubtful pleasures. Yes, I admit that I doubt the usefulness and morality of these pleasures. I'd better get down to brass tacks, whatever they are. I'm sure, however, that they don't contain evil pleasures. My brass tacks can be found (in abundance) in my library, for example. Of course you can pick up a book and get engrossed in it for a while, while your hands touch your body in a polyphonic way, as if it were a fugue by Bach or any other composers infatuated with counterpoint.'

Well, you put your hands in your pockets – not in the presence of ladies or of churches, however, and then you decide – once and for all, mind you – that you are virtuous and no particle of evil is capable of soiling your hands, your heart and even your ears. And if several particles of evil take aim at your ears, you just buy a dozen ear plugs and begin to listen to Haydn or Monteverdi broadcast by your heart. Alas, evil oozes out of the wound we traditionally call 'the world' as if no other name could be found in our dictionaries for the horror we are living in. Why not just say 'word' because, as we all know, words and letters are at the origin of the world. You could also call the world 'Letter' – no matter which letter you have in mind. Any word would suit and thoroughly describe the filthiness I touched upon several minutes ago. (To tell the truth, I touch upon this

filthiness, I really *touch* it, all the time; even now, at the present moment. Even when a beautiful young lady hands me a beautiful apple – either a real apple or an electronic appliance – I reject it with horror, saying to myself, ‘Adam again, Eve again, the serpent again, this bloody old song.’

Can Tertullian be of any help? We read in his sacred books the following words related to Jesus Christ and his imitators, ‘He did not strive. He did not cry aloud. No one has ever heard His voice in the streets.’ So I wonder why our saints still wonder why people are not virtuous? Why do they continue to kill each other mercilessly? Why don’t they kill each other *mercifully*, one wonders? Please, wonder no longer: just follow your path wherever it is making its way towards damnation and don’t worry your head or any other part of your body. Take care of your head, shoulders, little fingers and forget about the world which surely, though slowly, leads you towards the lion’s den. And to the lion’s share of evil.

I am used to saying, ‘As Tertullian said,’ or anybody else said or wrote. But what do *I* care about these sayings, doings and wrongdoings? What does it have to do with *my* life? Let me live and lead my life in accordance with my own principles or their absence. Somebody says something and sometimes this somebody means well, but his or her meaning ricochets off my mind and returns to the sender. Sometimes it does, sometimes it does not. And once again all this really does not matter, as far as my own life is concerned. My life goes its own way and it sees and feels other meanings, whether well-meant or not, scatter around my body as if I had nothing else to do in the whole world – only protecting myself from foreign and often ridiculous meanings. These manifold and mostly meaningless remarks lie scattered around my body and soul, but they are not smeared on them, which proves their shallowness and ludicrousness. They do not take root, if you see what I mean. I don’t even have to visualise a button and press it to make them disappear in the twinkling of anything, not only of the eye. You twinkle your little finger and they disappear as if the so-called body language was familiar to them. Besides, there are other problems in the world where we suffer so atrociously, and consequently I should not concentrate exclusively on evil; although some pessimists maintain there is nothing else in the world. Pessimists or optimists? There are specialists who advocate the disappearance of the world – as the only remedy against evil which is the only concomitant of the world as such. (Are there other worlds? A world as much, a world as too much or too little, a world of indescribable filth and so on.) So you don’t resist the evil you encounter, contrary to what your mother recommended throughout your childhood. What is more, you increase its quantity by putting more and more bags of evil on the hill you have already created in the course of the last thirty years. You hope that everything will burst and you will finally realise your long-standing dream: to sing a requiem to the world, borrowing a few melodies from Mozart and Verdi; and Berlioz, why not?

You listen to contemporary politicians and hope their words will turn into a bomb and burst at last, leaving you alone in the cosmos. No sooner said than done. Wait a minute! *Vous allez plus vite que les violons*. But how do they go, these violins? First you have to buy a dozen of them to find out what their tempo sounds like, which pace they are keen on. And of course you need a few violinists to handle them properly. (You yourself play only the piano.) And what if they don’t go at all? Of course no Stradivari is required for this experience: it is not the beauty of the sound you are analysing so thoroughly. Just pace, just pace, just pace. You can shake them, if you wish; sometimes it is enough to wake them from their Kantian sleep. (What did he call it?) If this does not work, you can smash them to smithereens to warn others, to threaten them directly.

All things considered, it is much easier to jump the gun, especially that, in this linguistic case, more people will be aware of what you are doing your best to suggest, recommend and achieve. You go to the States,

buy a gun and begin to jump over it – on Fifth Avenue, preferably. (Donald Trump is prepared to shoot people dead on Fifth Avenue – to prove how popular he is and will ever be, even in the 24th century. I wonder why Trump's words have not turned into a bomb yet? Hopefully one bomb will be enough to remove him from the surface of Fifth Avenue and also from that of Fourth Avenue. And so on and so forth. And so Fourth and so Fifth and so Sixth.)

I think I have already devoted too much time and space to evil which may grow perniciously obsessive with its own importance, with its so-called glory. What other subjects do I have in my chest of drawers? You can say that all your life you have known that evil governs the world; or Satan, as Gounod put it. And then, some old woman or other interferes with the flow of words going from your mouth towards the ceiling and also to the walls that surround your body; and your thoughts, needless to say. She says, 'Don't you remember the piece of chocolate I gave you on one of your birthdays? Was it a piece of evil, that piece of chocolate? In accordance with your present philosophy? Didn't you like it? It was a piece of Swiss chocolate, if my memory serves me right.' 'Yes,' you answer almost absent-mindedly, 'but I should have been introduced to a Belgian variety of this refinement. You delayed this knowledge, barring its way to my taste buds and my sensitive, refinement-oriented mind. You're a piece of evil, nasty old lady. May I ask you to leave this room once and for all?'

Berkeley deplores our incapacity to eat and drink ideas, sensations, categories which continue to dodge our attention on account of their volatility. Where is the idea you are trying to voice and even to explain to your multiple listeners? One of them asks you frankly, 'Where's the idea you're talking about? In your head? Well, pull it out of your head and show it to us. No, no, no – that won't do. Don't draw it on a piece of paper. There are enough picture galleries in the world, and the pictures exhibited in them say only two things, "Beauty", or "ugliness".' Suppose we see a beggar whose life depends on a piece of bread that can be found in one of the pockets flowing around the square where the beggar implores the Almighty and also some pedestrians to sustain his life, if only for a few minutes. This beggar tries to persuade his listeners or rather half-listeners that the world is so magnificent one should do one's best to remain in it as long as possible. 'Don't you wish to offer me a short piece of this magnificence?' says the beggar reproachfully. Some pedestrians (and some gods) hear his reproaches or rather the tone of his voice, but their souls are impenetrable. They are impervious to reproaches of all kinds. They say to themselves and some other pedestrians or gods, 'I'm so weary of life that my ears and heart cannot react to whatever happens around me. I can't even triumph over my inner problems and worries. Yes, I have a few pieces of bread at home, and my fridge isn't far away, to tell the truth. No, I don't keep my bread in the fridge. What I have in mind when talking about this fridge of mine is a huge quantity of sausages – just in case, just in case. But this case doesn't seem to thrive and grow on this square. So the beggar we're talking about won't get anything either from my pockets, or from my fridge. And even if this fridge of mine was within my reach – within my mental fridge, so to speak – I wouldn't lift a little finger, let alone a big finger – to help this beggar out of his misery. Anyway, the only way out of human misery is death, and I'm not a killer, either born or unborn.'

So we can say to this beggar of ours, 'Have you ever heard about Berkeley? I'm not alluding to the university, you know. He denied the existence of corporeal things, and a slice of ham is corporal. Whether you wish it or not. Do you recall the existence of our priests? During their masses they distribute the body of Christ, although, on this occasion, they don't put into your mouth a slice of sausage. I don't know why, actually; by the

way.’ I know a woman who often dresses in black and, frankly speaking, for all her beauty – and she is really beautiful, believe me – I have no urge to approach her, touch, make love to her or spend a few nights in her company, notwithstanding her funeral attire. Yes, that is what I am afraid of. I am afraid her death, if only apparent, will make its way into my body, soul and other ingredients of my self. What shall I do with this impalpable, yet quite palpable, almost organic death? I might put a green jacket on and look only at it, while communicating with this woman. But I am not used to enjoying a body without looking at it; physically enjoying something I do not relish visually, not to say spiritually. Colours are spiritual. As we look at a patch of white colour, an angel pays us a visit and bursts into song or rather a hymn to praise everything, in spite of death, rottenness and overall perversity.

I think it was Voltaire who talked to his readers about our shouts, our screams. What were we screaming about? About our evil nature, it goes without saying. (What else could you scream about? The rest is of no importance.) So we scream, scream, scream. Evil! Evil! Evil! Sooner or later the evil we are talking or screaming about flies towards us and asks us the following question? ‘Are you calling me? Do you want me to assist you in any way?’

‘No, no, no!’ we shout.’

‘Why did you call me, then? Do you wish me to destroy you, physically and psychologically?’

‘No, no, no!’

‘Why did you call me, then?’

‘To look at you for a second and say how ugly and unbearable you are. And perverse, of course.’

‘But I’m born from the Devil. Shouldn’t I show disrespect à *l’endroit du papa*, as the French put it? I’m learning French, you see. In my opinion, the French aren’t as diabolical as the rest of humanity. So I’d like to offer them a huge amount of nastiness.’

‘What about us?’

‘Oh, I think you’re born from God. But your behaviour is diabolical, for some obscure reason.’

Should we mistrust the people who are born of the Devil, although they do not always admit it sincerely? Of course if you take a cane and start beating their bodies, from head to foot, sooner or later, they will admit it – to get rid of you. Then they will run for ten minutes or so, stop in their tracks, turn back and shout, ‘We lied to you. We lied to you because we wanted to get rid of you and your cane. You’re Cain, Cain, Cain, Cain. So you were born of the Devil, whereas we are Abels, Abels, Abels, Abels.’

Yes, there are many people who give you a piece of advice for nothing: no money is asked for this particular piece. (There are other pieces and they are very expensive.) They just say, ‘Go back to yourself and find your divine origin.’

‘And what if I’m born of the Devil or Evil itself?’

‘Then you should deal with them rudely, upon your arrival at your essence. Beat them as long as necessary to make them disappear under the surface of the globe.’

‘But there are many pits in this area.’

‘Then dump their dismembered bodies in one of these pits.’

‘And if there aren’t enough pits for their bodies? Evils and devils are multiple, as you should know – they’ve studied the multiplication table thoroughly.’

So you take a garden spade.

They call it a 'good action', although neither this particular action nor any action brings about a metamorphosis we have been waiting for since the beginning of the world, since its outset. Upon opening our eyes we told our mummy, 'That's not the world I want.' And your mummy, her voice full of understanding and of all sorts of vibrations, assures you: 'It's not the end yet, it's not the end'. For a moment you feel elated and ask your mother to develop her thesis.