

VALERY ALEFF

MY PORTRAIT GALLERY

T. S. ELIOT

You don't like twiddling your thumbs, although, from time to time, this ritual gives you an opportunity to compose a song, which is an exploit in itself: 'Little, little, little thumb / Are you clever? Are you dumb?' To be as dumb as a thumb. So instead of saying, 'To be as dumb as Sam,' you just show your thumb to your cat, for want of anyone better – no one is better – and all the problems you have always had with Sam disappear of their own accord. What kind of problems have you had with Sam or any of his namesakes? You know he is dumb, this Sam of yours, but you don't know him *personally*. You are perfectly aware of his dumbness and sometimes you even get the feeling it is on your dinner table as if cooked for your evening meal. Or it is just a statuette you can admire from where you sit and drink your tea with a muffin. But where is Sam himself? Suppose he comes and says, 'Here I am.' If this quasi unpredictable occurrence takes place – under your very nose, as the case may be – you do not turn your nose up at this individual and ask him a few questions instead; to find out if he is really as dumb as Sam.

This individual (as I call him) must belong to space and time; or in them, over them, below them. The chief thing is to keep him or her *within* space and time, which can happen even if you are *above* your time, spiritually speaking. Or beyond space and time, beyond their ken. Well, you just pinpoint this individual, the yardstick you use to measure human stupidity up, assuming it is measurable at all. Some of us constantly say it is immeasurable, and whatever yardstick you resort to on this and other occasions devoted to human revolting silliness, foolhardiness, the instrument is likely to break, unable to withstand the pressure of what Flaubert used to call '*idées reçues*'. But even if you don't receive any idea, be it idiotic, Flaubertian or not, you are quite capable of creating your own set of ideas whose daftness will pursue your ghost well beyond tombs and hells.

Well, let us submit our individual to a test devised to find out to which age and mentality this individual belongs. Let him critically analyse the following verses:

Let us go then, you and I,
When the evening is spread against the sky
Like a patient etherized upon a table....

According to critics, this excerpt represented an almost tangible break with the immediate past. Our individual sets about commenting upon this break or whatever amounts to a separation with what immediately precedes the moment you are living through. Here is the moment under discussion and for a while you are even permitted to see the break itself. You go so far as to *hear* this break which sounds (more or less) like the adjective 'etherized'. In its wake you can detect other adjectives and even verbs such as: to rise, to size. You must size up the situation before you decide what to do. But the yardstick you are using for the individual in question (the individual you question about T. S. Eliot's significance) will not help you, whatever fingering you decide upon in the course of the operation.

Well, the evening our poet talks about is a patient for the simple reason that all evenings and mornings are incurably ill, given the evils of our and their times. Their number is beyond any yardstick, even if you resort to the Milky Way for the purpose. You (imaginatively, figuratively) pick up the Milky Way and put it on the evils inflicted by humans to humans ever since the first human cell began to sprout somewhere, probably in Africa.

But several evils escape from the geometrical vigilance of the yardstick so that you can see them, if only vaguely, in a sort of unaccomplished dream. This reminds us of Wagner and such a thing, such a remembrance often arises in T. S. Eliot fruitful, productive brain which ‘often branches off the main route and goes through the countryside,’ as one critic put it when discussing the intricacies of *The Waste Land*. Actually the above excerpt also undergoes the same treatment; or rather the ingredients of the excerpt. It is the sky I have in mind: the poet might have left it alone, on its own. The sky hangs over us, indifferent to whatever happens to us on this Earth, on its surface, in its entrails. In a manner of speaking (and this manner is large, all-inclusive) we are always lying on an operating table and a number of instruments or weapons float over our eyes which do not seem to have been etherized. Or have they been, in spite of everything? In spite of what? Lack of ether? That is where the sky comes into its own, offering us as much ether as is vital for the surgeon’s job. As a matter of fact, the patient we are talking about is etherized only on account of the sky’s unavoidable presence. (But for the sky we would lose our God in the twinkling of an eye. And we can keep Him only in the twinkling of the sky, believe it or not.)

Let us develop one of the branches we have already supplied our tree with: the Wagnerian branch. But before embarking upon this enterprise, let us realise that the individual we chanced upon at the very beginning of our tale can be pigeonholed at this very point: he belongs to the times when T. S. Eliot wrote his epoch-making verses. Why? Because otherwise he would have rejected the whole idea straightaway: the patient, the table, the ether and so on. He (or she) would have said: ‘All this is rubbish, nothing more than a heap of rubbish. I can see the sky which continues to hang over my head as if it were a gigantic canopy or chandelier. If I take a taxi and am driven to the nearest hospital, I’ll see a lot of patients some of whom are sure to be etherized. But they have nothing to do with the sky and the other ether, the angel-inhabited ether. This poet of yours doesn’t have his head screwed on the right way.’ Of course you can answer that anyway it is too late to handle T. S. Eliot’s head. Besides, no one really knows which way is right in the domain of poetry. Wordsworth’s? Wallace Stevens’? And what about *their* heads?

As for the Wagnerian branch, this combination of words brings to memory one of the most legendary trees our history bestowed upon us: the tree where Notung spent a lot of time, waiting for Sigmund’s arrival. (Incidentally, the same tree can be seen in one of Louis II of Bavaria’s castles.) But I was thinking in terms of another episode for which Wagner’s *Ring* is justifiably famous. The giants built a castle for a group of pagan gods, but upon the happy ending of their labours they did not say: ‘If you’re in financial difficulty, we’re happy to let you space out your payments over two years.’ The reward they all had agreed upon (Wotan and the giants) could be neither stretched out nor divided, split or otherwise broken, for they were yearning for the goddess Freia, for her glorious, ever-young body. No one would have dared cut this (or any other divinely fashioned) body into pieces. This month you receive the goddess’s hand as the first payment. Next month you will receive the goddess’s mouth, as the second payment. Actually, on the eve of the giants’ glorious accomplishment, Wotan asked the following question: ‘Let’s get down to the nitty-gritty – when can you finish the building and how much will it cost?’ The answer was curt: ‘Tomorrow. Freia.’

The episode is well-known and therefore there is no need to go over it again and again, again and again. Every now and then we come across what is nonchalantly called ‘the last straw’. This time the idiom may be applied to the little hole through which one of the giants spies upon Freia’s magnificent eye. We are quite aware of Wotan’s – or rather Loge’s – brilliant theft which results in a sudden appearance of a golden mountain within the pagan gods’ territory. One might get the feeling the gods are allowed to have as much gold as is necessary

for their wellbeing, comfort and *jouissance*. There are various gods in our Pantheon and we should on no account confuse them, confounding our teachers who have always emphasised the difference between pagan gods and our Christian and Old-Testament Lord and Saviour. Pagan gods are surrounded by materiality, sumptuousness; one might even go so far as to maintain they literally roll in money. Literally, literally. Their palaces are covered with carpets made of money, and they roll on them day in day out; day out day in. Well, if you give any thought to your financial security and opulence, you start thinking in terms of gold and trinkets, diamonds and so on. That is how Wagner's gods, the ones he depicted and set to music in the *Ring*, inhabit the Earth and her surroundings. They have enough gold within their reach and there are riches which seem to be out of their reach and this state of affairs is unthinkable and inadmissible – within those gods' minds. So they have a lot of palaces built for their own convenience where they entertain both guests and whores in full accordance with their filthy, un-Christian customs. Their utter un-Christianity enables them to sacrifice their own daughters and other next-of-kin; Freia is a case in point, needless to say.

At some point or rather at the hole through which the goddess's enchanting eye can be seen, the drama gets under way, and a lot of tragedies follow. One of the giants says out loud: 'I can still admire and desire Freia's beautiful, unparalleled eye.' Wotan says to him: 'I'm unable to catch the meaning of your words because you don't utter them in the original.' Then the giant makes a supergiant effort and recalls a few German words. '*Ich bin müde, aber Ich kann* distinguish an eye that undoubtedly belongs to Freia, *unserer* fee. We might have to employ something temporarily as a stopgap measure. In other words, I wish you to stuff yet another morsel of gold into the wall we'll take with us.' What you are left with is Freia's elegant eye you can enjoy till the very end of your life, provided you enable it to come to the fore of your stream of consciousness. The rest of the opera is of no interest to you or anyone else. Everybody concentrates on the above-mentioned eye which is the supreme, irreplaceable thing (or sign) of beauty. That is how it usually works in the context supplied by either T. S. Eliot or Ezra Pound. They write a text and suddenly another group of words, an alien cluster almost brutally interrupts the linguistic flow and you begin to wonder what all this means and presages. Let us not stray too far from Wagner and his epic on whose riches so many creators have relied for two centuries at least.

The poet describes or rather alludes to a procession watched by a Queen: 'The river sweats / Oil and tar / The barges drift.' Obviously the Thames. All of a sudden, out of the blue or out of the nearest cloud, there comes this famous song (Wagner had a string of number-one hits in the late 19th century): 'Weialala leia

Wallala leialala.'

Warum? one may ask. This song is executed by three maidens, river maidens commonly referred to as water sprites or just foam. Bubbles, bubbles, nothing else. These maidens are the guardians of gold, and one just fails to place them in the context of *The Waste Land*; unless you need (at this point) to recall something cheerful; a morning pick-me-up, so to speak.

Weialala leia

Wallala leialala.

You are advised to visualise three beautiful maidens, mermaids, sirens, three bathing beauties – three wonderful swimmers at that; instead of oil and tar, barges and all that lot. You are sure to switch your inner atmosphere to a buoyant mood – in no time at all. Don't be afraid of water: even if you cannot swim, you had better plunge into it (the water created by all these leilallas) headlong and kiss whatever you feel in your lips' and gums' neighbourhood. And if you happen to walk along a street, you might burst into a wallala-song. It is all

the more recommendable on a sunny day, when you are tempted to inform every passer-by: 'It's suffocating this afternoon.'

As for another so-called off-shore – Ezra Pound's favourite speciality – the commentary, alias the verdict seems to resound all over the area, although no one has spoken yet.

O the moon shone bright on Mrs. Porter
 And on her daughter
 They wash their feet in soda water
Et O ces voix d'enfants, chantant dans la coupole!

Where does this come from ? From Verlaine's *Parsifal*, according to T. S. Eliot himself. But he did not answer the other question which is on everyone's lips: 'What does this paedophilic intrusion have to do with Mrs. Porter, her daughter and the water they wash their feet in?' The following suggestion is less important: 'Why not pour a thimbleful of whisky into the washbasin?'

As for T. S. Eliot's conversion, the eliotics wrongly put this époque-making event around 1930, the year marked by the birth of *Ash Wednesday*. In my opinion its origins go back to the early Twenties when the poet was engrossed in *The Waste Land*. Let us recall 'Weialala leia or Weialala leia

Wallala leialala.

Wallala leialala.'

Once again we find ourselves in the company of Rhinemaidens. One of them is circling with graceful swimming strokes. Inevitably this image and its contents remind us of two texts coming from the pen of St Ambrose and from that of St James.

As regards the use of the bath, I know that some are content with saying that a Christian virgin should not bathe along with eunuchs or with married women, with the former because they are still men at all events in mind, and with the latter because women with child offer a revolting spectacle. For myself, however, I wholly disapprove of baths for a virgin of full age. Such a one should blush and feel overcome at the idea of seeing herself undressed. By vigils and fasts she mortifies her body and brings it into subjection. By a cold chastity she seeks to put out the flame of lust and to quench the hot desires of youth. And by a deliberate squalor she makes haste to spoil her natural good looks. Why, then, should she add fuel to a sleeping fire by taking baths?

St Jerome, *Letter CVII*

Our maidens swim and circle in the Rhine which has nothing in common with ordinary or Roman or Turkish baths, even if some of their visitors could exhibit a number of graceful swimming strokes. The second text, that of St Ambrose, puts the virgins on guard against invaders, providers of sexual harassment:

But let fear secure this for the holy virgins, for whom the Church first provided such protection, who, anxious for the prosperity of her tender offspring, herself as a wall with breasts as many towers, increases her care for them, until, the fear of hostile attack being at an end, she obtains by the care of a mother's love peace for her vigorous children. Wherefore the prophet says: 'Peace be on thy virtue, and abundance in the towers.'

St Ambrose, *Concerning Virgins*, Book I

Understandably enough, our three maidens repulse Alberich's advances as follows, 'Your piercing glance, / your stubby beard / could I forever see and clasp it! / Your bristly hair's robust locks, / should always stroke Flosshilde! Your toadlike form, / your croaking voice, / o could I, amazed and mute, / hear and see only them.'

One easily recognises these maidens' psychological features in the portrait painted by T. S. Eliot in the crucial, turning-point poem Ash-Wednesday:

Lady of silences
 Calm and distressed
 Torn and most whole
 Rose of memory
 Rose of forgetfulness
 Exhausted and life-giving
 Worried reposeful
 The single Rose
 Is now the Garden
 Where all loves end
 Terminate torment
 Of love unsatisfied

Let us not forget that Alberich relinquished the very idea of Platonic love, after his love-discrediting scrimmage with the Rheinmaidens.

PLATO

I am weary of ready-made, totally inappropriate sayings such as, ‘Everything reminds us of everything,’ (thanks to quantum mechanics, no doubt) and even the far more abominable version of the same thought – ‘everybody reminds us of everybody’ does not extricate this foolishness, these abstract links from human minds. It is true that the following poem – or rather the excerpt from this poem – did remind me of something; of many things, as a matter of fact. Facts can be successfully disputed, but I am in no mood for disputes today. Let me remember more clearly and systematically what the beginning of Guido Cavalcanti’s *Ballata* II (in Ezra Pound’s virtuoso translation) reminded me of.

*Il vidi donne con la donna mia:
Non che niuna mi sembrasse donna;
Ma simigliavan sol la sua ombria.*

Fair women I saw passing where she passed;
And none among them women, to my vision;
But were like nothing save her shadow cast.

In spite of the utter excellence of the translation, I cannot help asking myself several questions which are all the more welcome since my perplexity can also be exhibited in front of the poet himself. A few women walk past the poet whose imagination is wholly overtaken by his donna or rather primadonna; at least within the context of the poem. Indeed she is not only much superior to her walking shadows who, frankly speaking, hardly deserve such a nomination, but she literally usurps their rights to which they are entitled, if only through their births and mere existences on this planet. Actually a shadow is not to be toyed with: you can neither crash it nor stub it out like a cigarette you are fed up with. Let us listen again to Stravinsky’s *The Rake’s Progress* to realise to what extent a shadow – not a *mere* shadow, though – can assume the role of a guide.

What *was* I reminded of by the above-quoted excerpt? Not only of my numerous mistresses whose number included all those shadowy women partly celebrated by Guido Cavalcanti. A shadow, the body itself, and vice versa. That is how it really works in daily life which differs – often radically – from a poet’s celestial mind. (Filled to the brim with Platonic ideas, one might presume.) I was also reminded of Plato’s *Symposium*. I propose to approach it by means of the following citation: ‘A lover who goes about this matter correctly must begin in his youth to devote himself to beautiful bodies. First, if the leader (love) leads aright, he should love one body and beget beautiful ideas there; then he should realise that the beauty of any one body is brother to the beauty of any other and that if he is to pursue beauty of form he’d be very foolish not to think that the beauty of all bodies is one and the same. When he grasps this, he must become a lover of all beautiful bodies, and he must think that this wild gaping after just one body is a small thing and despise it.’

Are there any questions arising from the above-quoted text? Of course no problem whatsoever arises in relation to the very beginning of Plato’s wisdom-infused monologue I chose to present within this essay or portrait. You go about this matter (love, libido, ecstasy, ecstasies of all kinds, poetry, inspiration, muses, music) correctly – about these matters, rather – if you devote your precious time to bodies; as soon as your sexual

maturity comes to the fore. It comes, knocks on your door and you open it or rather them: the door and the maturity. At least that is what I felt on the night when my fountain of youth, love and libido began to function. Plato showers you with bodies, and you are even allowed to spread yourself thin, contrary to what we imagine when talking about Platonic love. But let us not forget we are at the very beginning of our love labours. Well, at first they are really lost, for there is no point in making love to too many bodies, given that they remind you of other bodies which end up amounting to the same thing. They are nothing save the shadow cast of the Absolute Body which is tantamount to the Absolute Truth; in some respect, at this stage of the procedure. This state of the libido-imbued bliss does not last, for sooner or later you get weary of the one body to which you devote your energy, time, talents and many other things you might need for your own creative work.

Unavoidably, some other citations crop up and among them you distinguish T. S. Eliot's: 'In the room the women come and go / Talking of Michelangelo.' Sure enough, at the preliminary stage we are talking about – it is a theatrical stage, to some extent, to the extent of the stage – women do come and go, although they might not talk of Michelangelo. Of whom else could they have talked? T. S. Eliot was likely to ask. Go – gelo. Now and then rimes are supposed to sustain the growth of a poem. Of course no one forbids them to speak about his David, but this supposition makes us go too far, and going too far is never beneficent for what is lying right under your feet. And first you are supposed to deal with the matter at hand. Or at feet, as the case may be.

Why do they come and go, instead of staying where they are? Immobile postures are beautiful, judging from the photographs supplied by various erotically orientated magazines. You have plenty of time to concentrate on such and such picture and the result is often rewarding, contrary to what might experience so-called *coureurs de jupons* – the men who literally (and also figuratively) run after women's dresses, swimsuits, legs and other symbols of feminine beauty. Well, they do come and go on the strength of what is written in Plato's text where we find the difference between the right view of things, the global picture, and the erroneous, narrow-minded attitude adopted mostly by the young who hunt high and low for bodies, nothing else. And then these youngsters realise there is only one body in front of them and even behind their own body. 'After this – after what I touched upon in the previous sentence – he must think that the beauty of people's souls is more valuable than the beauty of their bodies, so that if someone is decent in his soul, even though he is scarcely blooming in his body, our lover must be content to love and care for him and to seek to give birth to such ideas as will make young men better.'

So first you see a multitude of bodies and you do your best to catch them unawares; or awares: some women think only in terms of love, of corporeal love. Well, you catch them awares or unawares and after a while you get fed up with bodies, mere bodies. You say to yourself, while handling such a body, such a collection of members, hands and feet: 'This is nothing but a body, a mere body. And I'm no longer immature to enjoy this materiality, this simplicity and proximity of life which is far more complex, needless to say.' And then you say to yourself there is something behind the throne, so to speak. And you continue to speak to yourself. What is there behind the throne? The soul, my God. And every soul you can find inside a human body has a beauty of its own, and sometimes you can even conclude that you are facing a bathing beauty: the beauty that bathes in the bliss provided by divinities or God. At some point you just look around you and see a sea of smiling faces, which denotes their close proximity to souls, to a sea of human souls. There are plenty more fish in the sea, as they say. But we still hesitate as to the value of the beauty we behold as we count the seas we see in front of our eyes. Which sea is more valuable, in terms of beauty? The soul or the body?

We are young and we have no idea what the soul means so that we attach no meaning to the notion of the soul. And yet Plato speaks about *the soul* and consequently we must pay heed to what all this is related to, otherwise we run the risk of missing the point; or the soul, to be precise. And if we don't miss the point (we are still young and vigorous) the soul that we contemplate at leisure will give birth to many ideas concomitant of better lives. 'The result is that our lover will be forced to gaze at the beauty of activities and laws and to see that all this is akin to itself, with the result that he will think that the beauty of bodies is a thing of no importance.' So you gaze at a law, at some constitution or other, and decide that this constitution is much better than a youngster who has a very strong constitution. And if this youngster has the constitution you are thinking of, his legs and other parts of his body are in close communion with your sense of beauty.

But what is the soul? Isn't it the shadow we talked about at the beginning of this essay? Or is it the other way round? Is the body a shadow of the soul, a palpable shadow of the soul and self? Do you wish to know what your soul means and how it can live in the world to which you willy-nilly belong? You just touch your body and say to yourself that this touch amounts to *everything*. In other words, this touché reveals to you the truth connected to the whole of Creation. But what about the ladies who come and go, talking of this and that? (Some of them have no idea who Michelangelo was and why one should talk of him, from time to time.) What counts is their movement: you switch from one pole to the other, in full accordance with Plato's text. Actually there is a crowd we contemplate and touch and make love to at the outset of our lives. And then (at some point) you say to yourself: 'My love-furnishing community has dwindled to a tenth of its former size in the last two years.' And two years later you repeat the same interior monologue. And this tendency does not seem change, for all your efforts. And then you cease to keep it motionless; you no longer try to reverse the tendency. In a way, you imitate Chekhov who used to see as many as eighty young women on every platform where he was supposed to touch the earth. One of his ants or mistresses called each of them 'Antonovka'; an apple, in another word. Who are these women now? one might ask. In *The Seagull*, the heroine of the famous theatrical play. She walks around the stage, airing her grievances and comparing herself to a dead, assassinated seagull. Her body is inaccessible unless you know her manager and are prepared to pay him a huge sum of money for the permission he might give you. This permission is likely to pave the way for a more detailed exploration of the actress to whose talent the role of Nina was entrusted. But nowadays such an exploration is no longer in fashion: actresses are not whores in disguise. So you must content yourself with their souls.

'After this he must think that the beauty of people's souls is more valuable than the beauty of their bodies, so that if someone is decent in his soul, even though he is scarcely blooming in his body, our lover must be content to love and care for him and to seek to give birth to such ideas as will make young men better. The result is that our lover will be forced to gaze at the beauty of activities and laws and to see that all this is akin to itself, with the result that he will think that the beauty of bodies is a thing of no importance.' A far-fetched story. If an actress playing the leading role is ugly, spectators are sure to leave the theatre in dribs and drabs as if to show some courtesy to the rest of the cast. A beautiful actress, on the other hand, can do whatever she likes or dislikes: she will be forgiven on the spot. Even if there are bloody spots on her hands. That's right – even Lady Macbeth is forgiven if her beauty atones for her crimes, expiates the murder she was instrumental in bringing about. Sometimes one can hear a voice coming from the stalls: 'Never mind the blood. Anyway we can't see it from our seats. Duncan wasn't an exemplary king and anyway democracy is far superior to all kingdoms put together.'

Whenever we seriously try to tackle the problem of the soul and the ramifications of its relationship with the body, we come to the conclusion that excludes the double achievement, the double beauty we all strive for. No one – with the exception of some monks and mystics – yearns for ugliness, dirt and fleas whose presence on saints, on their clothes, bodies and even in their intestines seems to testify to the saintliness of the person we have drawn your attention to in the hope of making a brief foray into the most intensely-guarded secret of the universe. (Whenever you approach the subject, you are bound to embroil yourself in lengthy, incomprehensible linguistics.) The relationship between matter and spirit, atoms and thoughts, quantum mechanics and ordinary mechanics. How to get to the heart of the problem?

‘The lover is turned to the great sea of beauty, and, gazing upon this, he gives birth to many gloriously beautiful ideas and theories, in unstinting love of wisdom, until, having grown and been strengthened there, he catches sight of such knowledge, and it is the knowledge of such beauty.’ All right, you have just turned to the great sea of beauty where there are mostly souls, for you are convinced that it is much easier to come across a beautiful soul – they are all beautiful and immortal – than to stumble upon a flawless body. Anyway, even if the soul is *not* faultless, you can deal with its faults rather easily. It is much easier to improve upon a soul than to rectify the defects of the body. It is not for nothing that the Russians say: ‘A hunchback will get rid of his hunch only by means of his grave.’ Indeed, you can use an axe to chop down an old apple tree, but the matter stands differently with hunches. Sometimes you have to be prepared to follow a hunch, but there are no hunches of this kind either in your mind or in your body. You see a hunchback whose ugliness makes your skin crawl. But even if you have a huge axe at your disposal, you will not attempt to cut the hunchback’s hunch into pieces. Well, you see a lot of souls and some of them are not up to your standards. Well and good. You put on one of Beethoven’s last quartets and the sea you contemplate at leisure grows more and more glorious. One might come to the conclusion that Beethoven’s (or Haydn’s) quartets are the knowledge of such beauty.

‘You see the man who has been thus far guided in matters of Love, who has beheld beautiful things in the right order and correctly is coming now to the goal of Loving: all of a sudden he will catch sight of something wonderfully beautiful in its nature; that, Socrates, is the reason for all his earlier labours.’ For all your patience and zeal, you might still have a number of ugly souls in front of you, in the sea we are talking about. After a while, you are to realise that what you actually see belongs to the realm of bodies that sneaked in through the back door while you weren’t looking. Well, you have no alternative but to drown them in the same sea. That is why your visions feel much more comfortable in a sea than on land where you are duty bound to dig graves for the ugliness you are bent on removing from your existence.

‘First, it always *is* and neither comes to be nor passes away, neither waxes nor wanes.’ After reading this sentence, you realise that the result you obtained through your love labours is a sort of definitive version of the highest sentiment we are allowed to experience in our lives. No more drowning by numbers, no more axes, hunches and backs. ‘Second, it is not beautiful this way and ugly that way, nor beautiful at one time and ugly at another, nor beautiful in relation to one thing and ugly in relation to another; nor is it beautiful here but ugly there, as it would be if it were beautiful for some people and ugly for others. Nor will the beautiful appear to him in the guise of a face or hands or anything else that belongs to the body. It will not appear to him as one idea or one kind of knowledge. It is not anywhere in another thing, as in an animal, or in earth, or in heaven, or in anything else, but itself by itself with itself, it is always one in form; and all the other beautiful things share in

that, in such a way that when those others come to be or pass away, this does not become the least bit smaller or greater nor suffer any change.'

Itself by itself. You look at the universe and you say to yourself, 'It is itself by itself because I can't participate in its course and harmony, for fear of appearing ridiculous, ignorant and rotten. You see a statue and you say to everybody this statue represents beauty, love, salvation and even the solution to all your problems. Your problems knock at your door and enter your boudoir, or whatever it is. One of these problems dares speak to you and you listen to this problem's speech. This speech says to you, 'What should I do?' And you answer this speech in the following fashion, 'You should look at the statue of beauty.'

'All right, all right. I contemplate this stature at ease. But I don't feel anything.'

'Don't you feel its beauty?'

'I feel its lack of life.'

'Don't you feel attracted to it on account of the beauty it irradiates?'

'Does it irradiate anything, apart from mere irradiation? Isn't it dangerous to stand near this statue?'

There is one representation of beauty. You feel it, approach it, begin to caress it to your heart's content. From time to time, you ask your heart if it is content or not, and your heart answers, almost invariably, 'I am not.' And you continue to caress the statue, lick it, embrace it, kiss it as often as Othello kissed his wife at the end of his life. Let us return to the source of our discussion.

What is the source of any problem we might have when confronting the world and all its aspects? The immensity of the thing. You can kiss one woman, two women – at once, at once. But you cannot kiss ten thousand women at once. You begin with one thousand, but the other thousands are waiting for your kiss *en pure perte*. To no avail or whatever you can say to account for your actions and reflections.

*Tuoni la guerra e s'inabissi il mondo
se dopo l'ira immensa
vien quest'immenso amor!*

Let the war thunder and the world be engulfed
if after infinite wrath
comes this infinite love!

What do we confront within these frontiers? How often do we beg for frontiers because immensities and infinities make us sick? Othello is sick, but he is not aware of it. Actually he becomes sick whenever he approaches infinities. You cannot approach infinity: it is not measured through approaches, steps, kilometres. You can come across it in perplexity, in doubt. Or in love.

*Ingentilia di lagrime la storia
il tuo bel viso e il labbro di sospir;
scendean sulle mie tenebre la gloria,
il paradiso e gli astri a benedir.*

Your lovely face ennobled the story
 with tears, and your lips with sighs;
 on my darkness glory descended,
 paradise and the stars to bless.

You tell your story to a face that listens to you, paying attention to every word you utter; and even to the words you do not utter: you just let them fly through your brain. Oddly enough, this face reflects your story, but in addition to your trials and tribulations it exhibits its own emotions, its own troubles and what not. The result is more than overwhelming; and you are tempted to call it infinite, given that you have striven for infinity and immortality all your life. You can cope with a particle of infinity: with the knowledge you gained at the university or while coming to terms with your first wife. But infinity and immortality lie far beyond your measurements and yardstick: it is an infinitystick you must acquire to realise in what jam you found yourself some time ago.

You fall in love with a woman, and you think she expresses much more than what a human being represents under some circumstances. Well, these circumstances grow, outgrow themselves and now you realise it is the cosmos itself you have to face in order to solve all your life-and-death enigmas. That is what happens in *Othello* where death and life play the leading role – to the detriment of the actors involved in the performance. A spectator is likely to think: ‘It’s not Othello. It’s death himself.’ ‘It’s not Desdemona. A mere victim, nothing more.’ Victim or not, the action unfolds and its folds fall somewhere so that willy-nilly the infinity is restored, even though there is nothing to be restored, enjoyed, fêted. ‘She was fêted by audiences both in her own country and abroad,’ they say about the actress playing Desdemona. But on the stage this actress is helpless, and her situation is all the more hopeless since the stage director is faithful to the text we seem to have inherited from Shakespeare.

Let us go back to Othello whose helplessness sticks out a mile or two miles: it depends on the size of the stage. And of the world. How does he confront infinity and the inconveniences indissolubly linked to it? Taking on Desdemona, the whole of her is too much for his constitution which is robust, no doubt about it. But this time we endeavour to have the measure of his mental and psychological constitutions. Othello is visibly unable to withstand the pressure of Desdemona’s libidinal power, so he decides to limit his solicitations to her hand, one of her hands – two hands of hers would be beyond all his kens. ‘Give me your hand; this hand is moist, my lady. / This argues fruitfulness, and liberal heart; / Hot, hot, and moist, this hand of yours requires / A sequester from liberty; fasting and praying / Much castigations, exercise devout; / For here’s a young and sweating devil here, / That commonly rebels: ‘tis a good hand, / A frank one.’

And what about Desdemona’s body? Othello has no strength left to inspect her body, the whole of it. He must feel he is a speck of dust in comparison with the cosmos. So, unable to look at Desdemona’s face and body, he contents himself with her hand. But even her hand is beyond his ken and he bubbles over with excitement. Over what? Over a mere hand that cannot even play the piano properly. Wait a minute! Suppose Desdemona’s hand was not moist at the time when Othello decided to examine it closely. Desdemona might have said to herself, ‘There are men whose attention is irresistibly drawn to hands – to the detriment of legs, for instance. Usually legs are regarded as a symbol of female sexual potential or reverberation; or vibrations. But hands are also important, especially if a man takes your hand in his hand and starts rambling on your relationship, on your

hands' relationship, on your heads' relationship.' Sure enough, Othello executes a monologue – as if it were a piano sonata – and Desdemona listens to his ravings which, incidentally, do not describe her hand accurately enough: it is moist only because she had washed her hands a few minutes before Othello's arrival. But Othello is fed up with handling too many hands, too many moistnesses, too many objects that talk to him about his valour, love and mortality. And anyway he is bent on reducing numbers, on turning numbers into one, or just O. O what a hand. O what a finger. O what a marvel this little hand is: it is so small it does not require a global analysis or a global kiss. The problem is, however, that as long as Desdemona lives and to some extent prospers, her hand does not exist on its own: it is somehow attached to Desdemona's body and even to her soul, whatever we might think about her soul in the light of what happens to souls in Gogol's poem. At least the soul is a living creature and palpitates inside our body or even outside it, if we are to believe the Indian sages who speak at length about souls' peregrinations in the sky, around the moon.

Othello was aware of all these peregrinations and connections. Actually, at some point, he mistook Desdemona's soul for her body. It is Desdemona's soul that Iago sees under Othello's body, on his body, and even in his body's mouth. Under his body, on his body, in his body, through his body. This Othello's monologue denotes his ignorance of the way our souls interchange their approaches and ideas with bodies, whatever their chemical constituents: they also talk to stones, believe it or not. The multiplicity of the world, its manifold structures and nature grew unbearable so that death instinct prevailed in the midst of tendency revolving around Othello's mind. And death instinct means elimination: one by one, one by one, or two by two, three by three. Why do you eliminate in our case? First you eliminate the hand that attracted your attention at some point; to the point of making you take it and elaborate on its tendons, microbes and texture for more than five minutes, according to the last staging I saw. But even this short recreation does not help you come to terms with the Creation you find in so many books you are quite unable to place them not only in your recollection but also on your shelves. The world is everywhere, everywhere, everywhere. And if we focus our attention on Othello, we are bound to say, 'The world is Desdemona, Desdemona, Desdemona.' The rest of the world hardly interests our traveller. And his good luck astonishes historians: the Russians could not vanquish the Turkish army for all their efforts and deployments. But drought has stunted the growth of this year's cereal crop, according to Chinese books. And Othello has no alternative but to suspect his wife, to suspect foul play. Of course he had an alternative, but he had no idea where it was situated. 'We had no reason to suspect he might try to kill himself,' said the Venetian guests. They were wrong: their suspicions were not voluminous enough to suspect Othello's suicide.

'Have you done your essays?' 'Two down, three to go.' One to go, I suppose. Or four to go.

It is the cause, yet I'll not shed her blood,
 Let me not name it to you, you chaste stars;
 Nor scar that whiter skin of hers than snow,
 And smooth, as monumental alabaster;
 Yet she must die, else she'll betray more men.

Suppose Othello dies, inflicting several wounds on his body either with his bodkin or the sword that killed the famous Turk. What about Desdemona? With the passing of the years she realises her vocation lies in the domain

where women betray men; sometimes for no reason at all. What reason can you have to betray a man, a woman, your native land? I had a hunch that you'd be here, in this country, in this city. Your hunch grows in the twinkling of an eye because everything ties in with its predictions. And this hunch informs Desdemona that, whatever she does, her husband will always suspect her, even if her skin and soul are whiter than snow. (They are certainly whiter than Russian snow.) And let us not forget that her skin is as smooth as monumental alabaster. Nevertheless her husband rolls his eyes, puts his wife on the back of a horse and loops a noose around her neck.

Dying reduces the number of the living and that of desires, of temptations. Even St Antony will be no longer tempted, if everything and everybody die around him. At some point you see Othello running back and forth in his endeavour to catch all the stars, the cosmos itself he receives from Desdemona's bosom. Too much of a good thing. Othello examines her hand and once again he comes across such an immensity he feels defeated by the sheer volume of it. The hand is moist, voluptuous, touchy-feely, feely-touchy, feely-caressing, feely-embracing, feely-making-love-to, feely-betraying-the-Moor.

And all this nonsense related to a real sexual intercourse: on her, under her, above her breasts, above the nest where her soul dwells, lies and begets her children, at both sides, in both minds, literally everywhere.

////////DESDEMONA////////

Σ

Othello, Othello, Othello, Othello, Othello, Othello, Othello, Othello

Othello jumps over Desdemona's body, hits the chandelier, falls on his knees, injures his knees, licks the blood he sees all around him and decides to kill Desdemona, reducing his worship to one *bacio*. How much simpler, how much *bacio*.

I kiss'd thee ere I kill'd thee, no way but this,
Killing myself, to die upon a kiss.

This is the minimum. A kiss, the cosmos, death. What more could you wish for? The great Andromeda Galaxy?

Un bacio, just one. No *altro*.

ST AUGUSTINE

Freud thought – and scepticism or pessimism reached in his thought a tremendous, tragic height – that civilisation does its best to prevent us from reaching the state of happiness, even if we think only in terms of the truncated pleasure principle. According to our ur-psychoanalyst, progress in civilisation requires blatantly imposed labour and instinctual repression. Your instincts are supposed to interfere with your job: computers break down, cars and tractors are already kaput. Your instincts put a number of spokes in all the wheels one can see within our civilisation and some of these wheels are actually out of reach. But instincts are so powerful, so indestructible they reach beyond distances, fields of vision and comprehension. As a matter of fact, instincts are incomprehensible and cannot care less about achievements, technological progress and the lives of Leonardo da Vinci's descendants. Freud maintains that unimpeded, instinct-generated sexual gratification is incompatible with the discipline essential to the struggle for existence, and that renunciation, an infinite series of 'no' and the delay in satisfaction is a prerequisite for progress. (No delays within the domain of dissatisfactions.)

Aren't happiness and sexual ecstasy germane to the blossoming of cultural values? But we should remember not only Freud, but also the Fathers of the Church whose admonition directed us towards the same goal which seemed to exclude not only pornographic pictures, but even a number of kisses carried out in the streets of your native city where everybody knew your habits, your mother and father. And these observers used to say: 'How come he is so volatile with this woman who might not even be his mistress, not at this point? He is so volatile he takes her in his arms and throws her towards the stars; and she becomes volatile, willy-nilly. She is seduced by his capricious masculinity, partly, which means she consents to his courtship, but not like that, not in accordance with the description.' Not willy-nilly, but just nilly; or willy. And that makes all the difference.

I always vote for the role that human mythology plays in our history; and even outside it: in our unconscious and other instincts that bear no names, considering that names do not always explain everything. You say 'Ivan' and you seem to understand what you are talking about. But actually you are talking about nothing, given that Ivan is just Ivan and nothing more, nobody more, to pay homage to *The Odyssey*. You say 'Ivan' and they look at you; one might say they even study you, scrutinise you. Why Ivan? What for? Someone says, 'Are you talking about Ivan Karamazov?' and you begin to shake your head and even your index finger. You begin to shake; your body does – if you take this remark too seriously. Don't take it seriously, for it is bad for your health. Anything taken seriously is bad for your health. All right, you don't take *anything* seriously. Something comes and you begin to play with it as if it were a ball. What kind of ball? Does it matter? You just throw it, launch it, launch a new rocket, space shuttle, and you watch its trajectory from your terrace, while drinking your eternal tea.

And what about happiness, three-somes and so ons? What puzzles me is the solid, stolid, monolith structure of human nature. It is as if someone repeated over and over again: human nature, human nature, human mythology, human mythology. There is nothing else in the world. Humans are kings and emperors, and whatever they do is an ideal example for all other creatures. You open your Cambridge dictionary and look up the word 'slur'. To sing or play notes in a smooth and connected manner. That is how the music of our history has been played for millennia. We still recall the attitude adopted by Sigmund Freud. St Augustine voices a similar attitude in the *City of God*.

Anyone who utters a word in anger, anyone who goes so far as to strike another person, could not do so if his tongue or hand were not put in motion at the command, as one may say, of his will; and those members are set in motion by the same will even when there is no anger. But the genital organs have become, as it were, the private property of lust, which has brought them so completely under its sway that they have no power of movement if this passion fails, if it has not arisen spontaneously or in response to a stimulus. It is this that arouses shame; it is this that makes us shun the eyes of beholders in embarrassment. A man would be less put out by a crowd of spectators watching him visiting his anger unjustly upon another man than by one person observing him when he is having lawful intercourse with his wife.

I beg to differ. Of course St Augustine's nature has a lot of affinities with mine, although I am neither a saint nor even an angel. 'My little angel' says a mother to her son. Well, my mother never said anything of the kind, which was unkind on her part, considering that so many little angels played with me every day in our courtyard. I heard constantly the above appellation coming from mothers, fathers and uncles; and yet, in my opinion, the majority of those so-called little angels were devils in disguise. I think it is not necessary to resort to the words 'in disguise' because they were just devils, literally and psychologically. As for their angelic nature, they had no wings, but their relatives did not regard angelic attributes with consideration. They thought one can be an angel without wings, without benevolence, without a real proximity to God. It is enough to be related to you, and shout as the majority of children shout, scream and cry.

At this point I had better resume my analysis of St Augustine's text with which I disagree in the light of what goes on in the world, in today's world, our world. Naturally enough, St Augustine had no idea of what was lying in store for humanity in the middle of 21st century. I am alluding to sexual liberation, to the shameless exhibition of sexual organs and whatever is related to them. And some men just cannot make love to their wives if there are no supporters in the audience; no public, no hurrahs et cetera. Those men invite their friends and sometimes also their enemies to attend the play, the theatrical performance they stage for themselves, but chiefly for Peeping Toms who surround them on all sides. Of course there are solitary Peeping Toms; these install a lot of mirrors in their bedrooms, in their living rooms: more often than not they indulge in lovemaking on a dinner table. And they go so far as to applaud their actions without interrupting their love-producing ritual. As I pointed out earlier, St Augustine was too far from our times, but Freud ought to have known better. Actually St Augustine ought to have known better too, for he was quite aware of what Cynic philosophers did in public places. 'It is true that there is a story that Diogenes once made an exhibition of himself by putting this theory into practice, because he imagined that his school of philosophy would gain more publicity if its indecency were more startlingly impressed on the memory of mankind.' He was right: we still recall his séance of self-abuse. 'However, the Cynics did not continue this practice, and modesty, which makes men feel shame before their fellows, prevailed over error – the mistaken idea that men should make it their ambition to resemble dogs.'

There are individuals – and I am of their number – who prefer to resemble cats; this is a real, the only authentic ambition, but they never crawl on all fours over their carpets and other parts of their numerous floors. There are spiritual matters that count – in the realm of cats, contrary to what many of us think. We might think that cats only walk on all fours, leak their paws (and other parts of their feline bodies) and purr; and miaow. But you should not omit your cat's senses; six, seven, eight senses of your cat. When he or she sniffs his or her paws

(or your hands, for that matter) to see if they need washing, the information your animal gets in the process is ampler and much more rewarding than what you can get from your perfumes that adorn your bathroom. And the world your cat sees, senses and judges from where it, he or she sits had nothing in common with your common, run-of-the mill data. Even if this data is conveyed to you by Bergson, by his book where he expatiates on the *données de la conscience*. Your conscience is not spacious enough to receive the entirety of a cat's world which far surpasses whatever you can get on your own. But if you condescend (sic!) or even vouchsafe to consult your cat on any subject you encounter in everyday life, in everyminute life, than you might get enlightened: in no time at all, if you follow in your cat's pawsteps closely.

Recently we overstepped many limits in the discipline we are looking into, for obscenity is a key-word of our times and civilisation. There was a Soviet actress we worshiped, for she played mainly queens and aristocrats, being beautiful, on top of everything else: elegance, manners, no forgetfulness of manners and so forth. I regularly consult the Internet to find out to what extent celebrated actresses deign to show their 'delicacies' to the voyeurs of all kinds. I type her name followed by the word 'nude' which is eloquent enough to pinpoint the interest I exhibit in this particular case. And I get two videos – at the push of a button, needless to say. (Everything is done today at the push of a button except harmony and peace.) I feel duty bound to point out that the material I was looking for dated back to the Thirties and Forties of the last century. In addition to the problem habitually called 'the time-machine quandary', I was faced with the Soviet decency or prim-and-proper conveniences. Well, I got the material (if I may say so) I had been searching for so desperately in the twinkling of an eye. You should not use this expression too often, but when your eye is *directly* involved in the process, you can and should use it without batting an eyelid.

St Augustine speaks about something else. He seems to think that male organs do not move of their own accord: they need their master's assistance to perform the deed; quite different from the one carried out by Macbeth, I hope. It is not true, according to my numerous experiences because you cannot control this member of yours, whatever Nietzschean will you may use to overcome its resistances. Sometimes this member of your parliament – let us call it thus – comes into its own and performs the feats which are not called for, especially if they literally unfold in a bus, in a train where you stand up and walk along corridors in your endeavour to reach a restaurant or a lavatory. Your child may grow so boisterous you just have to spend a dozen minutes, doing your best to reassure him that everything is all right. 'We're on the train and no encounter of the first, libidinous kind is ahead of us, ahead of the moment we are about to traverse in the hope of eating something decent, not too invigorating, God forbid. I can't walk through the train as a clown prepared to put all his advantages and disadvantages on display.

For us sex has no symbolic meaning – the sexual has become the staging of desire in a moment of pleasure. Ours is the culture of premature ejaculations. Well, if you are on a bus you might wish for an ejaculation, be it premature or mature: for the sake of welcoming the bliss you have been deprived of for three hours at least. You can experience this urge anywhere, not minding a treacherous spot on your trousers which might make them (your fellow creatures) think you relieved yourself at inappropriate moment which is not described in the code of good behaviour. Baudrillard insists on the theatrical character of whatever happens under the passengers' very eyes. The passengers say to themselves: this bus is a theatre and we are lucky enough to attend a theatrical performance. The stage director belongs to a modern type of stage manufacturers and no wonder we attend a highly stimulating, beautiful play where actors make love to each other on hammocks.

Baudrillard is not always right. The imperative for immediate realisation of desire. Repression and liberation are part of this code or play. Your rush towards your partner, but on second thought you repress your desire, for you honestly think that Freud's keyword can help to make headway in the domain of sexual paradise; or at least purgatory. Baudrillard asks us, 'What should we do after the "orgy" of sexual permissiveness – the desublimation of repressed desires, following the 1960s?' You go from one spot to another, and your libido is replenished on every spot you visit during your walk and talk with somebody, with a man or a woman.

Baudrillard says something else. He sees it (repression and liberation) as a disaster leading to an oppression which parades as liberation. Feminism is caught in this 'staging desire'. We are on a world stage; at Avignon, for instance. And we let ourselves go; we let our members go, all of them. Occasionally we recall the Cynics who, according to St Augustine, did not continue their practices, for some obscure reason. I don't think St Augustine told them: 'Are you forgetting your manners?' Nor did several religious leaders intercede with the authorities on behalf of the condemned paedophiles.

'The shroud of psychoanalysis,' said Baudrillard, 'has fallen over seduction – the shroud of hidden meaning and of a hidden excess of meaning.' You watch *The Seven Veils*, the dance executed at the end of Richard Strauss' opera *Salomé*. They did fall over seduction, all these veils, only to be removed rather languidly, following the rhythm, melody and genius of both Richard Straus and Toscanini. The stage is in front of you as if you were in a strip club. What do heads and plates matter? The king gets closer and closer to Salomé, saying, 'I think I know what this piece of knowledge glued to your body means and teaches us.'

'Could you please tell me what it is?' asks Salomé.

'I think it tells the cosmos it isn't as huge as we used to believe.'

'Is it small, in your opinion?'

'It is shrinking, isn't it?'

'I'll remain with you as long as you wish. But is your wish long enough? Your age doesn't seem to supply a sufficient proof, a sufficient reason for my declaration.'

Is the *Dance of Seven Veils* an intruder in the legato-assured harmony? A staccato-intruder? Or is it just another slur, a link between Salomé and Cynic philosophers?

BENEDETTO CROCE AND PABLO PICASSO

'If we adopt the old language of philosophy, the pleasures of the imagination relate to "matter" and the pleasure of art relates to "form". In more modern terms, what is called form in art is nothing else than the contemplative attitude of the spirit, while what is called matter is, in itself, the practical play of the passions. The pleasure of art is of theoretical origin, the "pleasures of the imagination" are of a directly practical origin.' You cull a few sentences from an essay (*The 'Pleasures of the Imagination'*, by Benedetto Croce) and at once a multitude of questions arise from the darkness of your ignorance. Why do the pleasures of the imagination relate to 'matter'? You cannot *always* think in terms of self-abuse! Or in terms of the riches that seem to have avoided you ever since you became conscious of how delightful it is to own luxury goods and a few castles. You wish not only to touch these palaces, but your life, in your opinion, should unfold within their material walls. No fairy tales this time; no air where a few castles always float, like dirigibles. According to Croce, the 'pleasures of the imagination' are of a directly practical origin. Can't you imagine something ethereal, impalpable, utterly useless? Can't you imagine an angel – not a guardian angel, mind you – just for the sake of seeing an angel, right under your ceiling? Or his or her flight around your chandelier? The practical play of the passions. Why practical, for God's sake? Because you declare your love to a rich heiress, to a daughter of some typhoon or other? You write a poem for her, touch her breasts ever so gently and she succumbs to the efficiency of your courtship without further ado. And she says to you afterwards, 'You know, I like Shakespeare, especially his comedy *Much Ado about Nothing*.' In this case, nothing means prudery.

The contemplative attitude of the spirit. Is that what Croce calls 'art'? And what about Jackson Pollock? Did he contemplate the canvas lying on the floor? Before emptying his storage of colours? What *did* he contemplate? A bottle of whisky, I suppose, except that he drank before being able to look at it closely. Why should you contemplate a bottle of whisky? Drink it and forget about it or rather about everything with the exception of the canvas lying somewhere and a tube you hold in your right or left hand. A tube of paint or that of toothpaste. What does it matter! The pleasure of art is of theoretical origin. You create a theory before embarking on a poem dedicated to the woman or man you have always loved. Instead of writing or singing, 'I love you, I love you, I love,' you come up with a theory. What kind of theory? Economic theory, scientific theory, Darwin's theory of evolution. You can insert all of them into your poem instead of repeating, singing and playing everything on your guitar, 'I love you, I love you, I love-o-o-o-o you.'

The pleasure of art relates to 'form'. One thinks immediately about Venus, Aphrodite or Apollo. Why not? Not about a spaceship, though. If you look at Picasso's paintings – not only those related and closely linked to his cubism – you will be struck by their fundamental ugliness. What pleasure can you experience in relation to ugliness as such? A sort of masochistic pleasure, I suppose. You say to yourself, 'This cubist painting reproduces the result of a sexual harassment, of an atrocious behaviour on the part of a maniac whose instincts will never be tamed, given that he is much, much worse than the proverbial "shrew".' Examine the series of his 'seated women'. The only irresistible urge you get upon studying these pictures – you do not really have to *study* them – is situated in the domain of disappearance. This is a vast domain, I must confess, but these women's disappearances might be simplified to the utmost: you just rise and go, assuming it can rise without losing all the pieces your carcasses are carrying in so many museums. (You know what I am talking about.) Even if there is no door in the vicinity of your bodies, just go and vanish into thin air. I wish you could vanish into *thick* air, for *thin*

air is transparent to some degree. And seeing you on a regular basis is intolerable and even a masochist or a sexual maniac cannot bear the sight of a work of art which disfigures humans to such an extent. After all, we are the most beautiful forms accessible to eyes. For once, let us not speak of God.

We continue to receive a lot of pieces of information from Benedetto Croce. He informs us that ‘the truth of this is testified by what was already in antiquity noted and commented upon with surprise: that in art things are pleasing which outside art are displeasing and painful (the lowest animals, and corpses, said Aristotle, while Boileau cites “*le serpent*” and “*le monstre odieux*”).’ Well, among the displeasing things or objects or beings I would choose and emphasise humans, both female and male of the species. I would not put on this list the female of the species, even if proverbially they are deadlier than men, but for Picasso’s contribution to this topic. His seated women are so horrible you may ask yourself if it is worth your while having a wife and begetting a few children. I don’t think along these lines, when I am on my own. Picasso makes me change my mind; at least he is a fruitful source of my perplexity as to what a human being is supposed to do. To put up with ugliness for the sake of his or her offspring? Oddly enough, men are far more acceptable, as far as Picasso’s art goes. Yet he was not homosexual, judging from the number of his mistresses. Within Picasso’s art women – especially his *seated* women – are displeasing; frankly speaking, they are horrifying, and Joseph Conrad ought to have kept his ‘horror’ for the benefit of these women. But there are exceptions to this rule, and these exceptions concern Picasso’s mistresses and wives: they take advantage of their closeness to the maestro to partake of beauty, if only modestly.

And what about the lowest animals? Humans are held in high esteem, and very few individuals are capable of putting them in this category; the lowest animals. They might occasionally speak of the lowest humans, but to them humans are always superior to animals, whatever happens to be under scrutiny. And what about serpents? About their participation in the Fall whose protagonist, Adam, spent a number of years in Hell, before being redeemed by Dante? ‘In the pleasures of the imagination, on the contrary, pleasure depends upon the image which is summoned up or composed being itself agreeable, serviceable as an instrument of pleasure.’ Once again, I am under the feeling we are talking about self-abuse – otherwise it is useless and almost ridiculous to call upon *all the figments* of your imagination. What are these figments of yours, of your imagination? A pair of legs, as I usually point out; a pair of breasts. What else? A still life, to remain within the realm of pictuality? You visualise a pitcher. So what? You fill this imaginary pitcher with a certain quantity of imaginary beer. Drink this beer, if you wish. You do wish it, although you realise it is not only pointless but even ludicrous: you can have as many as a hundred bottles filled to the brim with Belgian beer; if you take the trouble to go to the nearest supermarket.

Of course you can think, when looking at a seated woman painted by Picasso: ‘I’m not disgusted because it’s just a work of art, nothing more. I don’t have to touch it – I’m not *allowed* to touch it – and I’m not supposed to spend a night with it, in the same bed, which would be a horrible experience. Can you imagine a number of nightmares and their contents I would suffer from on account of this disfigurement?’ But whatever you say to yourself, the power of art is always around us, and you may feel it acutely upon meeting a woman in the streets. You take a glance at her and say to yourself, ‘She’s much better than Picasso’s pictures.’ But the latter do not leave you at once, yielding to the pressure of beauty you have just encountered. And so you go on talking to yourself. You say, among other things, ‘It’s true that sooner or later this pedestrian will grow old and during *that* period she’s bound to look exactly like Picasso’s portrait.’ More often than not he painted ugly and old women.

Actually he makes us see the world as it is. The world we live in, sleep in, bathe in is old and ugly. Recently I saw a Russian documentary in which they showed a few women who were getting more and more beautiful as they aged, as they accumulated the years, days and seconds – in their bosoms, throughout their bodies. But the world ages differently. A great deal of research has examined the effects of ageing on landscapes, cityscapes. And let us not forget that our mental capacities depend on what we walk around, through, on where we flight in planes and helicopters.

And even when you have a walk in a beautiful ecological city where you come across only beautiful women, you cannot help recalling Picasso's chronic deformity. You slap your rival's face and 30 years later she says to you, 'Do you remember what you did to my eye 30 years ago? For two months at least I couldn't get rid of the black eye you endowed me with. And now my vision is tarnished by a black spot. I had a shiner, and now the world no longer shines in my existence.' That is what Picasso did in the history of humanity: he gratified us with a black eye, with a gloomy, dismal perspective.

'Images of voluptuous pain, leading up sometimes to the joy of martyrdom itself, are thus savoured in the imagination.' You acquire a Picasso painting, counting on this variety of pain, dreaming about it day and night. Why is it voluptuous? Because you paid a few million dollars for this painting, and this deed of yours has given you unexpected celebrity status. People bow as they walk past you. Actually they never simply *walk* past you. As soon as your raincoat makes its appearance within their fields of vision they stop and begin bowing as if afraid of not being able to complete the series of bows before your disappearance. As for yourself, this picture has ended up turning you into a masochist. You spend hours in front of it and often you vomit beside your armchair: you have no time to reach one of your lavatories. Even your nearest lavatory cannot give you a helping hand. Last month you decided to purchase yet another lavatory with a view to installing it by the armchair – within reach, so to speak. But vomiting crises descend upon you so quickly – out of the black, no doubt – that up to now you have never had an opportunity to use it.

'For this reason I myself have steadily classed those theories which develop the encounter with and defeat of ugliness (once the subject of elaborate systematic works of philosophy and still cherished by second-rate academic aestheticians in Germany and elsewhere) as being not aesthetic theories at all, but hedonistic theories, fallacious and harmful in the field of aesthetics.' You live an ordinary life and suddenly someone comes and say (why do they always say something?): 'What you combat in your thoughts, in your brain and psyche is not aesthetic. It is hedonistic because you're true, venerated Christian and you can't bear hedonistic tones and overtones in your life. Everything is spiritual and is directed, aimed at the everlasting meeting with God.' All right, I agree with you, for the sake of agreeing, not for the sake of the argument, though. But what do we agree upon? Can we devote to this problem a few seconds without glancing at a TV set or the Internet? Somebody (Benedetto Croce) has steadily classed those theories; and many other theories, into the bargain. But are you supposed to follow his theory or example? Do you have to class your life in accordance with the values announced in his essays, volumes or doctrines? I wish to defeat ugliness once and for all; or just once, for want of anything better. You defeat it once and think it is enough to add 'for all' to make all other uglinesses collapse in the wake of this destruction. All right, you defeat one part of ugliness, a minute fragment of it. But other parts and fragments vociferate, as they do (humans, revolutionaries) during their meetings, parades and so on, 'We don't give up whatever we do. We don't know exactly what we do, but we don't give up this and that. We don't

surrender. United we resist or fall, but the main thing is to be united, and whatever happens, we'll be united. And we'll embrace in the middle of the crowds made up of policemen and other dictators.'

But Picasso calls us back, and we cannot resist his drive that has driven mad so many women. He spoke to them; they took their seats and became monsters, not even in disguise. If you show these monsters to your children, they are sure to hate women throughout their lives and even immortalities. Rousseau tells the story about his arrival in Paris – of all cities, as I am tempted to add, considering that I lived in this city for 33 years. He accosted this city from the wrong side, and spent all his life disparaging the capital of the world. The same phenomenon might affect your own children if, incited by your cultural instinct, you bring them to a museum where Picasso's portraits of seated women are exposed. Your child, be it a female or a male, sees a painting and begins to hate not only women, but also men. And yet Picasso treated men with indulgence. 'All the pleasures and indulgences of the weekend are over,' he would say to himself, 'and I must get down to some serious hard work.' And he would disfigure yet another woman.

What *are* the pleasures of your imagination? This woman could not by any stretch of the imagination be described as a beautiful model. Well, you stand in front of a very expensive picture and you are unable to bring yourself to deny its value, its relation to our overall beauty. So you do your utmost to accept its commercial and artistic treasures. How do you do it? You just stretch your imagination, and considering the task you are facing is too difficult, however trained and indoctrinated you are and will ever be, thank goodness, you pluck your imagination from your brain or psyche and endeavour to stretch it to the best of your abilities. You stretch it, you stretch it, you stretch it. Imaginations are overstretched, and their masters are not getting the reward they need. This is a warning you receive from on high, but that is not all, that is not all. What else is it in store for you?

They say to you that the woman or painting you are about to see is the most beautiful thing or object or being in the world. You prepare yourself for this feat or fête of nature and suddenly you are disappointed, as much as Rousseau was upon entering the gates of Paris. What are you supposed to do? To forget everything, including your own existence? You contemplate a Picasso woman, if only for a second, and realise you will never marry such a woman. Several months later you meet such a woman and you say to yourself that if such a woman resembles Plato's prototypes, she must be beautiful; or she must have a lot of money. In other words, you get used to ugliness and grow allergic to whatever is beautiful – in all domains. You listen to Wagner, you are in transports of delight upon hearing the leitmotiv of the dragon, but turn a deaf ear to Isolde and her death, even if the recording you see on your record player informs you that the version you have in your possession is best rendering of the immortal opera.

You meet Isolde in the streets and all your friends and enemies change their colours, becoming green with envy. They whisper in each other's ears, 'What a beauty, my God! I hope he doesn't believe his luck. And I meet only Picasso-manipulated women. Just my luck, you know.' But you dream only about such women, Picasso-inspired creatures, and when you talk to such an ugly duckling, she answers peremptorily, 'Don't you like Picasso? The most expensive painter in human history, you know.' 'Where those theories depict any genuine psychic process, it is the process of the "pleasure of the imagination", not "the pleasure of artistic creation"'. Well, Picasso availed himself of the latter on a regular basis, turning women into dragons, furies, Gorgonas and so on. I think I have already pointed out that he was far more indulgent towards men, for some obscure reason. One might suppose that not every woman on Earth was happy in his arms and responded to his calls with ecstatic shouts, screams and songs. And whenever a woman ignored him ostentatiously, he avenged himself by painting

a monster. Vengeance is probably the most delicious pleasure of Creation, and it is all the more fruitful when you direct your wrath and sadism against a creature whose cruelty made you relinquish your grip on her body. 'For the same reason I have rejected the theory of "apparent feelings", unless these feelings be so understood that the pleasure in them is seen to derive wholly from the "appearance" itself.' A woman appears in front of your eyes and you decide to pave the way for a more detailed exploration of her body. Of course you have already got a few eyefuls of her eyes, legs and shoulders, but you long for more details, for tangibility as such. But then you say to yourself, 'This morning I read an essay where a famous philosopher speaks of "apparent pleasure". I still have no idea what he means by this formula, and I'm burning with desire to find out what this all means. To tell the truth, at this particular moment I'm burning with two desires. The first desire springs from the formula I touched upon a few moments ago, and the second is rooted in the woman I see in the same street, in the street where I was walking just a few minutes ago. Now I am rooted to the spot because two desires paralyse my will, my capacity to move my members or thoughts. But if I orientate myself in such a way that the first desire gets the upper hand in this struggle for pleasure, I'll have to forego the ecstasy of tangible sexuality which is far from being apparent. In this case I'll have to content myself with appearances. Yes, the pleasure I'll experience under the circumstances will be wholly derived from appearances, not from tactile substitutions.'

All right, you opt for the first desire and do not even say 'hello' to the woman standing in proximity to your body. You just follow in her footsteps for a while, getting more and more eyefuls of her appearance. Of course you can ask her if she does not mind to accompany you to the nearest beach, which might allow you to study her appearance in a more professional way. But even if she agrees to strip her clothes for the sake of your study, you should not take advantage of her submissiveness, for apparent feelings do not tolerate such closeness. Sexual acts, I mean.

'In the pleasure of the appearance, the actor is Man as a universal. In the pleasure of the matter of the appearance, the actor is man as an individual, with his particular interests, inclinations, and likings. In the former pleasure there is equal enjoyment of the sublime, the comic, the mild, the fierce, the austere, the voluptuous, all belonging to the sheer spectacle of humanity; in the latter nothing counts save what serves particular private requirements.' Let us turn this Man into Woman and let her indulge in her theatricals which are superb, outstanding; most of the time. Sometimes you even forgo the pleasures of the flesh to avail yourself of gestures, mimic, gymnastics of eyes – if they belong to a real woman. And beautiful women are real as if painted by a hyperrealist. But if you let yourself go and strike up a close friendship with such a woman, going as far as marrying her – not on the spot, though (after much soul- and body-searching) – you inevitably come to know her by heart: all her habits, all her bodily secrets, her diet and particular tastes in the domain of the arts. Does the sublime whole disintegrate, becoming a mere hole? Perhaps, perhaps: anything can happen on this Earth of ours. Every now and then you might ask yourself the following question that begs a lot of questions: 'Do I yearn for a loss? What if this Earth of ours becomes *theirs*'?

'It is of course quite obvious that the images of genuine art can be and are brought into service among the pleasures of the imagination, and this is the basis for the educationalist's concern as to what books should be encouraged and what disallowed, what pictures should be shown and what kept out of sight of boys and girls, because as the pupils do not approach these with a perfect concentration upon truth or aesthetic value, they may receive from them either help or hindrance to their moral formation.' There are educationalists – and I am of their number – who show Picasso's women (not their photographs, mind you) to their pupils to put the latter off

the world and its illusionary pleasures. ‘Doesn’t all this ugliness disgust you?’ they ask now and then. ‘It’s fun,’ answer some of the pupils. ‘Listen carefully to what I’m about to say. You’re males, all of you. Some of you might realise they’re homosexually inclined human creatures. In other words, your inclinations guide you towards other men. You see a man and a woman whose bodies are situated within your field of vision. Even if you don’t feel anything, you incline your head almost automatically. And if there’s a mirror in this room of yours, you can see in this mirror the tendency that inhabits your body, psyche and the rest of your substance, as Aquinas used to say.’

There are misanthropes in our midst, and if they have a few pupils – or just one, why not? – these pupils grow side by side with Picasso’s women. Their teachers say to them, ‘Women represent the best part of humanity because the goddess of love and beauty is a woman. And there’s nothing else on Earth. Love and beauty – that’s all we need so as not to commit suicide every two minutes. Look at all those Aphrodites assembled in the book I’ve just offered you. They’re all seated. They must be exhausted after their love and beauty exertions.’ Some of the pupils say outright, ‘It’s not worth my while living in the world where such creatures come and go and even lie down on your beds.’ Some of your pupils are likely to fling their bodies out of one of the windows about which you did not think, while preparing your lecture on beauty and ugliness. So, before giving your lectures, you should bar all the doors and windows to stop anyone getting out of the room. Usually pupils either throw themselves out of the windows or quit the classroom to position themselves at the top of a staircase. Then they do their utmost to roll down this staircase, anxious to fracture whatever is precious within their bodies and also on their skin. It is not for nothing that specialists call Picasso a ‘suicidal maniac’, although he never even *attempted* to commit suicide.

‘The pleasures of the imagination, then, belong to the sphere of practice, yet it is well to give another warning against identifying them with the undertones of fantasy which accompany volitions, representations which reflect the unfolding of the will against a shifting background of hopes and fears, love and hatred. What constitutes and determines these latter is the quality of the volition itself, the end towards which the will tends. But in the case of the pleasures of the imagination the pleasure and satisfactions obtained by means of the imagination directly constitute the end.’ It is true that the pleasures of the imagination belong to the sphere of practice; otherwise there is no point in visualising anything. You dream of a beautiful landscape swarming with very beautiful women, and you put your vision into practice. You go to a travel agency, describe the figment of your imagination and say to the employee, ‘Where could I find such a landscape and how much will it cost?’ The employee stares at you for while and then says, ‘How many women do you wish to possess within this landscape or at a nearby hotel?’

‘I don’t know. Two or three or five. It depends on the weather and the food.’

‘I guarantee the excellence of the food at the nearby hotel. As for your mood and capacities, it’s up to you to deal with them appropriately.’

‘If I stay at the hotel for a month or so, I’ll need 30 women.’

‘All right. This package tour will cost you eight thousand dollars.’

You have at your disposal a multitude of hopes and sadistic stratagems. In their midst your will unfolds, brushing against some of the most succulent female bodies. You invite these bodies to the restaurant where the food is as excellent as the bodies you are relying upon. Anyway, the quality of your volition is as excellent as the food, the bodies and even the dresses worn by these bodies. The same goes for the end to which your

imagination tends. And what is this end, pray? This end may be defined as follows, 'A multiple enjoyment of life, its beauty and sensuality situated on the opposite side of Picasso's seated females.' You may even work on your dream, while waiting for the package tour in question. You put the book devoted to Picasso's models on the floor of your room, open the door, take a taxi and drive towards the outskirts of your native city. Not content with these outskirts, with the distance they create in relation to Picasso's masterpieces, you continue your journey and even leave the country – to complete your initiation with bravado.

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an arduous climb/task/journey. Well, if you wish to describe the tendencies and distractions that composed the props of your childhood and even adolescence, you are allowed to write whatever you like: no one will ever take the trouble to unravel those mysteries and spell things out, putting dots over is. You can say you went to Africa, became a doctor, and at some point someone likely to ask, 'At the age of eleven?' Of course you retort you were a precocious child and your dearest urge implanted in you bosom by your grandma has never left you ever since. (Ever since you heard her words and fully understood her instructions.) You say whatever comes into your head and even traverses it, which is not a piece of cake, literally, psychologically. A piece of cake is not always easy, for cutting a cake is a problem more or less tantamount to a mathematical problem. You cut triangles and cakes. Which is easier?

Your past is not easy to cut because by cutting it you may go too far and deprive humanity of a juicy or the most rewarding piece. You cut your childhood, the experience you had with a pair of skis and the disasters that followed in your footsteps – whenever you cut your childhood into more or less seductive pieces. But let us go straight to the general topic of this essay entitled *Appearance and Reality*. Let us return to the cake, for appearance obviously precedes reality. Reality is always linked to appearances – before being real in earnest. You see a forest where you intend to take a stroll, and suddenly a number of people arrive in lorries and cut this forest to pieces. What may astonish you beyond all measure is the non-resistance of the forest – as if you were opposed by one of Ghandi's (or Tolstoy's) partisans. Branches, twigs, trees and even stumps might mobilise several of the army's top combat units. Alas, the axes – the ones resorted to pathetically in the *Cherry Orchard* – go on with their job they call 'duty'; and whenever you tend them a glass of whisky, they say, 'I never drink on duty.'

I read Bradley when I was no longer a child. It is easier to read him when you still do not know what to do and what regard as a real world where you are bound to die; whereas, in the world of appearances, you may pretend to be dead for a while to find out how your relatives, friends and enemies react to your untimely disappearance. You open your eyes ever so slightly and watch their reactions, their attitudes towards your rite of passage. And you hear as you stand nearby, in real proximity to the corpse, 'Do you have any right to pass?'

'I do, of course I do. My fatal illness has done me for.'

'What kind of illness?'

'We all thought we were done for when the boat started to sink. But I really did it, the others survived.'

'Why?'

'Because, like Pechorin, a hero of Lermontov's novel, I didn't know how to swim.'

'Are you a Russian, then? Very few people outside Russia know that legend of your barbarous land.'

'Yes, I'm Russian.'

'You've no right to be taken care of in our hospital, on account of what's happening in Ukraine. Leave the field clear for the suffering representatives of our country.'

'What am I to do?'

'Do what you're inclined to do. Two minutes ago we pulled out of the deal, leaving you high and dry.'

'But I'm neither high nor dry.'

'Are you alluding to your urine test? And to *Vertigo*, to Hitchcock's mythical movie?'

It is to be something which comes as a feature and aspect within one whole of feeling, something which, except as an integral element of such sentience, has no meaning at all. And what I repudiate is the separation of feeling from the felt, or of the desired from desire, or of what is thought from thinking, or the division – I might add – of anything from anything else. Nothing is ever so presented as real by itself, or can be argued so to exist without demonstrable fallacy. And in asserting that the reality is experience, I rest throughout on this foundation.

When dealing with your past, you have no alternative but to analyse whatever sips into your memory bit by bit. Some context may come later or it does not come at all as if already dead, buried and utterly forgotten by our universal memory. It is a puzzle and you do your utmost to combine the pieces in such a way as to construct something reasonable, logical, something that makes sense and have a lot of rhymes and reasons. While doing so, you should forget about all the pieces of cake you have enjoyed throughout your life. If you dine in a good restaurant and have a piece of cake at the end of your meal, you just eat it, bit by bit. Eating a piece of cake is as easy as the cake itself unless you suffer from indigestion or from diabetes. You eat the whole cake and swoon in the middle of the restaurant. And your doctor says to you in reproachful tones, ‘I told you never to eat cakes in their entirety. Your diabetes will never approve of such a practice. One third of a cake. Well, two thirds at the utmost.’

The whole procedure – putting pieces together, which is far more difficult than putting two and two together – reminds me of how a chess player, an amateur (to all appearances and realities) cuts his Gordian knots. Every citizen has a private Gordian knot and either he cuts it or undoes it as he goes along his life’s convoluted path. (Women do not *cut* Gordian knots: they *weave* them.) The amateur upends the chessboard halfway through the game because he is losing. There are no sheets of paper on the table in the middle of which you see the empty chessboard. The moves have not been immortalised and so you just leave the room to find a dubitable solace in a glass of champagne.

Every memory you seem to possess cannot be presented as real by itself because it lacks all sorts of times and places. Where does it come from? I know, I know: Father Brown gave it to me in the course of our last or penultimate stroll. But this Father Brown is mine, not Chesterton’s. As we know – thanks to Mr Bradley – the reality is experience. The problem is the experience I am talking about dates back to the Russian Revolution. My Father Brown was in Petrograd at the time. He might have worked for some secret service or other. Then I remember that I was not yet born at the time when this coup de theatre (the Russian Revolution) burst into its revolutionary song. Of course I know a lot of revolutionary songs: we learnt them at school, but I did not sing them on the streets of Petrograd; nor did I sing them on the streets of Leningrad, let alone on the streets of St Petersburg. What a mess, what a chaos, what a monstrous appearance! Of course there is no denying that this chaos is an experience, but I cannot rest on this foundation because in no way does chaos serve us as a foundation; unless we get involved in chaos theory and see a lot of butterflies paying visits to our house.

‘You cannot find fact unless in unity with sentience.’ All right, I do feel something, even when uttering the name of Father Brown, although I have never met him either in Petersburg or elsewhere. I met him on the pages of Chesterton’s stories and I would not mind going to my library to find a few books related to the subject,

to the object of my sentiments. But I would not make much headway with any of these books in spite of the admiration I have for Chesterton, for *his* Father Brown.

I was born in Moscow: there is no denying this fact; and yet my sentiments do not really accompany it; my *positive* sentiments. I realised where I was – in the world, in our sin-ridden world – rather late: I must have been six or seven. And until the outset of my adolescence I wondered why in the winter nights are much longer. I might have even been surprised by the metamorphoses of temperature, but this is another story or novel. At the age of eleven, if I am not mistaken, I paid three visits to the American Exhibition and said to myself I was living in the right; at the right time, but in the wrong place. Why at the right time? Because, at the entrance to the exhibition they installed a gorgeous Chevrolet with an open bonnet or rather hood. In this case, we had better use the word ‘hood’; and yet, whenever I do use it, I get the feeling that inside this hood you will find the Red Riding Hood, if you dare open it. I did not leave my country at that point – this enterprise might have deprived me not only of my capacities, but also of my life – but I felt once and for all I was not living in *my* country. In whose country *was* I leaving? It did not really matter to know l’*appellation contrôlée* of this country of mine, of its Stali-li-li-li, Le-ni-lini-lini. What is appearance under the circumstances? I did my utmost not to *walk* on the Moscow pavements. (Other Soviet cities and citizens did not really count, considering I was not in their midst round the clock.)

Many years ago – today I often use this expression (I wish it could become an idiom) – for the first time in my life I heard the name of Okudzhava. In Moscow, of all places; as usual. I did not pay much attention either to the name or to this bard who was no Shakespeare, not by a long chalk. And many years ago I attended his recital in Paris, at the Pierre Cardin Hall. Soviet bards are beneath my dignity and beyond my ken: I have no such kens within my field of vision, within my sensitivity. (That is what I used to think.) I am not fond of these guitar-ornamented (or rather orientated) verses which tell you something as simple as *bonjour*. Okudzhava sings about Mozart, saying and singing, to some extent, ‘Don’t be disappointed, Maestro. Don’t remove your hands from your forehead.’ You do remove your hands from your forehead. So what? This gesture does not prevent you from taking your life or composing another opera, especially that you need your hands to write it, both of them.

And then he sang about one of the main (pedestrian) streets of Moscow; a kind of symbol I did not notice, when living in this capital of sorts. (In this capital of destinies, rather.) As I pointed out earlier, I was not in the habit of noticing anything during my walks in Moscow. These walks had nothing to do with my curiosity, with sightseeing or any love, however immature and ridiculous. I loved only river boats, and I am not sure they belonged to Moscow. They might have been constructed, manufactured elsewhere; in the region of the Volga, for instance. The point is I loved these boats *in Moscow* and not *in Petersburg*, for instance. I went in them as far as the University, the Unboring Garden, the garden where you never get bored. I am not convinced I could have said about this garden of mine (it was to some extent mine): ‘You’re my destiny, my vocation, my religion, I can’t reach your end, however long I may walk.’ That is what Okudzhava says about Arbat; or about Moscow, to some extent, to all extents.

No, Moscow was neither my religion, nor my vocation, and I was not eager to walk to the end of its streets, boulevards and all so ons that many capitals conceal in their bosoms. What does not allow me to sleep like a log, not far from my death, from the end of *my* street? There is a story about a bird, an ordinary bird which was put in a cage alongside a raven; not the raven of Nevermore fame, contrary to what one could imagine. The

ordinary bird chirped, chirruped, chirped, chirruped, 'I miss my forest, my branches, my colleagues.' Chirps and chirrups. It sang this refrain over and over, assuming we regard this aria as a song. The raven said nothing, contradicting Edgar Poe's heroes. And he died several hours later. That is what silence means in high society.

I neither kept silent nor chirped, and my attitude was somewhat identical to the Middle Way, although I wonder if the Middle Way really has its identity. Doesn't it wholly depend on the opposites, on the poles, on the North and the South? On the West and the East? In my case, the West and the East were far more important, and for years – fortunately this state of mind did not last for decades – most of my interior monologues were saturated with these notions and what goes with them: the luxury of the West, the poverty of our, Soviet East. (Japan and Taiwan have nothing to do with this misery.) I was writing short poems in Russian, and recently a friend of mine said they might be published in today's Russia. But today's Russia is not identical to the Russia of yesteryear. Today, in 1922, one wonders whether the crowd one sees under one's windows consists of men or of pigs, to put it mildly; not necessarily bluntly. Do I miss my forest, my branches, my colleagues' chirps? Some years ago, I said to a Moscow friend of mine, 'I haven't been outrageously happy in the course of my existence, but my friends are exemplary.' I know I was neither drunk nor high on grass as I uttered this sentence, but I must have confused the poles. My friends and my happiness are poles apart. Our relationships are a huge collection, a gallery of betrayals, low tricks, smutty jokes – as huge as the museum of abuses and affronts. But on the whole my life has been insolently happy, daily receiving gifts and revelations, luminous intrusions. (The intruder in the light.) But from now on I shall keep my friends at bay, whatever happens. Even on my deathbed I shall not need their assistance and prayers. Incidentally, Okudzhava had a rare, lung-oriented disease, and he needed a medicine which was vital for lungs, but pernicious in regard to the immune system. He was already on the doorstep of death and he was aware of the utter impossibility of contacts with the outside world made up mostly of humans. Yet he could not forgo the pleasure of meeting one of his best friends, Lev Kopelev, who had just caught a flu virus. They both died several days later. God forbid!

It is well known that after an injury followed by unconsciousness which is removed by an operation, our mental life may begin again from the moment of the injury. Now if the self remembers because and according as it is *now*, might not another self be made of a quality the same, and hence possessing the same past in present recollection? And if *one* could be made thus, why not also two or three? These might be made distinct as the present time, through their differing quality, and again through outward relations, and yet be like enough for each to remember the same past, and so, of course, to *be* the same.

My departure from the Soviet Union was such an injury – oriented towards the *positive* pole of existence. But an injury it was, if only in terms of shock, of the amplitude of vibrations. I left in 1974 and returned in 1990. I met my friends and the process of extraction, of removal began, slowly but surely. Your rotten tooth is responsible for your sleepless nights and this state of affairs may last several weeks. And then the tooth is extracted and replaced with an implant. My rotten friends, their extraction lasted for more than 30 years. Now I am free from their phone calls, their males and also their females – their wives, in other words. These were quite in keeping with their husbands' baleful hard-heartedness, and I am delighted to have lost their scrutiny, comments and last judgements.

The past is not as dead as God Whose life does not depend on our last judgements and hopes. We all remember our common past, but it is so poisoned by today's reflections, recollections – I remember much more than I used to only two years ago – that I am tempted to say it is not common; nor is it the past. All the nuances of my existence parade within my inner eyes, and every nuance turns something into its opposite. The above-mentioned poles jump from one extremity to another and I can hardly follow their game of chess or their athletics, theatricals: I have no idea what they are doing on the outskirts of my inner eyes or right under their exterior counterparts. At some point you are bound to lose track, and the only thing you *can* do about this mess, chaos or death is the solution to the reality-appearance problem.

I know that Okudzhava was just an appearance in my Soviet life: I heard his name many times, but notwithstanding the importance of names, sometimes you had better find out what the name in question really does; otherwise it may remain outside whatever is real for the rest of your life. I was already outside the Soviet Union, Russia and Moscow (this goes without saying), but oddly enough, the name of Okudzhava appeared in Paris, on some posters, and this appearance was different from the one I attributed to him when talking about my former, Soviet acquaintance with his persona. I went to his recital at the Pierre Cardin Hall or Institution and, in spite of his realism, of his proximity to my body and ears, I remained impervious to his output, to his songs, their texts and his behaviour on the stage of the Cardin Centre or Monument. I watched his recital yesterday, having lighted upon it while fiddling with my computer. I cannot say I have changed my mind completely, absolutely so that I have an altogether different mind in my head or in my substance, as I usually say. But I am in two minds about this man and his vocation which have been shared by many of my former fellow citizens. They would sit somewhere – on a hill, for instance – and strum on their guitars for hours on end, their mouths bubbling over with enthusiasm. Or toiling with enthusiasm. And what about trouble? The Soviet regime persecuted most of them, in some way or another, sending them thousands of bottles filled to the brim with vodka or moonshine. Or just locking them up in lunatic asylums. Incidentally, one of the most legendary bard-originated songs begins as follows: 'The moon was shining, shining, shining.'

Frankly speaking, I cannot call the attention I paid to this movement, trend or fashion the turning point: at the Cardin-sponsored recital the point did not gain enough momentum for any turns. But 10 years later, in a famous Parisian bookshop I chanced upon Nabokov's translations from Russian poetry: *Verses and Versions*. To my astonishment, in this book whose impact upon my literary development would have been immeasurable only 20 years ago featured one Soviet bard or poet, Bulat Okhudzhava. (Bullet Nobody, according to my spell checker.) The shock I experienced was in no way inferior to what Nabokov himself felt upon making this decision. 'Dear Bill,' he wrote to his publisher, 'You will observe three unusual features here: my translating a Soviet poet; my doing so in rhyme; and my thinking that you print that kind of stuff.' Over the years Nabokov's output has compelled universal admiration and trust. And my admiration, my trust. When I saw the name of Okhudzhava inside a book written by one of my favourite authors – let us not forget the absolute trust I put in him at the time – the immobile point I had touched upon earlier began to turn. And this turning was somehow akin to what might happen to one's wits.

Speranza, I'll be coming back
The day the bugler sounds retreat,
When to his lips he'll bring the bugle,

And outward his sharp elbow turn.
 Speranza, I'll remain unharmed:
 The clammy earth is not for me,
 Because for me are your misgivings
 And the kind world of your concern.

Neither my father nor uncle – the only uncle of mine I saw in reality, in Petersburg, for the space of two minutes – took part in the Second World War, but the war was in the air: in the Soviet Union, the events you could boast about were few and far between. We discussed Stalin's errors, but the most popular topic would always bring us to the surface of the Earth literally covered with corpses. At some point I began to believe that the surface of our planet were not clods of earth, but arms, legs and other members of the bodies of our former soldiers who, for some reason, could not find their graves. They just slept in ravines, in meadows, and even vultures did not dare touch them as if anxious to pay homage to the victims of the war, to all the sufferings they (and we) endured. I recall a conversation I overheard at home. Somewhere in the middle of this conversation, my father's said, 'We shouldn't bury them. Let their bodies bless our roads, our streets. They should participate in our lives. Nothing can be constructed, formulated without the dead, without their active role in our lives. The photographs we know by heart and see everywhere aren't fit for this task.'

I recall our car and often we drove to the Crimea to spend a month or so on the seashore, in company with living bodies. But on the road we heard the members of the dead under our seats as if the former soldiers had expressed their wish to help us, to enact a sort of plain sailing for our cars. At some point, however, the dead disappeared and we all realised that our Politburo ended up getting rid of them, for the sake of our psychological equilibrium. But I, for one, always regretted not having lived the rest of my life in their company, their *tangible* company. When the young ask the old why there are almost no motorways in Russia, the latter say, 'We worship the dead and prefer the discomfort originated in their bodies to Western luxuries.' But, as I just pointed out, the dead, mutilated bodies eventually disappeared, and we remained on our own.

The poet says, 'Speranza, I'll remain unharmed: / The clammy earth is not for me.' For a while I thought the poet was describing the state of affairs I came across after the war, at the age of nine approximately, when I realised our car was moving through a jungle of corpses, not along an ordinary motorway. 'Never mind the discomfort,' my father used to say. 'It's a bumpy road, but we'd better put up with all the incontinences related to it for the sake of the past, of the present, of our future, of our memory. Of course some of these bodies belong to our enemies, but this is the only way to forgive them. As for the bodies of our relatives, friends and colleagues, by allowing our cars to use them as a support, they show us to what extent they continue to care for us, to care for our care, so to speak. As the poet says, "Because for me are your misgivings / And the kind world of your concern." Entente cordial, in other words.'

But if an entire century
 Goes by, and you are sick of hoping,
 Speranza, if it's over me
 That death his outspread wings should throw
 You must command: let then the bugler,

Sore wounded, raise himself a little
 So that a last grenade may not
 Dispatch me with a final blow.

The word (name) Speranza might surprise the unprepared reader. That is how Nabokov explains his choice: ‘The bilingual reader will note that I could not force myself either to use the name “Nadezhda” (unpronounceable in English) or turn it into the stiff, long-faced, long-aproned “Hope,” hence my “Speranza” which re-enacts dazzlingly the eloquent lilt of the original.’ I beg to differ, if only for the sake of expressing my doubt as to the dazzling substitution of the name Nadezhda which, in my opinion, is as pronounceable as the name of Nabokov’s wife Vera. Incidentally, these names are part of the Russian trinity: vera, nadezhda, lubov’. (Faith, hope, love.) Long-aproned hope is charming, but sock-wearing hope is not less charming, given that one sock is not enough to make a woman quite happy. The same goes for Nabokov’s apron, of course: you dream about Carl Lagerfeld and a number of balls as you stand apron-humiliated in your kitchen, your hands kneading the dough.

Sentimentality should be shunned at the piano: its intolerable presence always results in a thunderous applause in the midst of which composer finds his own bones and tissues. But in the domain of poetry it is not only admissible – it is welcome: even Dante indulged in sentimental moods, now and then. The author of the poem takes liberty with time and also with space, as we shall see in the course of this essay. There is something childish and therefore touching in the text under scrutiny: children often say to each other, ‘All right, see you in the 23d century.’ And even grown-ups overshoot the mark constantly, at least within the space-time bounds. ‘I haven’t seen you for ages,’ meaning, ‘I haven’t seen you in the Victorian age, in the post-industrial age. I wonder *when* I saw you last. Perhaps in the stone age. What do *you* think?’

In the poems written during the same war soldiers often talk to their wives and mistresses – in terms of the latter’s expectations, worries, waiting and fatigue. One poem says, ‘You’d better wait for me very intensely, even if you’re sick and tired of the whole affair.’ These are really poems and not letters sent to Moscow or elsewhere, which informs us that the childish game ‘the abolition of time-space’ is under way and slowly reaching its climax as the literary outputs accept newcomers with open arms. The more you write during a war, the better. Some lift weights after work to let off steam; others write poems, which is more logical in the context of a war. Weights are weapons, so you do not need additional gymnastics to relieve your physical and psychological pains and smooth your nerves. Adults know that even the theory of relativity and quantum mechanics cannot deal successfully with the time-and-space problem, whereas children do it in the twinkling of an eye. In a way, they turn both time and space around their little finger. And then everything becomes reachable, achievable. You wait for a hundred years – nothing to do with Marquez’s novel – and get sick and tired in the process. But in spite of your sickness and fully respectable and rewarding age you can ward off a grenade aimed at your lover, husband or brother. This is not a joking matter; it is the pathetic symphony written and performed by those who glorified their motherland in the Second World War.

In the Absolute, where all content is blended with existence, the Nature thought of will gain once more an intuitional form. It will come together with itself and with other sides of the Universe, and will make its special contribution to the riches of the Whole. It *is* not as we think of it, it *is* not as it becomes when in our experience thought is succeeded by perception. It *is* something which, only under certain conditions,

turns to physical fact revealed to our senses. But because in the Absolute it is an element of reality, though not known, as there experienced, to any finite mind – because, again, we rightly judge it to be physical fact, if it became perceived by sense – therefore already it *is* fact, hypothetical but still independent.

During a war – not a distant war, not a televised one – you seem to reach the confines of the Absolute, and gradually you realise that the Absolute has no confines. And you carry on with your work, with your discovery of the Absolute. An absolute destruction is not coming yet unless they drop another atomic bomb, but even if they just bomb a nuclear power station, you think about this bombing in terms of the Absolute, considering the number of square meters that have already being irrevocably contaminated. The contamination is irrevocable and that also belongs to the Absolute; it is part and parcel of it. But for this *irrevocable* contamination, the Absolute would not be absolute. Yes, this contamination which might appear even more absolute than the Absolute Itself makes a major contribution to the riches of the Whole. Some painters proceed in the same manner. They finish a painting and then say to themselves, ‘It’s not really finished.’

‘Why do you think it is not?’ ask their friends.

‘Have you forgotten destruction?’ asks the author and his voice, its intonation reminds everyone of the famous reproach: Are you forgetting your manners? You may even go so far as to declare that the above question is tantamount to, ‘Your table manners are appalling – don’t you know how to use a knife and fork?’ Be that as it may, the painter destroys a part of his painting and signs it, being satisfied with his indubitable achievement. But the friends continue to hound him: ‘Why didn’t you put an end to the *entire* masterpiece of yours? Do you think the nuclear war is avoidable?’ And the painter answers thus, ‘It’s considered good manners in some societies to leave a little food on your plate. And I’m a member of such a society.’

In the Absolute all content is blended with existence, meaning that whatever you mention in your thoughts, whatever tickles your fantasy appears in front of you, within reach. Actually, you are likely to get disappointed rather quickly because you realise that in the Absolute there is no such thing as ‘out of reach’. Consequently everyone can lay his or her hands on what – you are quite sure of that – belongs to you. You have every right to own your own phantasms, otherwise they would not be called your *own* phantasms. You begin to dislike the Absolute which is more democratic than American presidents. Your thoughts are succeeded by perception. But others also perceive something and, as it happens, their perceptions are identical to yours. At the best of times, everyone think in terms of villas, yachts, sports cars and so on. The point is, all these luxury goods are different in every case, in every head. Some prefer a Rolls Royce to a Ferrari; others buy French castles, instead of setting in Italy, near Florence or in Venice. When the world is at war, we hear, see and experience the same bombs, the same atoms and the same poisons.

Let us return to the poem I included in this essay. It would be more logical to say it forced its way through a multitude of other potential ingredients. The protagonist – we might even say a hero: after all he is a soldier we can see in action – asks his wife, mistress or dearest friend to wake the bugler up and order him to divert the fatal grenade, its murderous impact. In the Absolute you have a mistress or a friend or both, and their hands – like those of a professional goalkeeper – deflect grenades from the goal. There are grenades everywhere, but the number of hands is in no way inferior to that of the grenades I am talking about. Anyway, within the Absolute – and there is nothing outside it – you cannot out-Herod Herod. You can just Herod.

In the first place change must be relative to a permanent. Doubtless here was a contradiction which we found was not soluble. But, for all that, the fact remains that change demands some permanence within which succession happens. I do not say that this demand is consistent, and, on the contrary, I wish to emphasise the point that it is not so. It is inconsistent, and yet it is none the less essential. And I urge that therefore change desires to pass beyond simple change. It seeks to become a change which is somehow consistent with permanence. Thus, in asserting itself, time tries to commit suicide as itself, to transcend its own character and to be taken up in what is higher.

So let us sum up the narrative that leads us to a multitude of grenades and the air letting them through, as if unable to stop this nonsense once and for all. Of course nowadays no fog can interfere with the destructive momentum of our wars because our radars pierce not only any fog, but also Bog, God in Russian. We often complain about God's indifference, about his inability to stop a slaughter, to emulate the heroine of the above-quoted poem who deflects grenades and saves her lover's life not only once, but twice or thrice. Why not install a multiplication table at the foot of this gigantic image where the war goes on and on without being successful enough to erase anything that is wrong, as they say? (As our teachers used to say at school.) What is wrong, may one ask? I wonder if one still can find such a one – an individual who wonders what is wrong with our contemporary life. The simplest answer is obvious: everything is wrong and so everything should be erased. Of course this aim is known to everyone and some of these everys and onces do their best to achieve the goal implanted in their minds. But the hands continue to sprout from the earth, coming to the fore on a regular basis, and these hands protect the Earth and its inhabitants from grenades, bombs, drones, rockets, missiles and warships. You begin to amputate the hands in question, but the more you succeed in this amputation-process, the greater the number of hands springing into the air, dropping on the Earth.

A change is probably needed, otherwise we may spend our lives doing nothing with the exception of the exercise which is sure to remind our sportsmen and sportswomen of basketball or volleyball. But we should not forget that in the course of these endless games some heads get separated from necks and shoulders, and these heads roll on the grass, in ravines and round meadows. Many years later – time is not wholly suppressed, not yet – an old man said to his granddaughter, 'You know, there was a path through the meadow to the village. And along this path a number of heads kept on rolling, as if nothing had happened.'

'But what could have happened?' asked the granddaughter.

'The Big Change.'

'What is it?' asked the granddaughter.

'Grenades, hands and rolling heads. That's what we had to put up with in our world. We were badly in need of help.'

'Whose help?'

'The Almighty's. We prayed to Him day and night, asking him to replace the rolling heads.'

'Did He comply with your wish?' asked the granddaughter.

'He did. He sent us a number of rolling stones.'

Doubtless we have some permanence, but this permanence is intolerable, and everybody is on the point of realising the truth. Then some individuals quit this point, cross a logical, a material frontier and proclaim: 'As

1990 dawned, few people could have predicted the dramatic changes that were to take place in eastern Europe during that year. But we did predict it. And now we predict yet another series of changes.' As 2022 dawned... Well, we cannot go any further without consulting Bradley on the subject: we do not have enough information to carry on in our sweet way unaided. So we pick up the same book, *Appearance and Reality*, and read on and on, 'And we may draw this same conclusion from another inconsistency.' There are only inconsistencies around, and you wonder what kind of conclusion you can draw from an inconsistency; apart from an inconsistent conclusion. As you know, little headway has been made so far in the negotiations with Fate (or *Fatum*). Why, may you ask? Because Fate is consistent and merciless, whereas inconsistent conclusions, for all their mercifulness seem to impart to you the following diagnosis: we are inconsistent, therefore nothing is settled yet. To tell the truth we are powerless in the presence of Fate's unshakeable, unwavering solidity.

'The relation of the present to the future and to the past shows once more time's attempt to transcend its own nature. Any lapse, that for any purpose you take as one period, becomes forthwith a present.' The nature of time is its faithfulness to the moment we are living through, and everybody knows that this faithfulness can turn into an obsession, into a sort time-paralysis. (Faust is one of the best exponents of this thesis.) But we put our feet on a Bergsonian path and duration takes over, making us think of the past or of the future, to the detriment of the moment where our body continues to find itself. In the Breadlian terms, time commits suicide, but this suicide reminds me of a few suicidal attempts I have witnessed ever since I learnt the melancholy truth: a human being can put an end to his life for some obscure reason, for some transparent reason or for no reason at all. Suppose you confide to you closest friend that you intend to jump into the void from your balcony situated on the 20th floor of some building or other. And this friend of yours is all right until he starts sermonizing; and then he grows unbearable. Of course he tells you that you do not own your life because it belongs to your parents and also to God who seems to endure your presence in this universe. And if God endures your presence, you could endure it too, to say the least. Your friend repeats 'to say the least' three times, and you are tempted to cut him short, declaring, 'Least said soonest mended.' But what could be mended, in this case? Do you mean to say that, as soon as your friend vanishes beyond the nearest corner you kick the bucket? You would not repaint your balcony, before stepping into the void, would you? Or should you mend two holes in your shirt? After all, the Almighty is not keen on untidiness. Anyway, before you show your friend out, you will say to him, 'I'll just allow time to commit suicide. That's what my act amounts to.'

In the poem under scrutiny the lapse of time where we suspended our disbelief features a grenade and a bugler. Let us see what happens next. Here is another lapse of time, another eternity:

But if I suddenly some day
 Don't manage to protect myself,
 When the terrestrial globe is jolted,
 Whatever that new battle be,
 I'll always fall in the same war,
 The distant one, the Civil one,
 And commissars in dusty helmets
 Will bend in silence over me.

The continuation is equivocal for more than one reason, one thought, one remembrance because either you survive or not; either you see the grenade that is about to kill you or you just hear a noise vaguely associated – in your professional mind – with the flight of a grenade. Needless to say you prefer birds and even innocuous planes, the ones you used to fabricate in your adolescence when you were so keen on construction sets, on whatever could make you feel at the top of the world. Oddly enough, at that age a Beethoven sonata would not elevate you to the top of the world; and yet it is the easiest way to get up there. So you play this sonata, instead of trying to protect your body from grenades and other nuisances that spawn in the air and on the earth. The new economic freedom has spawned hundreds of new small businesses. That is what you might read in the newspapers and elsewhere, on all the Internets of the world. But you still stick to your gun and that might be your eternal truth, considering your attachment to eternity, to the Absolute. What is eternity without your guitar on which you strum whenever in a suitable mood or even when you are out of everything? The warm, safe cocoon of childhood. The warm, safe cocoon of adolescence, of adulthood. And if the cocoon you long for is not warm enough, you put it near a radiator and leave it there until it becomes as warm as your hopes and heart.

But if I suddenly some day / Don't manage to protect myself

This can happen only if you leave all your cocoons, all your wives and mistresses and even the bugler who is supposed to follow in your footsteps, wherever you go. Well, you go astray, from time to time, and then you hear the bugle of your bugler or any other bugler, and you recover yourself and the right path leading to a bliss, to one of them you can find amidst the constellations. What strikes one upon reading the text is the *same war*, as if there were nothing else in the world. And you should decide, once and for all, if you stay or go, if you press the same moment to your heart or let everything go, fly, vanish into thin air. But what happens if you let the thin air vanish into the thinnest air?

The terrestrial globe is jolted. That is what happens during this war in Ukraine and you cannot welcome these jolting as a sort of massage you need for your old, outdated muscles. Whatever that new battle be,

I'll always fall in the same war,

This is an ominous verse related to what we recently said about appearance and reality, about eternity and time. You'll always fall in the same war. Even if you are protected on every side, by God. By God and your mistress, your wife and your offspring. You are stuck within the same war like a character you are sure to find in the Bible if you take the trouble to find the book and read it, consulting the illustrations. There is a man – a king of sorts, if I remember rightly – who is hanging on a branch, being stuck in his personal void or eternity or whatever. (Being stuck in whatever is exquisite, delicious and could be recommended to all lovers of sticks or whatever.)

If I remember rightly, we pick up a lapse of time and it becomes our paradigm. You chance upon the following sentence, when perusing the morning papers, 'Some of these educators are hoping to produce a change in the current cultural paradigm.' Well, they should recite the above poem and say, 'You think you're seating in this hall, doing nothing, for you seldom do anything, you, lazybones. You lazytissues, lazytendons, lazylivers. Don't forget there's a grenade flying in your direction, determined as it is to strike your face and the rest of your Aristotelian substance. The same war, the same war. Once again we are in the presence of the eternal recurrence which is my leitmotif. My Tristan, if you wish; or my Wotan.

I'll always fall in the same war,
The distant one, the Civil one,

You talk to us about a poet who strums on his guitar now and then, producing a few sounds. This poet says or rather sings, 'I'll always fall in the same war.' All right, the war is over, the one you are singing about. They find you in the middle of a forest, in the midst of dragons, and you repeat, 'The war isn't over, the war isn't over.' And you fire your gun into the air; or you fire your gun into the crowd. Without warning he started firing into the crowd, they say and write. That is how war starts, goes on, goes off, goes away.

And commissars in dusty helmets
Will bend in silence over me.

Who are these commissars? Doesn't matter. There are people who make themselves comfortable over your corpse. You put some quantity of your dust and ashes on their helmets and the image is completed. You can put it in a poem and even in a painting, a picture, a film. But will you always put up with commissars and their helmets? Don't you wish to avail yourself of solitude in this eternity of sorts? Don't bend over me! Don't bend over me! This is an order!

From the above text you select, as usual, silence which is related not only to music, but to everything. You just bend over in silence, bend over in silence, bend over in silence, bend over.

MICHAIL GORBACHEV

We do not always think in terms of Paradise and Hell, saying during our evening strolls along our familiar streets, 'This is a hell on Earth,' or 'this is an earthly paradise, although I don't seem to have met St Peter at the gate.' Oddly enough, the poet who dedicated a generous portion of his time to suburbs, Philip Larkin, speaks about this problem rather convincingly in one of his essays, 'It was that verse about becoming again as a child that caused the first sharp waning of my Christian sympathies. If the Kingdom of Heaven could be entered only by those fulfilling such a condition I knew I should be unhappy there. It was not the prospect of being deprived of money, keys, wallet, letters, books, long-playing records, drinks, the opposite sex, and other solaces of adulthood that upset me (I should have been about eleven), but having to put up indefinitely with the company of other children, their noise, their nastiness, their boasting, their back-answers, their cruelty, their silliness.'

Of course one might recall the predicament in which the Russian tsar, Boris Godunov, got involved after killing or not killing the rightful successor to the throne. In the light of what Philip Larkin exposes in his essay, we are supposed to come to the following conclusion, 'It's better to spend one's eternity in Hell – where you meet only old criminals – than in Paradise.' Boris kills his rival, sees him on a regular basis – not him, his ghost, his bloody, bloody, bloody ghost – and one wonders whether the whole affair is really related to the throne, to its successors, to history, to Russia and many other things lying outside both Heaven and Hell. Nothing whatever lies outside these domains, but one thing is certain: 'Boris Godunov was instrumental in bringing about the disappearance of the so-called tsarevich only because he had no wish to spend his afterlife in the presence of children and their purity.'

Let us be short and sweet about it. (Or short and bitter or whatever.) Gorbachev died a few days ago. I watched a few documentaries about his death, about his birth. Pierre Richard and Gerard Depardieu paid him a visit. (It is pointless to add it happened one day or even in days of yore. Where is this yore, I wonder?) Gorbachev was answering a question proposed by his school-teacher. He was brilliant and his brio shined everywhere – even outside the schoolroom. He ended his speech and sat down. The point is his chair was no longer there: it had been withdrawn by other children; those who are supposed to live in Paradise. He collapsed and everything was forgotten, ridiculed: you can be mocked because you keep falling off your bike. And Gorbachev was mocked because he had fallen off his future pedestal.

THOMAS DE QUINCEY

You can write about Emanuel Kant, even if you have no idea what he was writing about. You know, however, that he was a man so that there were first days and last days in his life; and the latter were certainly swarming, teeming with pains of all kinds. There lies a pain and destiny is itching to apply it to a human body: planting pains is our destiny's irreplaceable, incurable vocation. One wonders if destiny chooses between its victims, handpick them; or just deal with human mess higgledy-piggledy as if there were no Kants in the midst of this mass of bodies; neither Kant's brain nor hands which, day after day, immortalised the fruit of his meditation. Probably destiny took into consideration the regularity of Kant's walks: everybody knows how he walked and where he strolled; and when, when, when. And what about his childhood? Did he also walk in the same manner at the age when he slept in his cradle and not in real bed? (I am not sure his bed had a canopy.) Did he get rid of his urine on a regular basis, his watch slightly trembling in his hand, his chamber pot minutely vibrating under the weight of his body? When did destiny realise it was nursing a great man?

Last month I re-read De Quincey's *Last Days of Kant* and underlined as usual a few passages – not to get lost every time I open the book; not to read it through on every occasion. So let us proceed in a chronological order, although I do not start from the cradle, from his birth as if his childhood were truncated, insignificant, almost non-existent. 'Up to this period it had been his custom to dine at a *table d'hôte*. But he now began to keep house himself; and every day invited a few friends to dine with him, so as to fix the party (himself included) at three for the lower extreme, and at nine for the upper, and upon any little festival from five to eight. He was in fact, a punctual observer of Lord Chesterfield's rule – that his dinner party, himself included, should not fall below the number of the Graces, nor exceed that of the Muses.' For the life of me I cannot see why either the Graces or the Muses should participate in the elaboration of our meals and their structures. I, for one, do not think that the Muses pay visits to poets in accordance with the number of guests they (the poets) entertain. Unless these guests are poets in their own right and consequently recite their verses throughout the festivities, thereby feeding the host's imagination. In this case, the guests I am commenting upon are muses in disguises, not just drunkards.

The routine, which under no circumstances either varied or relaxed, was this: no sooner was dinner ready, than Lampe, the professor's old footman, stepped into the study with a certain measured air, and announced it. This summons was obeyed at a pace of double-quick time – Kant talking all the way to the eating-room about the state of the weather, a subject which he usually pursued during the earlier part of the dinner. Graver themes, such as the political events of the day, were never introduced before dinner, or at all in his study. The moment that Kant had taken his seat, and unfolded his napkin, he opened the business of the hour with a particular formula – '*Now, then, gentlemen!*' The words are nothing; but the tone and air with which he uttered them proclaimed, in a way that nobody could mistake, relaxation from the toils of the morning, and determinate abandonment of himself to social enjoyment.

I wake up rather early, at four in the morning, and after welcoming a few unassuming thoughts, begin to rise from my bed, which might take quarter of an hour. Many great or medium men devote next hour to spending time in their private gyms or swimming pools. I have neither and so my computer keeps me

company not under water but on the dinner table where I also find a few cups of tea with milk. Sometimes I just heat up a modest quantity of a tea brewed on the day before: I am as unassuming as my morning thoughts. Sometimes I treat myself to a newly-brewed (or newly-bred) cups of a different tea. I never drink the same tea twice, contrary to Wittgenstein's eating and drinking habits: he always ate and drank the same things. Is it here, in this custom of his that one should look for the source of his two radically different periods of thoughts? You cannot be diverse everywhere.

Then I write for an hour or so and go for a stroll, my headphones reciting for my sake a few literary masterpieces. I also devote a huge quantity of time to philosophy and science; in the course of my walks.

The whole entertainment was seasoned with the overflow of his enlightened mind, poured out naturally and unaffectedly upon every topic, as the chances of conversation suggested it; and the time flew rapidly away, from one o'clock to four, five or even later, profitably and delightfully. Kant tolerated no lulls, which was the name he gave to the momentary pauses in conversation, when its animation languished. Some means or other he always devised for rekindling its tone of interest; and in this he was much assisted by the tact with which he drew from every guest his peculiar tastes, or the particular direction of his pursuits; and on these, be they what they might, he was never unprepared to speak with knowledge, and with the interest of an original observer.

This an amazing excerpt. Not only did the great philosopher waste his time in the company of those who were far inferior to him in every respect – with the exception of his physique which must have been on the puny side – but they were also supplied with a list of books that they were expected to read. So what happened corresponds much more to what teachers do with their pupils. They teach them a discipline and devote their future lessons to the discussions of the topics handed out on earlier occasions. But why did he do that? Was he fond of universities to the point of never leaving their halls and other spaces? No wonder that his great books were written relatively late, at the time when he began to relinquish the pleasure of teaching everything to everybody. He must have said to himself, 'Everybody might do whatever he or she likes. They have their heads and I have mine. And they'll never have my head, even if I chop my head off and install it on their shoulders.'

On many occasions, the great philosopher displayed however a lot of empathy – as we all do to some extent. If someone falls ill in the proximity to our mortal body, we think of ourselves, of our being liable to the same vicissitudes of life. If someone says, 'My God! My doctor said I shouldn't drink wine for seven months at least, otherwise I'm likely to come down with the cirrhosis of the liver,' we think about our consumption of alcohol and even touch our liver to find out if it is not too oversize. And even if someone says quite innocently, with no ulterior motive, 'My daughter loves to wear oversize clothes,' we start viewing the world in terms of our liver.

And this leads me to mention a singular feature in Kant's way of expressing his sympathy with his friends in sickness. So long as the danger was imminent, he testified a restless anxiety, made perpetual inquiries, waited with impatience for the crisis, and sometimes could not pursue his customary labours from agitation of mind. But no sooner was the patient's death announced than he recovered his composure, and

assumed an air of stern tranquillity – almost of indifference. The reason was, that he viewed life in general, and therefore that particular affection of life which we call sickness, as a state of oscillation and perpetual change, between which and the fluctuating sympathies of hope and fear, there was a natural proportion that justified them to the reason; whereas death as a permanent state that admitted of no more and no less, that terminated all anxiety, and for ever extinguished the agitations of suspense – he regarded as not adapted to any state of feeling, but one of the same enduring and unchanging character.

What is *not* justified to the reason, in my opinion, is the agitation of mind which is quite inadmissible in the context of a great alchemical work: true philosophers regard their labours as those almost identical to alchemists' fervours and fevers. Kant was no doctor and consequently could in no way take care of the sick, however great their interest in philosophy might have been. You are a doctor and your mind is agitated on account of one of your patients whose pilgrim's progress towards death is unquestionable, restless and reckless. You consult both your books and intuition, but find no remedy for the illness from which your patient has been suffering for more than two years. And frankly speaking, regretfully, your reason has been agitated throughout this stretch of time. (A stretch of your mind has been constantly quivering, throbbing with anguish.) You have been trying to console yourself by the thought that an agitated mind is more apt to find a solution to the problem under scrutiny: its agitation makes it scour the area, the woods and the entire countryside; in search of the above-mentioned solution; whereas a tranquil mind remains on its sofa. But try as you may – even if you do not happen to be a doctor – you will scour town, cities and countries in vain: you will not find anything suitable for a dying person.

Kant's empathy can be viewed from a different angle. A dead person is no more, like many others, and you cannot cry during your visits to cemeteries that you do visit from time to time, if only to bury the dead. Besides, you are not likely to learn anything from a corpse, whereas a living creature, even if this creature stands or rather lies on the threshold of death, may warn you that there is a degree of danger involved in this or that; in a cup of coffee, for instance. A dying patient drinks a cup of coffee and dies three hours later. And you write in your notebook, 'Nothing in the world would make me drink coffee on my deathbed.' I do not think Kant needed a praise habitually expressed by those who surround a dying individual and, upon seeing his or her relative come into the room, burst into tears rather boisterously. 'It breaks my heart to see him so unhappy, to feel his bountiful, merciful, Jesus-like heart.' That is how this praise usually sounds. But Kant probably sought to be in unison with death – for reasons better known to himself. He was attuned to death anyway, taking into consideration the care he took of practical reason. And the practical side of the problem drew him on and on – towards deathbeds of all kinds. But what the use of meandering about cemeteries? Unless you violate a tomb...

To return, however, to the course of his day, immediately after the termination of his dinner party, Kant walked out for exercise; but on this occasion he never took any companion; partly, perhaps, because he thought it right, after so much convivial and colloquial relaxation, to pursue his meditation, and partly (as I happen to know) for this very peculiar reason – that he wished to breathe exclusively through his nostrils, which he could not do, if he were obliged continually to open his mouth in conversation. His reason for this wish was, that the atmospheric air, being thus carried round by a longer circuit, and reaching the lungs, therefore, in a state of less rawness, and at a temperature somewhat higher, would be less apt to irritate them.

I admit that this explication works as a pretext you can voice in the presence of an individual who pesters you day in day out. But in a serious book devoted to the last days of a great thinker it is out of place, for the simple reason that simpletons should be got rid in another way, even if, as a result of your frankness, you may lose their moral support for years, if not forever. You should say to them, to all those busybodies, intruders and gatecrashers, ‘Dear Sir, I thank you from the bottom of my heart for your visit. And the speech you made on my pure and practical reasons is remarkable in many respects that, unfortunately, I have no time and no wish to adumbrate. I’m awfully sorry to leave you at this point – I’m otherwise engaged this afternoon. As for my customary walk about which the whole world or rather the entire planet has talked for three centuries at least – the talk of the universe, so to speak – I have to breath in the way highly recommended by yogi and their disciples. And you can’t walk and talk at the same time. As the Russians put it, “Whenever I eat, I’m dumb and mute.” Incidentally, I’d better pay heed to this piece of advice – I speak too much during my dinner parties.’

Actually, Kant’s argument does not hold water, for the simple reason (this reason is much simpler than Kant’s reasons) that you can answer questions by means of gestures and cityscapes; or landscapes. For instance, your companion asks you, ‘Are you sure your pure reason is really pure?’ By way of an answer, you just nod your head. And if this companion of yours – let us call him ‘heckler’, for argument’s sake – continues to harass you by asking, for instance, ‘Could you please tell me how pure your reason is?’ you will show him a lump of snow. ‘As pure as the driven snow. I understand, I understand.’

A quarter of an hour before retiring for the night, he withdrew his mind as much as possible from every class of thoughts which demanded any exertion or energy of attention, on the principle, that by stimulating and exciting him too much, such thoughts would be apt to cause wakefulness; and the slightest interference with his customary hour of falling asleep was in the highest degree unpleasant to him. Happily, this was with him a very rare occurrence.

I know it is not advisable to have a bout of literary ecstasy – either active or passive – right before turning in, especially if, to satisfy it fully, you resort to your computer and its vibes. On the other hand, if you concentrate on your lovers or merely on erotic images, it may assist you during your passage from reality to dreams and healthy nocturnal restoration. As for philosophers, they should abstain from any contact with their metaphysics or empiricism around 7 p.m. otherwise both Morpheus and sweet dreams will shun their company during the forthcoming night. As for Kant’s association with his ideas, doctrines and their omnipresence, let us analyse the following text:

The concept of an objective principle, in so far as it is compulsory for a will, is called a command of reason and the formulation of such a command is called an IMPERATIVE.

All imperatives are expressed by the word ought (of shall) and they indicate thereby the relation of an objective law of reason to a will, which, because of its subjective constitution, is not necessarily determined by this compulsion.

We do not need to visualise Kant in his nightshirt, wandering about his room in search of peace required by any sleep, however shallow and short. Where can this peace be found in the realm presided or rather ruled by the concept of an objective principle? If a kingdom is ruled by the objective principle you just look at the king or the emperor, bow and say, 'Your Majesty, I hope you've spend a wonderful, sweet and fruitful night.' But what are you supposed to do with a mere concept, if it is applied to an objective principle? The principle is objective – there is no doubt about it, but you are also dealing with a concept which may be either objective or subjective. You have your concepts and Peter has his, partly based on the concert he attended last night. He worships music and often says to you, 'Philosophers are too much involved in what I call "an abstract space". And you're quite aware of the fact that I'm no fan of abstract paintings. Abstractedness as such appals me, especially when it gets mixed with something crystal clear and obvious, idealistic and ethic. Let us ponder over a few examples. I never gamble, as a matter of principle. But if a concept – any concept, mind you – did its best to prevent me from gambling, I wouldn't give a tinker's Cuss about it. I never ask to borrow money, on principle. And the two principles I'm talking about are quite similar: they belong to the category going by the name of honesty. And I can't deceive anyone – it's against *all* my principles. But concepts are strewn all over my library and I don't always see them.'

But there are so-called 'compulsory objective principles' and Kant, as he continues to walk around his study, asks himself if they are also called 'a command of reason'. He knows perfectly well where his reason is located and he asks this reason of his if it has just sent any message to his will, and the reason answers thus, 'You'd better put this question to your will.' The problem is Kant has no idea where his will is situated: it is everywhere, according to Schopenhauer, whereas Kant's reason is within the latter's head. Kant applies his hands to his head and finds his reason at once, being quite used to this search. Well, the best thing to do is to enjoin his and universal will to be understandable and not to put too many spokes in philosophical wheels. 'Let us call such a command IMPERATIVE, if you don't mind,' says Kant. 'I still have to sort out how much an objective law of reason is related to a will. Are they brothers or not? Or sisters? Or distant relatives? And there are only two minutes left before I dive into sleep.'

The infirmities of age now began to steal upon Kant, and betrayed themselves in more shapes than one. Connected with Kant's prodigious memory for all things having any intellectual bearings, he had from youth laboured under an unusual weakness of this faculty in relation to the common affairs of daily life. Some remarkable instances of this are on record from the period of his childish days; and now, when his second childhood was commencing, this infirmity increased upon him very sensibly. One of the first signs was, that he began to repeat the same stories more than once on the same day. Indeed, the decay of his memory was too palpable to escape his own notice; and in order to provide against it, and to secure himself from all apprehension of inflicting tedium upon his guests, he began to write a syllabus, or list of themes, for each day's conversation, on cards, or the covers of letters, or any chance scrap of paper. But these memoranda accumulated so fast upon him, and were so easily lost, or not forthcoming at the proper moment, that I prevailed on him to substitute a blank-paper book, which still remains, and exhibits some affecting memorials of his own conscious weakness.

The infirmities of age steal upon all of us, but very few people have notebooks where they note their stories, requests and orders from which their relatives and servants are not to deviate under any pretext. I receive very few people – none, I am tempted to say; so that I have no problems with my stories, which is all the more logical since I seldom tell stories either over the phone or during meals. And I never talk of conceptions so as not to lose access to my sleep altogether. Usually, I drink a bottle of wine and take a sleeping pill, but for several days I have been swallowing antibiotics and consequently I parted ways with alcohol on the day when the whole ritual started, to my utmost displeasure: I like wine and dislike intensely any contact with antibiotics (and other medicine, to tell the truth). Kant might have liked wine to some degree – he disliked beer, especially the dark variety of it – but antibiotics or no antibiotics, he would take his notes and tell his stories with the same gusto; as if he had still been a young man, a student at Königsberg. From time to time, he would call his servant and ask, ‘What day is it today?’ And after receiving an answer he would put his hand in his pocket and draw a notebook out of it. Obediently, the right story would appear before his very eyes. But to make assurance doubly sure, he would ask his guests: ‘Dear guest, have I already told you this story?’

‘What story?’ asked the guest.

‘The one which begins with the letter “O”.

‘No,’ answered the guest. ‘You’ve already told us the story with the letter “T” and letter “B” and letter “M”, but we’re still in the dark about the story beginning with the letter “O”.’

And Kant begins his story: ‘Olga Philamonovna – it’s a Russian story, you know.’

There are people who, in spite of their age and incapacities (some of them are total) still do not relinquish the use of phones as if they were afraid of losing touch with reality. And yet we know that reality has nothing in common with phones, emails and suchlike. They wrap their Smartphone in a sheet of paper on which their relatives wrote the following instruction, ‘Hello! Thank you, bye-bye. Good luck.’ They are not supposed to go beyond these words, these best wishes because nothing else counts in our life. And anyway they are incapable of giving their helping hands to anyone, even if their hands are still in good running order. For instance, they are able to press a few buttons and even drink a cup of coffee without splashing it on rugs and tablecloths.

But they should not go too far in this direction. (The direction of helping hands, it is called.) For instance, if they decide to help a woman to her feet, they invariably collapse at this lady’s feet, and she takes it as a compliment, as homage to her beauty. But habitually they say, ‘If you want another drink, just help yourself,’ instead of fiddling with bottles and carrying them to and fro.

Another sign of his mental decay was the weakness with which he now began to theorise. He accounted for everything by electricity. A singular mortality at this time prevailed amongst the cats of Vienna, Basle, Copenhagen, and other places widely remote. Cats being so eminently an electric animal, of course he attributed this epizootic to electricity. During the same period he persuaded himself that a peculiar configuration of clouds prevailed; this he took as a collateral proof of his electrical hypothesis. His own headaches, too, which in all probability were a mere remote effect of old age, and a direct one of an inability to think as easily and as severely as formerly, he explained upon the same principles.

I used to have a friend whose propensity for bad moods and sheer peevishness was always attributed to atmospheric conditions; to winds and rains, among other things. He would say, ‘This wind isn’t propitious for

great achievements, and if you're incapable of exploits, you should stay in your bed. It's not worth your while scattering trifles and stupidity over the world.' I have always disdained this kind of excuses, self-vindications and justifications of inertia. And if your mind guides you towards cats, you should prepare your hands for a series of caresses, instead of blaming upon these innocent, wonderful creatures your headaches, rheumatism, arthritis and incapacity to create a masterpiece. But today – I must confess this minor, hopefully curable sin – I often consult my sight and also weather forecasts to account for the fragility of my bones and tendons, for the passivity of my fantasy and utter lack of ideas, either brand-new or as old-as-the-hills. I just look at the nearest wall and say, 'This stupor has nothing to do with cats. They're innocent, beautiful and messianic.'

Hitherto, as I have already mentioned, he went to bed at ten, and rose a little before five. The latter practice he still observed, but not the other. In 1802 he retired as early as nine, and afterwards still earlier. He found himself so much refreshed by this addition to his rest, that at first, he was disposed to utter 'eureka', as over some great discovery in the art of restoring exhausted nature; but afterwards, on pushing it still farther, he did not find the success answer his expectations.

You continue this practice, this ritual of sorts and the word 'eureka' resounds in your house more often than not, sometimes to the detriment of others words, other resonances. Now you go bed at 6 p.m. and, unwilling to acknowledge your defeat in your war with death, weakness and forthcoming idiocy, you say to yourself and to some of your relatives, 'From now on I'll go to bed at 5 p.m. And I'm sure it'll work for me and that's all that counts. Will other representatives of our species become as immortal as my body? If they resort to my method?' Well, your body seems to withdraw from the battlefield, leaving death and destruction and moral, physical witness invade every corner of your being or rather non-being. (At least now it is more or less a third-being.) And you realise it at last and calmly evaluate the result of your Darwinian quest; on your deathbed.

Of course, if you are really pigheaded, you can go on and on, turning in before lunch, before breakfast and even before midnight, removing a day and a night from your calendar. Then you rewrite all calendars and find yourself in your mother's womb before Julius Caesar's birth.

His walks he now limited to a few turns in the king's gardens, which were at no great distance from his own house. In order to walk more firmly, he adopted a peculiar method of stepping: he carried his foot to the ground, not forward, and obliquely, but perpendicularly, and with a kind of stamp, so as to secure a larger basis, by setting down the entire sole at once. Notwithstanding this precaution, upon one occasion he fell in the street. He was quite unable to raise himself; and two young ladies, who saw the accident, ran to his assistance. With his usual graciousness of manner he thanked them fervently for their assistance, and presented one of them with a rose which he happened to have in his hand.

De Quincey who was Kant's intimate friend suggested he should keep him company during these perilous walks. Quite understandably Kant inquired, 'What would be the purpose of this duo? Do you wish to discuss with me the categorical imperative?'

'No,' said De Quincey quite innocently.

'Or do you yarn to elucidate the mystery of the thing in itself?'

‘No. I’d like to make sure you meet with no danger in the course of these outings.’

‘What kind of danger? A fall, an injury, a fatal encounter with a wolf? We’re not in Russia, are we?’ And Kant laughed benevolently, with all the gaiety he was capable of.

And De Quincey went into details and enlightened his friend on the method he intended to rely upon in the course of these friendly, *anti-solitary* walks, as he put it. ‘You are determined to carry your foot to the ground perpendicularly, but from where your eyes are situated, you can’t see clearly in what way, in what position your foot is about to reach the ground. I’ll kneel down, advance a little bit on all fours, and when you’ll take the trouble to initiate your manoeuvre, I’ll watch your foot closely to make sure it adopts a suitable trajectory – the most suitable trajectory for the manoeuvre you have in mind. If need be, I’ll correct this trajectory by pushing your foot or rather by moving it ever so slightly, and it’ll reach the ground safely, ensuring the stability and solidity of your walk. Besides, my help will allow you to avoid stamping your feet all the time. Your feet aren’t freezing, are they? Nor are you a little boy who refuses to take his medicine.’

Needless to say, the philosopher declined the offer and his refusal resulted in the above-mentioned fall which demands a comment. And this comment may appear inappropriate, considering that I am about to speak about myself, about my own falls. I have fallen many times in my lifetime, and I am not willing to attribute all these falls to my senile dementia: I suffered from many injuries in my adolescence and also in my youth. But my last spectacular fall is a memorable event because a few Russians rushed to my assistance. Such a participation in one’s grief does not happen often in Russia. Of course the Russians are prepared to shed a few tears upon learning that one of their friends has just passed away, but if the same friend collapses before their very eyes, I am not sure they will take part in the incident. I am not sure, I am not sure. They *might* help you regain your foothold in this world, for all I know. You never know with the Russians.

As for the two ladies described by De Quincey, I am not sure – you cannot be sure with Kant – that the philosopher acted graciously on the occasion. The writer says that his hero thanked both ladies ‘fervently for their assistance, and presented one of them with a rose which he happened to have in his hand’. What about the other lady? Why didn’t he split the flower right down in the middle?

All labours, even that of reading, were now performed slowly and with manifest effort; and those which cost him any considerable bodily exertion became very exhausting. His feet refused to do their office more and more; he fell continually, both when moving across the room, and even when standing still; yet he seldom suffered from these falls; and he constantly laughed at them, maintaining that it was impossible he could hurt himself, from the extreme lightness of his person, which was indeed by this time the merest shadow of a man. Very often, especially in the morning, he dropped asleep in his chair from pure weariness and exhaustion; on these occasions he was apt to fall upon the floor, from which he was unable to raise himself up, until accident brought one of his servants or his friends into the room. Afterwards these falls were prevented by substituting a chair with circular supports, that met and clasped in front

If you are almost as old as Kant, you are likely to compare whatever you do with Kant’s deficiency in the field which is common to all of us: physical health, weakness and death. I have almost reached Kant’s step on the ladder of life, but I do not yet fall after standing still for half an hour. I could carry out a lot of experiments to test my body’s capacity not to die from sheer exhaustion, on the even place, as the Russians put it. You stand for an

hour, for two hours and then you fall, especially if you continue to stand still without allowing yourself any assistance which could come from an object such as a chair or an armchair, the latter being even more reliable: if you do collapse around midnight, you will feel far more comfortable in an armchairs' open arms unless you resort to an authentic 18th century armchair.

I speak rather often about my legs' numerous failures so that I shall not waste my time on this aspect of my life at this point of my narrative devoted to Kant's malfunctions; in the domain of physical life where no concepts will ever put you back on your feet in no time at all. Yes, I do admit that my feet, my legs and even a part of my belly refuse to do their office, at least partly, magnanimously: I have not yet been crushed to death, *Gott sei dank*. I know what Soviet newspapers could have printed on their pages after Stalin's immortal, immoral funeral: 'Tragedy struck when several people were crushed to death in the crowd.' Of course they did not say a word about this tragedy, although around three thousand people died in the course of this massacre which went on for two days at least. You can be crushed to death, even if there are no individuals, no human beings around; if there is no crowd to speak of. You are crushed to death because you are a living creature and belong to human race. What is more, you can read and you know several languages, which enables you to gauge the depth of what is usually defined as human stupidity. You are literally, physically crushed to death by this stupidity, if you do not content yourself with a brief foray into human activities, words, deeds and other mechanisms of our earthly existence. (Hopefully we act differently on other planets.)

Well, I cannot deny that I suffer from my body's inability to cope with the physical texture of life. I can still successfully cope with literary and musical textures which I enjoy to the utmost, if they are intricate and elegant enough. And I think they count much more than conceptualisms; even Kant's concepts are less important, in my opinion, than a fine literary texture you can find in De Quincey's works. The point is I do not laugh, whenever I fall: sometimes I am physically incapable of laughing. But whenever my speech, its mechanism and structure are not impaired, I do laugh, however; and yet I am sure, from what I gather when reading De Quincey's essay, that Kant laughed more sincerely. My laughter is not entirely sincere: I cannot laugh outrageously, disrespectfully in the presence of death. Besides, I am not as light as Kant was throughout his life, and my heaviness is no guarantee of my safety, to put it jokingly; and yet this is no joking matter. Actually I wonder if there are joking matters in the domain or in the kingdom of life. You pick up what looks like a joking matter and die of cirrhosis or of multiple sclerosis.

I never drop asleep in my armchair; I wish I could. There is nothing wrong with this posture, with this variety of sleep and sweet or bitter dreams. In my opinion, it is far better to have a series, an infinite series of nightmares than spend a sleepless night. Of course the following stage of this exercise cannot be wholeheartedly recommended: you should guard against unhappy endings related to the floor. In my case, such a finale is all the more dangerous since I have no servants, no friends, no relatives, and my doors are always locked.

These unseasonable dozings exposed him to another danger. He fell repeatedly, whilst reading, with his head into the candles; a cotton nightcap which he wore was instantly in a blaze, and flaming about his head. Whenever this happened, Kant behaved with great presence of mind. Disregarding the pain, he seized the blazing cap, drew it from his head, laid it quietly on the floor, and trod out the flames with his feet.

For obvious reasons, this excerpt has nothing to do with my life: no candles, no nightcaps, no flames; and even my inspiration does not boast about its flames on a regular basis, letting me down rather often. But I am not sure my age should be blamed for this irregularity: creative artists are aware of muses' fundamental, inborn disloyalty. However, I cannot help being surprised by the contents of this last quotation: if Kant was able to perform such feats of self-defence, one may wonder why he regularly fell not only during his walks (around his abode) but also on many occasions. Sitting in his armchair, standing beside it. He just kept falling, whenever an opportunity arose; and even outside these opportunities. At some point, at the last stage of your life, you may realise there are no other opportunities. Falling, falling, falling – that is what lies in store for you. And there are no other stores, other stories. Of course I am tempted to undergo a test which might enable me to compare my state of body to that of Kant. But I am quite reluctant to provide the ingredients of this experiment, its tools such as a nightcap and even a candle: I am not very fond of candlelit dinners. So let it stand, as Joyce used to say; or let it fall.

Yet it may be readily supposed that to Kant, at the age of seventy-eight, changes, even for the better, were not welcome; so intense had been the uniformity of his life and habits, that the least innovation in the arrangement of articles as trifling as a penknife or a pair of scissors disturbed him; and not merely if they were pushed two or three inches out of their customary position, but even if they were laid a little awry; and as to larger objects, such as chairs, etc., any dislocation of their usual arrangements, any transposition, or addition to their usual arrangement, any transposition, or addition to their number, perfectly confounded him; and his eye appeared restlessly to haunt the seat of the mal-arrangement, until the ancient order was restored.

By the way, I have just recalled De Quincey's description of how Kant walked, of what manner of walking he adopted so as not to fall too often, which might have resulted in a sort of perennial, ultimate paralysis. (It is true that Kant – as well as all other inhabitants of the Earth – was going through a series of partial paralyses, but the ultimate paralysis is irrevocable and definitive; so it is much worse, much, much worse.) 'In order to walk more firmly, he adopted a peculiar method of stepping: he carried his foot to the ground, not forward, and obliquely, but perpendicularly, and with a kind of stamp, so as to secure a larger basis, by setting down the entire sole at once.' It dawned upon me that, instead of imitating a boisterous, ill-mannered boy, Kant was practicing for his duels with flames (...trod out the flames with his feet).

As for his allergy to disarrangements, I understand him perfectly, especially when I have no alternative but to change my charwoman. Every new charwoman has her attitude towards arrangements, instalments and cutlery in general or rather in particular. After such an innovation (a new charwoman) I usually spend a number of minutes, looking for forks, spoons, let alone books and other intellectual tools. And if I happen to find a fork, I do not ask myself if this fork is appropriate for the dish I am about to consume: I just content myself with whatever I find in my hand. My late cat was even more sensitive to ill-arrangements. His house had to be always in the same position, otherwise I was punished by an ostentatious presence of his urine or even of his solid waste. Walking through them – you do not *always* see what lies or spreads under your feet – was an unpleasant experience; and even my love for my cat and for cats in general could not overcome my aversion to such rituals. Frankly speaking, I do not waste my time on restoring the ancient order (or orders). I just let things stand and

train my memory by trying to memorise the new orders. Besides, I do not *always* recall the ancient orders; to tell the truth. In short, at the age of 75, it is better to welcome *some* changes, instead of fighting chaos round the clock. You just sum up the situation in one word: chaos, and continue to live as if nothing had happened.

A friend in need is a friend indeed; and we would now have given any money to that learned Theban, who could have instructed us in the arrangement of the breakfast-table. But this was a mastery revealed to none but Lampe. At length Kant took this task upon himself; and apparently all was now settled to his satisfaction. Yet still it struck me that he was under some embarrassment or constraint. Upon this I said that, with his permission, I would take a cup of tea, and afterwards smoke a pipe with him. He accepted my offer with his usual courteous demeanour; but seemed unable to familiarise himself with the novelty of his situation. I was at this time sitting directly opposite to him; and at last he frankly told me, but with the kindest and most apologetic air, that he was really under the necessity of begging that I would sit out of his sight; for that, having sat alone at the breakfast-table for considerably more than half a century, he could not abruptly adapt his mind to a change in this respect; and he found his thoughts very sensibly distracted.

I have never understood this saying: a friend in need is a friend indeed. I am acquainted with a number of individuals who never take notice of you during your period of prosperity. But when you find yourself in a hospital, they bring you oranges every day; and even before falling asleep you are likely to touch with your own hand an orange that your friend's hand put on your cover. You recover and these so-called friends disappear; perhaps they are loath to take part, if only abstractedly, symbolically, in your everyday happiness. Never mind, never mind. And since I have no servants who might obey my call, we can safely skip the very beginning of the above excerpt.

The rest is of the utmost importance. The global question is akin to what Prince Hamlet asks himself, while seating and musing on a rock (in Laurence Olivier's version of the tragedy). How can one sit at the same table with someone else? I understand Kant's embarrassment perfectly, and I honestly wonder why he did not say to De Quency at the very outset of their friendship: 'We'll smoke our pipes together, and you'll drink your coffee (my coffee) in my company, on condition that you'll sit somewhere else. Not in another room, though.' And every time a coffee was brought in by one of the servants, Kant would say with a smile whose broadness was immeasurable (according to De Quincey): 'Sit yourself down and have a cup of coffee. But not opposite me, I beg of you. In other words, please find yourself a seat situated out of my sight. I solemnly promise you'll never be out of my mind.'

You invite to your breakfast-table neither a friend nor an intruder, a gatecrasher; just somebody, a thought-crasher perhaps. Throughout your breakfast – in utter solitude you always enjoy it thoroughly – he bombards you with questions related to his life, its ideal, its numerous purposes and even his wife. 'Do you think she's faithful to me?' he asks, after telling you a few stories featuring her unofficial lovers. (She seems to have a few *official* lovers as well, strange as it may appear.) And once again you ask yourself the crucial question: How can one sit at the same table with someone else? And then you recite Hamlet's monologue – for argument's sake.

In the spring of this year, 1802, I advised Kant to take the air. It was very long since he had been out of doors, and walking was now out of the question. But I thought that perhaps the motion of a carriage and the air might have a chance of reviving him. On the power of vernal sights and sounds I did not much rely; for these had long ceased to affect him. Of all the changes that spring carries with it, there was one only that now interested Kant; and he longed for it with an eagerness and intensity of expectation, that it became almost painful to witness: this was the return of a little bird (sparrow was it, or robin-redbreast?) that sang in his garden, and before his window. This bird, either the same, or one of a younger generation, had sung for years in the same situation; and Kant grew uneasy when the cold weather, lasting longer than usual, retarded its return.

I think that from this moment, from this point in De Quency's memoirs there starts what might be termed Tchaikovsky's *Pathetic Symphony* or simply *La Pathétique* I conducted twenty years ago in Tokyo. Peter Ilich Tchaikovsky, who was also on the threshold of death, could still walk along the Petersburg streets; he even conducted his last symphony in Igor Stravinsky's presence. The symphony was a flop, which is utterly incomprehensible, given the impact it always has on ordinary music lovers and also on professionals, with a few exceptions: there are professionals – Gustav Mahler was of their number – who do not like Tchaikovsky partly because of his tear-shedding provocations and endless sequenzas: these literally (not musically) swarm in his works. Never mind other professional – I do love Tchaikovsky and am willing, consciously and joyfully shed many tears as I listen to his symphonies, ballets and operas such as *The Pique Dame*.

The Pathetic Symphony I am talking about in relation to De Quency's essays, to the very last days of Kant's life gets under way when one of the authors – Kant was the second or first author of this essay – says en passant: '...walking was now out of the question.' You can say to your friend or to a passer-by, 'I know I haven't been outside my house for several years. I'm not fond of the constituents of what they call the outer world – they're too many cars, too many pedestrians, and the noise is just unbearable. And you keep knocking your head against various walls or shoulders or backs or streetlamps. Knocking, knocking, knocking – that what this amounts to, invariably bringing back to your mind the famous episode about which De Quency also wrote in a famous essay. I'm alluding of course to *Macbeth*. And then the force of the wind knocks your hat off. Why should I put up with such occurrences, such incidents and accidents?' But if your friend or foe asks you the following question, 'Are you able to walk at all?' you should honestly answer, 'Of course I do. What a question to ask! I walk around the breakfast-table every morning, and in the evening I carry out this ritual in my dinner table's presence. I go round and round it to imitate the movement of the stars and ordinary planets, which enables me to stay attuned to the harmony of the universe.'

As for Kant and his incapacity to walk either round tables or chairs or other pieces of furniture, it is clear that none of these rituals could be triumphantly performed at this stage of his life or overall illness. 'But I thought that perhaps the motion of a carriage and the air might have a chance of reviving him.' Habitually you are revived by the motions you indulge in as you slowly but surely reach your wakefulness. You may lay there wakeful the whole night, but when the dawn appears in your windows or behind your curtains you set about your preparations for a busy fruitful day. You move first your fingers, then your hand, then your legs. Gradually your body gets under way and this way revives you, gets you back on your feet again.

Getting under way was now out of the question, as far as Kant was concerned. Apparently, according to *some* documents, De Quency helped him in this respect. When reading his essay, one might get the feeling that the author did nothing special under the watchful eye of his guinea pig. He just smoked with him and drank a lot of coffee while talking about the ill-effect of beer-drinking to which Immanuel Kant was in no way addicted. Actually De Quency did much more, especially in the morning when Kant felt so helpless he would say to his servants, 'I think today I won't need you. To tell the truth, I'll never need you again. You can go back to your wives and children. My wallet is on the dinner table. Take as much money from it as you wish. I don't care whether the amount you're about to take corresponds to yours services and loyalty or not.'

But De Quency was already in Kant's room, and so these fatal words were never uttered, let alone acted upon. Delicately, with the utmost care, Kant's members were taken care of. De Quency would start with his fingers: he was partially acquainted with yoga whose adepts invariably start with their fingers. Bent on distracting Kant from his gloomy forebodings, De Quency would even go so far as to declare: 'I spent several years in a Peking Opera school, studying martial arts and acrobatics.' The remark that puts us in the picture about Kant's reaction or rather non-reaction to vernal sights and sounds belongs to the same *Pathetic Symphony*: just another melody, another interval, another intrusion of a clarinet that Kant is unlikely to appreciate, given his general apathy. (Otherwise he might have admired it – in his youth and even during his mature years. I wonder how he would have reacted to a performance of Tchaikovsky's last symphony; under Mengelberg's baton, for instance.) De Quency used to attract his attention to the murmur of the garden, saying, 'Doesn't it remind you of Wagner, of the second act of *Siegfried*?' But Kant infallibly turned a deaf ear not only to these murmurs, but also to De Quency's supplications. So the latter had no choice but emphasise the little bird's song which, however, did not remind Kant of Wagner and his *Siegfried*, of the same second act. One might disapprove of my reflexion and point out that Wagner's operas saw the light of day (and touched the ear of day) much later, and anachronisms are not always welcome in the domain of literary essays. But the same birds seem to teach us another truth; a Platonist truth, as it were. 'This bird, either the same, or one of a younger generation, had sung for years in the same situation.' As we all know, Keats would not have hesitated an instant before telling us his truth, the truth:

Thou wast not born for death, immortal bird!
 No hungry generations tread thee down;
 The voice I hear this passing night was heard
 In ancient days by emperor and clown;
 Perhaps the self-same song that found a path
 Through the sad heart of Ruth, when, sick for home,
 She stood in tears amid the alien corn;
 The same that oft-times hath
 Charmed magic casements, opening on the foam
 Of perilous seas in fairy lands forlorn.

Borges reminds us of the philosophic attachment nourished by the English; with a few exceptions perhaps. In the domain of philosophy, a general approval is seldom witnessed by all sorts of observers. Your nation might

adhere to one doctrine, but you continue to quote Kant and you do it to your heart's content; and others' discontent and disapproval, as the case may be. When injustice and murderous intentions stick out a mile, everybody stands up and vociferously declares, 'Down with you! Down with you! To the gallows!' In this case, however, it is better to shout, 'Up with you!' And Oscar Wilde's admirers just utter one word, one verb: 'Swing, swing, swing, swing, swing!' You, swine, they might add, after much soul-searching.

Every individual is entitled to his or her personality, and if this personality has more in common with 'it', you are entitled to it as well, instead of following Platonic precepts and ideas. There is an ideal called 'man', but the English maintain there are as many men as there are men. This is too abstract for an Englishman, it goes without saying. According to Borges, however, nothing goes without saying – in the kingdom of England. Instead of saying, 'He was a man,' as Hamlet says in the first of Shakespeare's Aristotelian play, you are supposed to say, 'He was Mr Smith,' 'he was Mr Myth,' 'he was Mr X, the hero of Kalman's famous operetta,' 'he was Mr Y,' and so on and so forth. What is more, you should not say, 'so on and so forth': spelling everything and everybody out is the English most-cherished speciality, according to Borges. So you go on saying, 'And so Mr N., and so a Louis XVI chest of drawers, and forth a mahogany table, and forth the cradle you can use in the opposite corner of the room,' and so on and so forth.

As for the immortal bird, let us picture to ourselves a young man and a young woman. The former says to the latter, 'You know, the bird we're listening to was also heard by Romeo and Juliet.'

'Sparrow was it, or robin-redbreast?' asks the woman.

'A lark, I think,' says the man.

'Aren't we listening to a nightingale?' asks the woman.

'Yes, to John Keats' nightingale.'

'What? What are you talking about?'

'I'm talking about John Keats and his nightingale.'

'Did he own a nightingale? Never mind – let's listen to the bird of *Romeo and Juliet* fame.'

'Why?'

'Because I wish you were as beautiful and eloquent as Romeo.'

Like Lord Bacon, indeed, he had a child-like love for birds in general; and in particular he took pains to encourage the sparrows to build above the windows of his study; and when this happened (as often did, from the deep silence which prevailed in the room), he watched their proceedings with the delight and the tenderness which others give to a human interest.

No sparrows build nests above the window of my study. What others give to a human interest, I endow with the life of my cat who spent the whole afternoon in the garden, taking advantage of the gorgeous weather. Others watch their wives or lovers sleep and some of them rival the patience displayed by the cameraman engaged by Andy Warhol. I am alluding to his film devoted to a sleeping body; an eight-hour-long film. Ludicrous, isn't it? Shooting a cat is much more rewarding. (Unfortunately, it reminds one of Boswell's *Life of Samuel Johnson*.)

To return to the point I was speaking of:

Kant was at first very unwilling to adopt my proposal of going abroad. ‘I shall sink down in the carriage,’ said he, ‘and fall together like a heap of old rags.’ But I persisted with a gentle importunity in urging him to the attempt, assuring him that we would return immediately, if he found the effort too much for him. Accordingly, upon a tolerably warm day of early summer, I and an old friend of Kant’s accompanied him to a little place which I rented in the country. As we drove through the streets, Kant was delighted to find that he could sit upright, and bear the motion of the carriage, and seemed to draw youthful pleasure from the sight of the towers and other public buildings, which he had not seen for years. We reached the place of our destination in high spirits. Kant drank a cup of coffee, and attempted to smoke a little. After this, he sat and sunned himself, listening with delight to the carolling of birds, which congregated in great numbers about this spot. He distinguished every bird by its song, and called it by its right name.

What must be admired in Kant’s attitude towards the journey is his awareness of his state of health, of its unhealthiness and fragility. I know several people who brag about their health even during their sojourns on various floors: they fall not only at home, which is more or less understandable, but also in theatres, cinemas and lavatories. When you come across such a person – the person who suffers from the consequences of her body’s unreliability – you mistake her for a heap of old rags. You see at once that the rags in question are old, very old; and then you realise they are not rags, not exactly. This rag is an arm in disguise, and this one resembles a leg, a hip at least; a hip lying in a heap of old rags. There are people who keep a lot of rags for cleaning their cars, but I have never done such a thing; for obvious reasons. And I have no need to describe these reasons, needless to say. Anyway, you cannot clean your car by means of human rags; for obvious reasons.

Kant was delighted to find that he could sit upright, and bear the motion of the carriage: yet another instance of Kant’s deep-seated objectivity. Again I am duty bound to resort to my memory’s (or my notebook’s) assistance. I know a number of people who are always on the point of falling from their seats, be they armchairs or benches in public gardens. But if you question their ability to sit upright, they grow furious and say, ‘What are you talking about? Ever since my childhood I’ve been sitting upright, in full accordance with my grandmother’s precepts. She used to walk behind me, shouting, “Stand up straight and don’t hunch your back,” and it was useless to remind her I was not *standing*, all things considered. And she would go on in the same vein, “Are you a hunchback or what? Or have you re-read Victor Hugo’s *Notre Dame de Paris*?” It was useless to let her know I had just seen the musical inspired by the novel.’

If you question the same people, the ones I found in both my notebook and memory, they are used to saying, ‘I don’t mind flying on supersonic planes. An intoxicating experience!’ Kant rejoiced upon realising he could bear the motion of the carriage without feeling ill at ease or just ill; *malade*, if you prefer. (Signs of the carriage-illness include fever, nausea and vomiting.) Of course we must take into consideration the road-structure you had to confront, whenever going from point A to point B (in those times). I am not sure his carriage was rumbling over the cobbles: De Quency sheds no light on this aspect of the journey: obviously for him the birds were more important than any cobble, any pavement whatsoever. And what about humans, the human race? Anyway, I envy Kant whose knowledge in the domain of birds and their names was infallible; and this is not the only realm where he felt at home. I listen to birds without going into details and my listening process might be compared to what a newcomer – in terms of concert halls – experiences upon listening to any piece of music, be it a Brahms trio or the Mozart *Clarinet Quintet*.

Kant seems to have enjoyed every minute of the above-depicted journey where towers and coffee played a leading part. And yet one cannot affirm he remained blissfully ignorant of the troubles that lay ahead.

I had on this occasion purposely avoided taking him to any public gardens, that I might not disturb his pleasure by exposing him to the distressing gaze of public curiosity. However, it became known in Königsberg that Kant had gone out; and accordingly, as the carriage moved through the streets which led homewards, there was a general rush from all quarters in that direction; and, when we turned into the street where the house stood, we found it already choked up with people. As we slowly drew up to the door, a lane was formed in the crowd, through which Kant was led, I and my friend supporting him on our arms. Looking at the crowd, I observed the faces of many persons of rank and distinguished strangers, some of whom now saw Kant for the first time, and many of them for the last.

Of course Kant had not foreseen such a welcome which, within his frame of mind, was just the opposite of what we mean by 'welcome'; for all the benevolence displayed by the members of the crowd. (Bloody nuisance, in other words.) The last sentence of the quote is equivocal, especially its ending: and many of them for the last. So some of these members saw Kant again – not in the course of his customary walks through the city, though, as one might conclude. It is said that the inhabitants of his native city used to set their watches as they watched their favourite philosopher cross one street after another. When asked, 'Does your watch keep good time?' they would dutifully answer, 'Kant always keeps good time. Frankly speaking, his time is much superior to any other time.' No wonder that, as Kant grew weaker and weaker, the watches that wholly depended on his walks and habits began to falter; some of them stopped altogether and had to be disposed of.

As the winter of 1802-3 approached, he complained more than ever of an affection of the stomach, which no medical man had been able to mitigate, or even to explain. The winter passed over in a complaining way; he was weary of life, and longed for the hour of dismissal. 'I can be of service to the world no more,' said he, 'and am a burden to myself.' Often I endeavoured to cheer him by the anticipation of excursions that we might make together when summer came again. On these he calculated with so much earnestness, that he had made a regular scale of classification of them – 1. Airings; 2. Journeys. 3. Travels.

This is one of the most contradictory texts I have ever come across. It is both optimistic and pessimistic to the utmost, considering that the more you live on this Earth – and I suppose this might occur on other planets, in other worlds as well – the more you think about life in terms of your stomach, for the simple reason that the importance of lavatories in our life can be hardly overestimated. (And you will need your stomach on any planet, within any solar system.) I suppose that scatology is not on the agenda; at least not on *my* agenda, for it is just the truth and nothing but the truth. At the close of your life – and this process starts somewhere in the middle, at least for some representatives of our species – you often ask yourself whether you can undertake an extensive walk. (Journeys of any kind are often out of the question.)

Before submitting Kant's optimism and pessimism to the final analysis let us try to understand what he meant by the variety of divertissement in which he was about to indulge in spite of his age and the state of his

health; of his stomach in particular. ‘... no medical man had been able to mitigate, or even to explain.’ Of course in the 18th century sciences were not reliable, not completely, considering the progress we have made in the course of the centuries that separate us from *those* times. When perusing such reports, we say to each other, ‘Today Kant would be cured in no time at all.’ But Kant was living and suffering in those times deprived of our machines and tools that can revert any situation, however deplorable and merciless. At least we can explain any diseases and the few exceptions that remain out of our mental and instrumental reach will never change the course of history, being insignificant and easily forgotten. So Kant complained loudly about his pains, and voiced his grievances in such a way that De Quincey thought it was his duty to inform the world and posterity about Kant’s physical troubles and their vocal expression. But in the same breath Kant said just the opposite, and I am sure De Quincey was instrumental in infusing a huge dose of optimism in Kant’s mind (and body?). On the one hand Kant confesses his pathological weakness – is it really pathological? We should never discard his venerable age and the effects of its power, saying, ‘I can be of service to the world no more, and am a burden to myself.’ When talking about great individuals, we should never affirm they are unaware of their greatness. Or we triumphantly come to the following conclusion, ‘Their modesty got the upper hand in the struggle with their megalomania.’ I am not sure Immanuel Kant was a megalomaniac, and perhaps he did not think in terms of his achievements in the domain of philosophy where human mysteries are revealed round the clock. And our knowledge of these mysteries helps us a lot in our struggle for life and might even help us, if an army of extraterrestrial foes invades the Earth in the centuries to come. Without being megalomaniac, Kant was, however, conscious of the helping hand he produced in the course of his existence. And this helping hand is still with us, and I shall resort to its assistance shortly.

Well, Kant seems to move away from the arena where the struggle for life is in full swing. He is weary and regards his body as a burden. And in the same breath – I have no idea whether he really *breathed* between the two statements – he declares he is yarning for airings, journeys, travels, and all these items involve not only carriages and their inconveniences (cobblestones) but also railway stations, crowds, overcrowded trains, checking in inside every airport, and so on. And it does not really matter whether all these means of transportation were available in Kant’s times: there are busybodies everywhere. The same goes for obstacles of all kinds, and if you eliminate our modern controls almost intimately linked to any checking in, we can talk about mud, insects and other nuisances which Kant knew only too well. So one cannot help wondering why he seriously spoke about his escapades in front of his biographer and closest friend. He was convinced that whatever he did or said would be known to the future generations. Why did he lay himself open to criticism and ridicule? Why visualise Kant and these proverbial heaps of old rags to which he was often reduced? And what about lavatories? Did they install one or two in the carriage he had singled out for his outings, airings and what not? Did he never moon around fields and ravines? How could you moon around a ravine, one may ask? But let us not forget we are dealing with a philosopher whose reason was pure, even when it happened to switch to a practical mode.

‘If,’ wrote Kant, ‘we consider in its whole range the knowledge obtained for us by the understanding, we find that what is peculiarly distinctive of reason in its attitude to this body of knowledge is that it prescribes and seeks to achieve it *systematization*, that is, to exhibit the connection of its parts in conformity with a single principle.’ What principle should we select for our analysis of the above ambivalent excerpt? Airings or pains? I am no longer of service or ‘just let me get my hands on those scoundrels who pretend I can’t avail myself of

airings, travels and long, endless journeys'. It is easier to declare we do not understand this philosopher because his deeds and thoughts, meditations and actions coincide rarely and unconvincingly. He did achieve a sort of systematization, when embarking upon his walks through Königsberg, but his life unfolded outside those walks as well: it never stopped until the very last moment. So what are we supposed to do?

At the close of this winter (that is, in 1803), Kant first began to complain of unpleasant dreams, sometimes of very terrific ones, which awakened him in great agitation. Oftentimes melodies, which he had heard in earliest youth sung in the streets of Königsberg, resounded painfully in his ears, and dwelt upon them in a way from which no efforts of abstraction could release him. These kept him awake to unseasonable hours; and sometimes, when after long watching he had fallen asleep, however profound his sleep might be, it was suddenly broken up by terrific dreams, which alarmed him beyond description. Almost every night the bell-rope, which communicated with a bell in the room above his own, where his servant slept, was pulled violently, and with the utmost agitation. No matter how fast the servant might hurry down, he was almost always too late, and was pretty sure to find his master out of bed, and often making his way in terror to some other part of the house. The weakness of his feet exposed him to such dreadful falls on these occasions, that at length (but with much difficulty) I persuaded him to let his servant sleep in the same room with himself.

To begin at the beginning: I wonder why Kant began to suffer the onslaught of unpleasant dreams only on the threshold of death. Of course the proximity of death may influence plants and animals, although we continue to affirm they know nothing about this phenomenon except that cats have a tendency to live their terrestrial abode on the very eve of their disappearance. Well, the closer our dissolution gets to our body, the weirder our dreams become, for the simple reason that death has his own vibes and can harass us even if we are still alive and even capable of walking around our house or garden or both. Besides, the word dissolution seems to play a sinister role in the whole setup: you get the feeling that death dissolves your sweet dreams – he literally engulfs them – to replace their sweetness with incredible bitterness for which you are not yet prepared, in spite of your daily participation in *memento mori*. Well, from my point of view Kant had a tremendous luck; and yet his reaction to what his unconscious offered him was slightly exaggerated – at least in comparison with what *I* experience in the same domain; in the same infrastructure, as they say in our modern world.

For many years my only nightmare features a half-familiar cityscapes where I roam, vaguely realising that the city is out of focus. Where is this focus or focus-pocus or focus-opus situated? I think alternatively about St Petersburg and Paris – the cities I like most in the world. I might have fallen in love with Rome, had I been born at the beginning of the Christian era, but it is better to remain on the realistic side, on the side of stark realism. So I continue to roam around this city and suddenly I hit upon an idea that seems logical in the context. Apparently, to all intents and purposes I do not feel comfortable in the city of my dreams or rather my nightmares. The following sentence crops up in my mind or somewhere else (I have no idea *where* my nightmares are located): After the trip, it was nice getting back to a few home comforts. And I set about looking for my house where there are a lot of creature comforts; as far as *I* am concerned. I walk along half-familiar streets and yet another thought takes root in my mind. (Let us call it 'mind'.) I must look for a railway station. Why a railway station? Because I always opt for luxurious trains to the detriment of planes and their creature

comforts. Well, I am prevented from lighting upon a railway station and that is the crux of the problem identified as a nightmare; my personal nightmare, to be exact.

Let us go back to Immanuel Kant; or rather to music. The point is I *always* hear music – in my head and heart, I suppose – and of course *my* music has nothing to do with whatever was sang in the streets of Königsberg or of Moscow. The music I hear is a collection of snatches borrowed from the treasury of our history. Haydn, Mozart, Beethoven, Brahms – you name it or him or her, if you prefer. Incidentally, Kant's sorry plight reminds me of how young Tchaikovsky endeavoured to get rid of the music ruling his brainwaves (let us call them this way). He would run downstairs, shouting, 'Mummy, Mummy, please remove this music from my existence.' As for myself, I never leave my bed in the middle of the night, anxious to obliterate such and such masterpiece. Odd as it may seem, my nightmares prefer cityscapes and railway stations.

The rest of the citation is utterly irrelevant: I have no servants, no bell-ropes. Only the weakness of *his* feet is sadly relevant. By the way, in my opinion Kant perversely fulfilled his daytime dreams. 1. Airings; 2. Journeys. 3. Travels. Just an infinite series of nightmares.

His dreams became continually more appalling; single scenes, or passages in these dreams, were sufficient to compose the whole course of mighty tragedies, the impression from which was so profound as to stretch far into his waking hours. Amongst other phantasmata more shocking and indescribable, his dreams constantly represented to him the forms of murderers advancing to his bedside; and so agitated was he by the awful trains of phantoms that swept past him nightly, that in the first confusion of awaking he generally mistook his servant, who was hurrying to his assistance, for a murderer.

Our parallel lives are not always parallel, in spite of my efforts to insert as much of my own experience and toils into this essay as is compatible with the respect I have always manifested for ideas and things in itself of the wonderful philosopher. But I am not sure this respect, in this sphere – the sphere of murderers – our lives exhibit any connection whatsoever: they are not even perpendicular, to tell the truth. I have never seen murderers in my dreams, and owing to the same deficiency – no servants – I have never encountered them or him in real life.

Kant tried to ward off evil spirits by writing about them in his notebook or diary: 'No surrender now to panics of darkness.' 'At my suggestion,' wrote De Quency, 'he now burned a light in his chamber, so placed as that the rays might be shaded from his face.' He also read or re-read his own writings which proved beyond a shadow of a doubt that their author was reasonable. 'That our reason has causality, or that we at least represent it to ourselves as having causality, is evident from the *imperatives* which in all matters of conduct we impose as rules upon our active powers. "*Ought*" expresses a kind of necessity and of connection with grounds which is found nowhere else in the whole of nature. The understanding can know in nature only what is, what has been, or what will be. We cannot say that anything in nature *ought to be* other than what in all these time-relations it actually is. When we have the course of nature alone in view, "*ought*" has no meaning whatsoever. It is just as absurd to ask what ought to happen in the natural world as to ask what properties a circle ought to have. All that we are justified in asking is; what happens in nature? What are the properties of the circle?'

'No surrender now to panics of darkness' is certainly an imperative, but I am not sure Kant alluded to this injunction, when writing the quoted text. If we believe De Quency's testimony – and we have no reason not to believe it – the philosopher began to shoo evil spirits at the end of his life, not at the peak of his genius. Anyway,

he often resorted to imperatives without saying to himself, 'I'm about to supply another example of what I call "imperative".' 'Coffee should be brought upon the spot!' is an imperative, whether we are convinced of it or not. And I am sure the philosopher did not *always* wish to go out at the same hour as if indeed he longed to regulate time by adjusting the watches of the inhabitants of his native city. But he must have said to himself over and over again, 'If I don't go out – and I ought to, there's no other way, no other way out, away, off – my fellow citizens might forget about time and its properties. And if you forget time you also forget space.' (As if Kant had been acquainted with the theory of relativity.) At this point a murderer might appear in the doorway. Just in case, Kant would exclaim, 'You ought *not* to enter this room of mine!' And if the murderer in question remained in proximity to his vulnerable body, he shouted, 'Clean up this room immediately – and that's an order! You don't understand my philosophy, but you must have a smattering of English – everybody has.'

However, when we have the course of nature alone in view, 'ought' has no meaning whatsoever. Let us take a cat, an ordinary cat, an extraordinary cat. If you say to him or her 'you ought', her or him will not obey your call, or whatever it is. I am surprised to find that Kant needed to philosophise about this nuance: it is enough to say or write 'cat'. Sometimes a group of murderers persisted in pestering the legendary man, and he had no alternative but to ask himself, 'What are the properties of the circle?'

Heretofore, darkness and utter silence were the two pillars on which his sleep rested; no step must approach his room; and as to light, if he saw but a moonbeam penetrating a crevice of the shutters, it made him unhappy; and, in fact, the windows of his bedchamber were barricaded night and day. But now darkness was a terror to him, and silence an oppression. In addition to his lamp, therefore, he had now a repeater in his room. The sound was at first too loud, but means were taken to muffle the hammer; after which both the ticking and the striking became companionable sounds to him.

Of course there are individuals – I often begin a sentence in this way because, in this world of ours, there are still some *individuals* – who can sleep only if someone walks in their room, stomping his or her feet; à la Kant. Or they put on a recording; usually a specimen of what is known as pop music. Silence breeds phantoms, nightmarish sounds which, though belonging to the realm of nightmares, prevent you from sleeping, even if you do not pray your or other gods for sweet, sweet, sweet, sweet dreams. 'Otherwise there's no point in falling asleep. Yes, I can forego this kind of rest altogether!'

Personally, I need neither light nor its utter absence. A moonbeam might elicit a tender, sentimental response on the part of my heart and body in general. Habitually the moon is associated with love; and yet intellectuals no longer rely upon our satellite during their love-monologues: they justifiably fear a Juliet-inspired reaction. I know a pianist who is so used to his metronome he cannot sleep without its tick-tick-tick-tick. I am not used to metronomes.

His very last excursion was in August of this year (1803), not to my cottage, but to the garden of a friend. On this particular day he manifested great impatience. It had been arranged that he was to meet an old friend at the gardens; and I, with two other gentlemen, attended him. It happened that our party arrived first; and thus we had to wait; but only for a few minutes. Such, however, was Kant's weakness, and total loss of power to estimate the duration of time, that, after waiting a few moments, several hours (he

fancied) must have elapsed. So that his friend could not be expected. Under this impression he came away, and in great discomposure of mind. And so ended Kant's travelling in this world.

A hard nut to crack. Thanks to this excerpt we plunge headlong over our views, convictions and assurances and find ourselves in the sea – instead of standing on a cliff, like a monument – to which Kant resorts from time to time to show how desperately forsaken we are. By whom? By God, in the first place. (But not by *Tod*, by death.) We thought we knew at least where we were and how one hour comes and calmly overtakes the preceding hour, determined to take us as far as the radiant future. What happens? You can lose your capacities related to your legs and their muscles, their tendons and nerves, but at least you are sure of your whereabouts and their behaviour. They are not unpredictable – that is what you say to yourself day in day out. And then you come across the unexpected, the weird as we say today, and you suddenly realise that the last few days have gone by in a blur. Then you realise that the last few years have gone by in a blur. Kant's conduct blurs the line/distinction/boundary between reality and fantasy. Why? Because he does his best to convince us that the objects conform to the mind. You walk around your room, laying your hands on various pieces of furniture, saying to them (and to yourself): 'You're still there and you'll be in my room forever. I'm sure you'll hear the trumpet of the last judgment – in my room, not elsewhere.' Then something happens to your mind and the object and also some subjects begin to disappear as if their final destination or aim were disappearance from your field of vision, from your fields, meadows, rooms, country houses – from your life, to put it shortly; but not sweetly.

Contrary to our deep-rooted convictions, it is not the mind that conforms to things; things conform to the mind. Only yesterday you could trust your belongings and rely on their devotion to your habits and manias: they had always obeyed your calls. But now you look at them and do not recognise their shapes, their validity, their utility. What are they for? you ask yourself. And Heidegger applauds the appearance of yet another question; in your mind. The point is you are not sure your mind is still among your most precious possessions. After all, it is your mind that says you are in a foreign land where there are only strangers, not to say foreigners, extraterrestrial warriors. You shout (inaudibly, inwardly), 'Please, let me get rid of my mind, of its improvised interferences in the smooth, flawless flow of my blissful and blessed, blessed, blessed existence, as Yeats put it once or twice.

Let us now proceed to our problem. That something happens, *i.e.* that something, or some state which did not previously exist, comes to be, cannot be perceived unless it is preceded by an appearance which does not contain in itself this state. For an event which should follow upon an empty time, that is, a coming to be preceded by no state of things, is as little capable of being apprehended as empty time itself. Every apprehension of an event is therefore a perception that follows upon another perception.

Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*

Another hard nut to crack. To tell the truth, Kant's philosophy resembles a field, a meadow strewn with hard nuts. You walk on them and your feet and even other parts of your legs begin to ache most atrociously, and they ache more and more as you continue your walk, determined to reach the core of Kant's teaching. Something happens, and this time the happening we are about to deal with concerns Immanuel Kant who decides to meet an old friend; at the gardens. Never mind the place and space in general: let us concentrate on time, this time. Kant gets into his carriage and a state on which the whole outing can be erected sees the light of day. Kant might have

forgotten this manoeuvre of his, but De Quincey was certain *that was* in the carriage. And it was obvious to him and to other travelling companions that Kant did not cover the distance between his bed and the seat in the carriage by means of his wings: he had none, being no angel. Walking towards the carriage was contained in Kant's present posture, and things or objects had behaved normally – so far, so far, which does not mean they are bound to behave accordingly (in accordance with what) till the same Day of Judgment.

The party arrives first so the friend – at that stage of the adventure – was supposed to arrive last. Kant says to himself, 'I've already gone through several states, and I won't enumerate them. Yet my memory is in good running order. In other words, I recall the states I'm talking about. One hour elapses; two hours elapse. What's going on? Has time gone crazy? Is that what's going on? Craziness, craziness, craziness? Does time exist no longer? "Longer" is the word pertaining to time, and if I say "no longer", I discreetly imply that time doesn't exist. No longer, no longer, no longer. There'll never be any "longer" in the cosmos.' So there was no point in waiting either for a friend or for a foe or for a shooting star. No point, no longer. In his masterpiece Kant said with assurance (with a double assurance): 'It is as little capable of being apprehended as empty time itself.' Well, during this abortive rendezvous Kant apprehended the emptiness of time. You live and learn.

Here is yet another example of Kant's relationship with time. (Let us not forget this relationship ended on the memorable day of his friend's non-appearance.) 'If it was said, "Dear professor, the coffee will be brought up in a moment," – "*Will* be!" he would say, "but there's the rub, that it only *will* be." (Man never *is*, but always *to be* blest.) If another cried out, "The coffee is coming immediately," "Yes," he would retort, "and so is the next hour; and, by the way, it's about that length of time that I have waited for it.'" Well, never again did Kant wait for coffee.

In the beginning of autumn, the sight of his right eye began to fail him; the left he had long lost the use of. This earliest of his losses it is noticeable that he had discovered by mere accident. Sitting down one day to rest himself in the course of a walk, it occurred to him that he would try the comparative strength of his eyes; but, on taking out a newspaper which he had in his pocket, he was surprised to find that with his left eye he could not distinguish a letter. In earlier life he had two remarkable affections of the eyes; once, on returning from a walk, he saw objects double for a long space of time; and twice he became stone-blind. Whether these accidents are to be considered as uncommon, I leave to the decision of oculists.

Space goes along with time, and Einstein cannot be expected to shoulder all the blame for this love affair. At the end of his life Kant had a vision which displayed for his sake the utter emptiness of time. You expect a friend and he does not come, in spite of your celebrity, importance and the *divertissement* your monologues and answers offer to anybody permitted to approach your vocal cords. Talking to Kant – must have been quite an experience. The friend does not care and you waste your time, losing it slowly but surely; the whole of it. I wonder if one could observe a few states or stages in the course of this seminal disappearance, but that does not really matter: time is no more and nothing in the world can compare with such a conclusion.

And what about space? What about its liaison with time? (There is something undeniably libidinous about it.) Kant was not aware of the emptiness of time. He thought that time was full of coffee, friends, walks around Königsberg and critics of various reasons: pure, impure. For some obscure reason – 'obscure' is the right word, under the circumstances – he decided to test his eyes; not in the presence of an oculist, though. 'He was surprised

to find that with his left eye he could not distinguish a letter.' There is no denying that the world surprises us every minute, and we had better not lose our ability of being surprised on a regular basis: this inclination moves us closer to children who are our models, our idols, our paragons of virtue, purity and ultimate wisdom. But Kant ought to have known better. After all, he dissected our world rather nicely and it is a pity he did not realise that misfortunes, tragedies and losses belonged as well to the domain of a priori. Luckily for him, nature, destiny and other ingredients of our life came to his assistance. And so ended Kant's pernicious propensity for reading newspapers. And so ended Immanuel Kant's very life.

LEAVING DEATH ALONE

Monday, the 6th, he was much weaker and more torpid: he spoke not a word except on the occasion of my question about the Moors, as previously stated, and sat with sightless eyes, lost in himself, and manifesting no sense of our presence, so that we had the feeling of some mighty phantom from some forgotten century being seated amongst us.

About this time, Kant had become much more tranquil and composed. In the earlier periods of his illness, when his yet unbroken strength was brought into active conflict with the first attacks of decay, he was apt to be peevish, and sometimes spoke roughly or even harshly to his servants. This, though very opposite to his natural disposition, was altogether excusable under the circumstances. He could not make himself understood; things were therefore brought to him continually which he had not asked for; and what he really wanted oftentimes he could not obtain, because all his efforts to name it were unintelligible.

A violent nervous irritation, besides, affected him, from the unsettling of the equilibrium in the different functions of his nature; weakness in one organ being made more palpable to him by disproportionate strength in another. But at length the strife was finished; the whole system was thoroughly undermined, and now moving forward in rapid and harmonious progress to dissolution. From this time till all was over, no movement of impatience, or expression of fretfulness, ever escaped him.

Kant sat at the table with us; and, taking a spoon with a little soup in it, carried it to his lips, but immediately put it down again, and retired to bed, from which he never rose again.

Thursday, the 9th, he had sunk into the weakness of a dying person, and the corpse-like appearance (the *facies Hippocratica*) had already taken possession of him. I visited him frequently through the course of the day; and going for the last time about ten o'clock at night, I found him in a state of insensibility. I could not draw any sign from him that he knew me, and I left him to the care of his sister and his servant.

Saturday, the 11th, he lay with fixed and rayless eyes; but to all appearance in perfect peace. I asked him again, on this day, if he knew me. He was speechless, but he turned his face towards me, and made signs that I should kiss him. Deep emotion thrilled me as I stooped down to kiss his pallid lips; for I knew that in this solemn act of tenderness he meant to express his thankfulness for our long friendship, and to signify his last farewell. I had never seen him confer this mark of his love upon anybody except once, and

that was a few weeks before his death, when he drew his sister to him and kissed her. The kiss which he now gave to me was the last memorial that he knew me.

Whatever fluid was now offered to him passed the oesophagus with a rattling sound, as often happens with dying people; and there were all the signs of death being close at hand.

He did not sleep; and a spoonful of liquid, which was sometimes put to his lips, he usually pushed aside; but about one o'clock in the night he himself made a movement towards the spoon, from which I collected that he was thirsty; but the muscles of his mouth had not strength enough to retain it; so that, to prevent its flowing back, he raised his hand to his lips, until with a rattling sound it was swallowed. He seemed to wish for more; and I continued to give him more, until he said, in a way that I was just able to understand, 'It is enough.' And these were his last words.

LEAVING BREAD ALONE

You know that some bread, a few muffins belong to you: you inherited them from your uncle or ant or whoever. And this whoever says to you these muffins are to tide you over everything. Whatever comes, you eat your muffins and your tide engendered by intestines and the rest of your digestive track goes over, over everything, down to your life. But what do you care about your life?

There is some bread somewhere and you are looking for it as if no other bread could be found in the world; no other bread, no other wine. You find both – on your dinner table.

I

You go round and round and you obviously go somewhere because there is no point in walking, flying, if you have no intention of reaching some destination. And then you realise that the destination you are thinking about is not just 'some' destination: it is *the* destination and even if you reach it automatically, almost unconsciously, you will become rich. Why go round and round instead of running, outstripping light and its speed? Just go and get what you have always dreamt about. Suppose, however, that you have never dreamt about anything apart from dolls and cuddly toys.

Well, you go round some planet or other. And they say to you, 'You go round yourself because you're eager to learn much more about your soul, its contents, its karmas. Of course you can say, 'I'm quite reluctant to learn anything about my karmas – I know too much of them, about them. Frankly speaking, I'm fed up with all this stuff, even of the stuff my dreams are made on. Incidentally, I wonder if they are really made and not spontaneous, in a way, falling from somewhere, from the stars, the milk you can see in the sky. But let us forget about the cosmos, which might enable us to think about another stratagem, another scheme of things (or of beings, for a change). We turn round a core, a corpse, and we realise we cannot move somewhere else – not in the vicinity of living creatures, anyway. Be they alive or not. (You never know whether the quick are really alive. And, as usual, you are tempted to say they are not.) Why should I turn round anything? I am not a gigolo, am I? If I turned round a woman, this woman might say to me, 'Why are turning round me? Do you intend to give me a few thousand dollars?' And I could answer her gracefully, 'I wish you could dance with me a few waltzes, preferably those composed by Strauss, one of the Strausses. But I have nothing against Tchaikovsky either, even if we are to dance his queer waltz from *La Pathétique*.'

At such moments – when you don't know where to turn, whom to turn to, how to turn – you are likely to turn a few pages in search of an answer to all your problems. But Confucius says, 'Old books are dusty so you waste your time on dusting them. And even if you dust all the books you can boast of – they are sleeping in your library – you'll never learn anything from them because they're old, old, old; much older than I am. And they're out of date, so you should consult their dates before reading them. And where could you find their dates?' So you fiddle with a year book, an annual yearbook and even a telephone directory. And what do you find in these books, may I ask? You find a few dates, that's for sure. But can you find the date you are looking for? Finally, you decide the date you are looking at at this particular moment is the date you need. And then you decide you don't need anything, and you don't even have to make decision because you do not need anything and this thought seems to be embedded in you. It is not only a thought, contrary to what you might think: it is also a feeling, a presentiment. You do *not* need anything, and even if you go to the best restaurant in the universe you will say to a waiter, 'A glass of coke. I don't need anything else except my life, my death and the middle way.' And then you stop because there is no point in going any further; or even backward.

You do wish to go backwards, and I devoted a lot of time to this preoccupation, occupation and business three decades ago because I had to find a few relatives of mine; in the Hereafter. And also other relatives, other persons. Sometimes you light upon a person standing in the middle of a road, and say to this person, 'Do you think I'm yearning to meet you?'

And this person says, 'I don't know anything about you.'

'But why are you standing here?'

‘Because I wish to stand here.’

‘Did you know I would come?’

‘No.’

There are persons and things that literally stand around you and you have no choice but to face them; or back them, as the case may be. And often you don’t know if the case is really there because it may be not; it can also be be, and I often choose be, the short version of ‘to be or not to be’. If you sink into ‘not to be’ it may sound and look like ‘a thorn stuck under my nail’. So someone sticks a thorn under your nail and then you watch this thorn get above your nail and go all over your body; and when I say ‘body’ I never forget to say ‘soul’ or ‘psyche’. I think psyche was a woman who stood behind a rock and then appeared in all her splendour to seduce Apollo or someone from his brood. Apollo said to her, ‘Do you have anything in common with my soul, my dear Psyche?’ And Psyche answered, ‘I am your *psy*.’ ‘I don’t know the word.’ ‘Analyst or shrink, if you prefer.’

That is what happens in the world. Apollo stands somewhere and suddenly, for no reason or unreason, Psyche joins him on a beach and then they set about talking to each other as if there had nothing else to do. They talk and talk and talk, and in the course of their conversation they realise they have nothing to say to each other as if they had really needed to *realise* it. Isn’t it obvious, clear, realisable, not questionable? Of course you can question this assertion, saying, ‘It’s questionable because they can say a lot to each other, for instance, “I love you, my dear Psyche.” And the latter can answer, “I love you too except that I have no idea what love means.”’ And then their conversation can become a dialogue, sounding thus:

‘Who are you?’

‘I am Apollo.’

‘What do you do for a living?’

‘I’m playing the guitar.’

‘Do you content yourself with tuning it? Or strumming on it? Why dedicate your life to this chore?’

‘I’ll go shopping when I’ve done my chores.’

‘Why can’t you go shopping *before* doing your chores?’

Apparently you should go deeper and deeper into yourself to understand the meaning of life and death and the Hereafter. You put a sort of ‘here’ in front of you and go beyond it so that, once you are beyond it, you think you know what awaits you in the Hereafter, provided you have enough time to look at this Hereafter, whatever this Hereafter may look or sound like; or unlike. But what about all these guitars and strumming? I think I saw Picasso’s picture featuring a guitar and a guitar player. I suppose in Spain (where Picasso was born) every man and woman play the guitar, saying to himself and herself, ‘I have to play this guitar of mine because Picasso was born in this country, my native land. And he painted a few guitars he played unless he borrowed them from Braque, Juan Gris or somebody else.’ But what do you care? You just borrow a guitar from a pedestrian or any other musician and play for hours – before sunset, presumably. You play and sing something along these lines or notes, ‘Carmen, I hope you can listen to my song in spite of your premature death. Of course I realise you behaved badly in don José’s presence, if that’s what his name and title. But I would never have stabbed you in the belly, for I respect all women, even if they’re not as beautiful as you are. I don’t say to myself, “This woman isn’t beautiful so I should stab her.” No way, no way. And if, in the near future, I feel like killing this woman, I’ll say to myself and others, “No no way, no no way.” Isn’t that beautiful?’

What is beautiful? What is not? Do you have to think in terms of proportions? You measure the height of the woman standing in front of you and then you pay a lot of attention to her width, saying, 'She's 2 metres in width.' Or 1 metre in width. Does it really matter? I wish to embrace this woman and you can embrace 1 meter in width; or 1 meter of length – all depends on how you judge this woman. If, for you, she is a piece of space, you can say, 'I'll wholeheartedly embrace this 1 metre in width.' But you might have some politically-incorrect problems in this domain. So you say to everybody, 'I wish to embrace Aphrodite, Venus, all other planets and the cosmos itself, herself.' But if you really wish to embrace the cosmos you should know how many meters you are to embrace in the course of your rite. First you should measure this cosmos and then you are supposed to proclaim, 'I'll embrace millions and trillions of miles, if you please.' Then you embrace these trillions and say, 'That's done. You can congratulate me, if you wish.'

And then your guests come in, bringing in their bags 300 bottles of gorgeous wines. And they say apologetically, 'Sorry, we couldn't bring you trillions of bottles, but if you live until the ripe old age of 200, we'll bring you, in the course of these years, 400 bottles of various wines we'll drink together.' You have no alternative but to live until this ripe age, and at some point you say to yourself, 'I'm ripe, I'm ripe. But I still wonder whether I've drunk all these bottles in the course of all these years. I also wonder whether these bottles were returnable. If they were, where are they? I wish to know whether I lived all these years or not. If I find these bottles I'll be able to swear I did live them, if only for the sake of living them for nothing.' You live for nothing; or you live for a bottle of wine, which is presumably better than living for nothing. You live for a bottle of wine at which you look from time to time, saying to it, 'I love you, my bottle of wine.' Then you see a woman or a man beside this bottle and you say, 'I love you, you know.' And you touch both of them if you feel like it.

What else? What else? There is nothing else, that's it. But if you don't go on you may die, you know. And if you do die you may turn in your grave, and they call it 'last waltz' or 'never-ending waltz'. At some point you might say to yourself, 'All right, I'm dying. I don't mind,' and then you see your mind because it is the last word you uttered in your former life. And your mind looks like a bottle of wine and so you begin to drink it, after biting it several times in a row, in the neck. You bite and drink and then they say to you, 'You should neither bite nor drink, otherwise you might die very soon, perhaps this afternoon.' So you stop drinking, eating and indulging in the pleasure defined as 'drinking blood' or 'eating flesh'. So you neither drink this blood nor eat that flesh in the hope of living forever. But after a while you realise you will never live forever for many reasons, one of them being the fragility of your veins and cells. You look at one of your cells and say to it emphatically, dramatically, 'Why are you so unreliable? What's the meaning of your unreliability?' And your cell replies, 'Unreliability has no meaning whatsoever.'

Once your cell engages you in conversation, you are stuck with it for half an hour at least. So your cell says to you, 'Why did you ask me anything? I mean – why did you ask me what you asked me?'

'Because I'm worried about my health,' you answer.

'I'm taking care of you,' the cell says and thinks.

'Do you really?'

'I do,' answers the cell.

'But I've always thought that one cell replaces another. In due course.'

'Yes, I suppose so.'

'I can't help wondering (and worrying) if the course we're talking about is due or not.'

‘What do you mean?’

‘There’s such a thing as undue course.’

That is what worries everyone in the course of all the years we can think about, even when we do not think about anything. What course are we following or doing? Undue or due, undue or due? Suppose it is a due course we are following, but then another question rears its ugly head (again or not again), ‘Do I really follow anything? Or do I do everything on my own?’ And there is an inner voice that answers most of the questions you ask yourself. And this time your inner voice says, ‘Do you know what your own voice comes down to?’ And you answer immediately, ‘My own personality always comes *up* to.’ And then you hear a sort of indescribable laughter. Of course you attempt to describe it and you describe it thus, ‘Ha, ha, hi, hi, ha, ah, ik, uk.’ Then you ask yourself if you described your laughter or your pain. Sure enough, you heard, ‘A, a, ah, h, h, h,’ because your voice grew horse. You check all your pains and find out that some of them say, ‘uh, uh, uh.’ You are not sure you can trust this piece of information. Of course you always trust the pains you experience, but whenever they deign to talk to you, you doubt what they say; except that you never doubt the end of these dialogues.

Are there only dialogues in our lives and deaths and purgatories? There are probably some trialogues, but they only concern the Holy Trinity to whom you can speak only in Paradise, if there is no other alternative. Perhaps you can say a few words to St Peter, from time to time. Actually no one knows for certain if he is always at the entrance; if he is the guardian of the so-called ‘Paradise-Gait’. For all I know, he may stroll through his domain without any thought related to his subjects. He just strolls through his kingdom and says, upon seeing this saint or another, ‘How are you today?’ And the saint answers, ‘There’s no today in your kingdom or domain or republic.’ And St Peter says, after exhibiting a number of smiles, ‘You’ve learnt your lesson.’

What kind of lesson can we learn on this Earth of ours? All right – everything is eternity, everywhere is overall space. We see a bit of space and say, ‘This bit is connected to all other galaxies by virtue of mechanics and quantum and quarks and arks.’ Once again you hear the voice you have no wish to hear, ‘What kind of arks do you have in mind and elsewhere?’ ‘A large wooden ship built by Noah in order to save his family and a male and female of every type of animal when the world was covered by a flood.’ Or you decide to hear no voices, no complaints or explanations, and you continue to write, ‘Ark, ark, and I don’t want to know what it means. Moreover, whatever I write doesn’t mean anything because life is meaningless.’ And somebody says to you, although this voice does not seem to have a voice (you can speak to anyone without voicing anything), ‘Life is meaningful and wonderful. You can go to museums and thus you’re sure to broaden the scope of your knowledge. And if you broaden this particular scope you may also broaden the scope of your life.’ And you vociferate upon hearing this kind of reflection, ‘Life has no meaning. What’s the meaning you’re talking about? You’re talking for the sake of talking and meaning. And outside your talking your meaning has no meaning.’

And then you watch TV and see someone jump in your presence, even though you are not really present within the space and stretch of this jump, whatever it is. And you admire this jump to the point of discussing it with the members of your family who say almost in unison, ‘Marvellous, marvellous, marvellous.’ And you say to the members of your family, ‘What’s so marvellous about it? Did you see her legs? They weren’t gracious during this jump, were they?’ And the members of your family answer as follows, ‘What does it matter? She broke several records and that’s what counts.’ But you drive the point home. ‘What counts is beauty, not records. You listen to a Bruckner symphony. Does it break any record? It is beautiful, beautiful, beautiful.’ And they say, ‘It breaks records in the domain of duration or length or boredom. They’re all listed in the Guinness Book of

Records.’ You go on talking to your opponents. ‘Are you talking about Alec Guinness? I like him very much. I like his *King Lear*. I mean, I like the performance he makes us admire in the course of the play entitled *King Lear*.’

‘Do you? Do you?’ they ask.

‘Yes, I do.’

‘Could you please justify your attitude, your appreciation of this performance? What are your arguments? What are they based on?’

‘They’re based on Alec Guinness’ gestures and voice.’

‘What can you base on a voice, pray?’

‘Let us pray, let us pray.’

What else could you say in this context? Or in any other contest (sic!)?

And then they ask you if you are sick or not. Of course you say you are not sick, for you are afraid of being locked up as some of Agatha Christie’s characters were in the course of her novels. So, whenever on the point of being locked up, you ask your visitors, ‘Are you going to lock me up?’ And you think about Agatha Christie. And if you do, you should say to those who stand in front of you, ‘Yes, I’m one of her characters,’ whereupon they will leave you in peace, immediately, yes-no question. They will even say to you, ‘I’m sorry, dear Sir, but I thought you were just a human being. You’re much more than that. So I bow before you and I think I could even bow and scrape before you if you had enough time for my demonstration of respect directed towards your persona.’ And you are tempted to ask them, ‘What is life?’ because they pay so much attention to your persona or rather to the life contained in your persona. You go so far as to ask them, ‘Do you think my persona has enough life in itself? If it doesn’t I wonder why you continue to bow to it, even on your knees to which you go down, whenever you see me life-sized?’

Once again you ask yourself, ‘Did they see me life-sized or death-sized? What does death-sized mean?’ Immediately you visualise a bone and you say, ‘That’s what they see when talking about me either in private or in public.’ Suppose they speak to you in public and the public in question sees a bone, just a bone, and they say to this public, ‘Can you see this bone?’ And the public answers, ‘Yes,’ although some of its members cannot see it, given the number of people gathered around it. And they say to this public and also to the bone, ‘Can you see anything?’ And the bone answers, ‘Yes.’ And so they ask the bone, ‘What can you see, according to your reflection and meditation?’ And the bone answers, ‘I can see the Hereafter and also a lot of dogs.’

‘What about the Hereafter you can see and probably feel? As for the dogs, we keep them at bay.’

‘I see quite a number of dogs, a lot of them.’

‘Do you mean to say the Hereafter has been reduced to a number of dogs?’

‘Yes, in the course of the last 40 years.’

‘Could you tell us exactly what number of dogs you’re alluding to?’

‘I’m not alluding to anything in particular.’

‘What about the number of dogs?’

‘I’m not *alluding* to them. I’m *talking* about them.’

What happens when you talk about someone or something? And what is the difference between allusions and talks? When you talk about someone, you walk around this person and say, ‘This person isn’t only in *my* mind. This person is also in *your* mind now because I’m walking around this person.’ When you allude to this or

that person, you just look somewhere, in some direction or other, and say to this direction or other, ‘Can you see what I mean?’ And if you hear a voice talking to you along the following lines, ‘What are you talking about?’ you set about looking for an answer to this question or allusion. And then you say, ‘I’m talking about the end of my glance.’ ‘Which end of your glance are you talking about?’ they are likely to ask you as you continue to throw your glances everywhere. ‘There’s no end to my glances,’ you answer or you may answer, according to the circumstances. And sometimes you do not act in accordance with the circumstances. So you act in accordance with non-circumstances; or you act in non-accordance with circumstances. Or with no accordance with no circumstances.

You sit down in front of a circumstance and you ask this circumstance a question to which you might have known an answer for many years. But noblesse oblige: you think you are duty bound to consult whoever or whatever you happen to come across so as not to contradict this person’s or thing’s inner (in *sich*) nature. So you say to this person or thing, ‘I know you have your inner (in *sich*) nature so I can’t ignore it, whatever my motives and designs.’ And this person or thing is likely to ask you, ‘What are your intentions? Do you intend to break me forever, leaving my pieces nowhere?’ Of course you do your best to convince this thing or person that you have no intention of causing it to fall apart – even for the sake of some experiment or other. Why do you say that? Because you don’t think – even in your nightmares this thought does not occur to you – that your good intentions could be questioned by whoever or whatever you can face, in accordance with circumstances.

Another circumstance appears in front of you: I am weary of saying that everything comes out the blue, with the exception of death. For once this exception does not come and I go on sitting where I am, where my seat is situated, so to speak. So what? It is pointless to investigate the origins and also the meaning of ‘so’ – there are too many sos in the world so you don’t really know about which of these sos you are talking; if you can still talk. You can talk and so you say, ‘So, so, so, so, so.’ And then you switch to something else situated in the vicinity of ‘so’. And this vicinity or rather the object you can find right there is called ‘what’. ‘What is it? What is it all about? What does the word “quantum” mean? What does mean mean?’ And then you hear a lot of comments on the subject:

‘I mean, I mean, I mean.’

‘What *do* you mean?’

‘I mean that I mean. Or what I mean.’

And this can go on for centuries. Centuries go on and one can hear the following poem, ‘I mean, I mean, I mean, and what I mean doesn’t really matter.’

‘I mean, I mean, I mean.’

‘I matter, I matter, I matter.’

‘Do you matter?’

‘Yes, I do.’

‘Do you really mean?’

‘I’m not sure.’

‘Is your meaning comparable to that of Plato and Dante? Or to the song of a nightingale?’

‘I’m not sure.’

Why do we always compare something to something or anybody? We look at a fly and say, ‘This fly is flying, as many other flies do every day.’ And we can add, after much soul-searching, ‘These flies don’t speak

because it's not necessary to produce a few sounds that sound like words. You can sing, if you feel like it. And you often do so, so that one can hear your songs almost everywhere, "A-a-a-a-a-a-a---o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o." So one listens to your song from afar and says, 'I think this voice belongs to a human being.' And then this being or human begins to question him- or herself on the subject. 'Do I hear anything?' this subject asks oneself. And then the subject suggests another version of the situation, 'Am I standing somewhere? Do I have a pair of ears that can listen to anything, even if there's nothing at all, anywhere?' Then you look at your body and ask yourself if it is standing or not. And then you touch whatever happens to be in close proximity to your body and you ask anybody, just anybody, 'Does all this exist?'

I have no idea whether it corresponds to a well-known theory according to which you fairly and squarely exist; or you exist only unfairly and unsquarely. You draw a square and ask yourself, 'Am I inside this square? Am I outside this square?' All right – you are *inside* this square, believe it or not. You have grown fat over the last year and so you are not sure you can stay within this square without hitting yourself. You don't hit yourself, all right, all right. What else? Do you exist squarely or not? All right – you exist squarely and so you say to your square, 'I'm at one with you, you know.' And if you don't add, 'you know,' this square will not know anything. And what about triangles? What *about* them? Why should you care about triangles? What you do care about right now is a square and fair, whatever the latter might mean in the context and even out of it.

And then you realise you are sitting in front of a circumstance which you might call 'an event' if you cared much more about your reputation. So you speak accordingly to this circumstance, saying, 'Are you an event?' And of course the circumstance evades both the question and issue. All right. So you have no alternative (do you ever have any alternative?) than to answer, 'My life is very important. And whatever happens in it deserves the name of "event".' And then a voice says to you, 'All right. You wish to become eventful. But what is an "event"? And what is "ful" in the context?'

They punch you on the nose and you say, 'Three inches punched me on the nose.' Why measure the strokes one receives in the course of one's life? One loses one's mother and measures this loss, saying to oneself, 'I lost 1000 yards.' And then you lose something or somebody else and you say, 'I lost two miles.' Does this make sense? What does? one wonders. I lose, you gain and then you think you eat too much and so grow bigger and bigger as if determined to vie with Gargantua or someone else whose weight and size have been known throughout centuries. You grow bigger and bigger and they say to you, 'You're neither Gargantua nor Hercules.' And you begin to ask yourself questions related to your identity problem. You ask yourself, 'Who am I? I'm neither Gargantua nor Hercules. Of course I could carry the vault of heaven as far as other galaxies, but no one enjoins me to do that. So I don't do either this or that. Incidentally, Atlas does the job wonderfully, as far as I can judge this kind of job. At least I'm delighted to realise that heaven doesn't fall on my head every two minutes.'

Suppose heaven does fall on your head every two minutes. You forget to say your prayers and suddenly you feel the weight of heaven on your shoulders and shoulder blades. And you say to yourself, 'My God, I didn't pray this morning.' And you begin to pray without trying to locate the Almighty in the midst of the weight you are carrying on your shoulders and blades. Isn't that a blessing in itself? If you need a blessing, you say to the cosmos, 'Please, make me feel the weight of your heavens and stars.' And immediately you feel their weight and also their might. For a moment you wonder what is more important: weight or might. And then you subside; actually you might use any other word, when trying to depict your almost divine inner harmony.

Sometimes your floor seems to rise from the dead: every floor reminds you either of Hell or of tombs which you count whenever you go to a cemetery, instead of going to a funfair. You count the tombs you come across and you say, 'One of these tombs might have been destined for my body. But I'm still alive.' And you go on, go on. How much longer can all this last? You do not wonder, for this kind of questions plunge you headlong into a sort of chaos from which it is impossible to extricate yourself or oneself; at least it might take some time. Do you have this time, some time, any time? No idea, not the foggiest.

Anyway, your floor rises and you say to it, 'Why are you rising? What's the matter with you? Stay where you are, forever.' And you begin to question your behaviour related to this floor of yours. Is it really one of the floors of yours? How many floors do you have under your feet? Never mind, never mind. You have a floor and you think you can walk across it to the very end of the world. Do you really need a floor for your walks? Can't you walk on the heavens? You walk on the heavens, on the stars, and you are happy, aren't you? Instead of counting tombs and graves you count stars, saying to the cosmos, 'One star, two stars, three stars.' So what?

AN ADDITION TO THE BIOGRAPHY

In 1974 V. A. left Russia (formerly the Soviet Union) definitively and requested political asylum in Belgium. For this innocent-looking move, the movers and shakers of his native country sentenced him in absentia to seven years' imprisonment.

FOR AGENCIES

Dear Mrs

I am sending you an excerpt from my latest book of essays. It is entitled *My Portrait Gallery*. Actually these portraits are multifaceted visions of the people whose identities – or multi-identities – give rise to so many associations that one readily yields to the temptation and creates a literary work, vaguely reminiscent of Pavel Filonov, Paul Klee and Joan Miró.

Apart from the essay devoted to De Quincey and his Kant where the story of the philosopher's (and a bon vivant's) death is recounted in great detail, there are no externally coherent texts in the book. I wonder if the quantum mechanics are *externally* coherent, unless they speak to us (in detail) about the end of the world. Some of the details are succulent, others bitter; but bitterness can also be succulent, delicious.

I am sending you the essay on Benedetto Croce and Pablo Picasso. I am almost certain that Picasso did not read a single line of the Italian philosopher. And to my knowledge, the latter never wrote a single line about Picasso. Be that as it may, someone, somewhere – why not God? – is likely to bring all of us together; sooner or later.

