

VALERY ALEFF

NIGHTS AND MARES

They are separated by a wall, by a quantity of the night and air that do all they can to prevent them from tormenting each other in the near future. In the novel Natasha speaks of the moon she can see every night, provided it is a starry night and not a cloudy one. Prince Andrey does not come to her father's estate every day so she might speak about him at length, putting great emphasis on his intelligence and nobility of spirit. She does not and Prince Andrey leaves the estate empty-handed, so to speak: he has no idea whether Natasha loves him or not.

As usual Tolstoy is slightly pedantic and didactic: the last sentence hits the nail on the head, but the nail has already been hammered in the right place for some time.

Handling it as if it was a pack of cards, I laid minutes, hours and years face up on my writing desk.

In my hotel room we did not talk as if determined to act and go ahead with a project we had in mind. She undressed, but I contented myself with watching her striptease from afar – from the bed on which I was sitting. This bed was a ship and I continued to round the Cape in order to fulfil my destiny without incurring the wrath of the Almighty: one punishment is enough. In my new ship I rounded her and found her members attractive enough to go ashore and touch her. I knew I was in love with her and this love was disinterested: I did not want her to sacrifice her life for me. I just wanted her to sit in front of me or rather by my side. I touched her several times, but this human contact was not erotic enough to satisfy my curiosity. Actually, I was curious about women and the way they could act on a man's psyche. How does a man's psyche react in the presence of a woman? What does it feel when a woman touches it? And then I transferred my attention to my body which was apt to receive a woman's message with more acuity and trepidation.

If we treat the world and whatever swarms in it as playthings, we are supposed to play with them as Charlie Chaplin does in the film *The Dictator*, tossing and turning a globe. 'Ludic,'

as they say in the States. In the second half of the 20th century, this word was quite fashionable in France. Intellectuals played with words and notions, went through the motions. At last humanity was able to play with the globe because, at the end of the 20th century, there was no more history. We used to play war games, killing millions of people. For a while we played with the globe that was cracking under our pressure. Millions of people have fallen into the fissures. Now we are playing with the fissures that continue to grow.

She poured some champagne into our glasses and put the bottle down on the tablecloth. 'Get up, young man!' she commanded. 'I'm going to propose a toast.' I obeyed her command and picked up my glass. 'Your jacket,' she said. 'Have you forgotten your jacket?' I laid down the glass and removed my jacket. 'You are soaked through. Is it raining outside?'

The point is I have been *deprived* of my bed and I have no idea by whom. Perhaps by someone who longs to dream of children and needs to be warmed up to the subject through someone else's objects such as beds and pillows.

'How did it happen?' asks the host. The victim opens his mouth but the host puts out his hand, almost touching the victim's teeth. 'I've got another idea. We've invited to our studio a famous fortune-teller. Let *her* unravel the mystery of your death.'

A plump woman descends a few steps and sits down by the third murderer. 'You saw a man lying on the floor in the adjacent room,' she says to the victim. "'What's to be done?" you asked yourself. Two answers to this question sprang to your mind. "Either I call the police or rush back into my room and barricade myself in." You opted for the second solution which seemed to assure protection from the invisible murderer. So you found yourself immured in your room for a considerable stretch of time. Little by little, however, you came to judge the situation on its own terms, leaving aside the problem of your own safety. A man had been murdered, your close friend and associate. Who might have killed him? His wife? She had been your mistress for two years. You unlocked the door, peeped out of your room, stepped outside, entered the adjacent room and all of a sudden—'

'What we're also interested in is the *future* of this man,' says the host.

'He will be killed in exactly...(the fortune-teller looks at her watch)...four minutes.'

Windows are an invitation
 Which we accept but seldom
 Because, in this world of ours,
 We're not very fond of the Hereafter.

Life can become unbearable, though,
 And a window opens on its own.

Whether we accept the invitation or not,
 There's no escape from our lot.
 We die and enter other worlds
 And another window opens.

How many windows are there in my universe? I jump out of them and fall on a thick mattress. Tosca will never die, for all her jumps and suicides. She still bows to the audience. Why can't You punish me? Why can't You invent an adequate punishment? You are less inventive than the Bolsheviks, aren't you? Your punishments don't match my crimes. My novel is entitled *The Crime*. Or *Crimes*. I am Lenin. Or half Dostoevsky.

I am Lenin, am I not? Half. Double. A double Lenin, please! Am I a drink? They drink me and fall down.

I am also a poet, an English poet. *Pendant mes moments perdus*. I've just given you proof of my knowledge of French. Why do you need this proof? Do you think I collaborate with foreigners? Do you think I am a spy? Who are you? Why are you spying on me? Why are you dancing around me? Are you going to eat me? Don't eat me, please! I am not eatable. I am not drinkable. Vultures refuse to eat me. Jackals refuse to drink me. So I have no alternative but to eat my own flesh and drink my own blood. I do. In the evenings. When I have nothing else to do. I don't understand why they find me unpalatable. I eat myself and grow out of myself. I cannot die. At least I cannot die by starvation.

I talk and talk and talk, hoping to empty myself and die of emptiness. Words compose my contours, my portraits in the distance, but there are still some words left at the bottom of my

stomach. There are always some words at the bottom of my stomach and in my intestines. My intestines are infinite. My words are eternal.

And then my words close in upon me and start tickling and pricking my body. My words are as sharp as razors. They cut my body into pieces. They cut my throat. My bathroom is full of blood. My bodies are piled up in my bathtub. My words float around in my blood and plunge into the caverns of my bodies.

What did Chuang Tzu tell me last night? Snares are employed to catch hares, but when the hares are got, men forget the snares. Words are employed to convey ideas, but when the ideas are apprehended, men forget the words. I would give all the tea in China to talk with such a man who has forgotten the words. That is what he told me in my bathroom.

I have not forgotten my words. I have forgotten my ideas. I have not forgotten my snares. I still catch hares. I've got millions of hares in my house. They are piled up on my writing desk.

Don't whine, comrades, we are bound to win, for we are right. And they are wrong, whoever they are. So they are bound to be defeated. And they *are* defeated, whoever they are. Whoever *we* are. They are defeated, but they don't whine over their defeat, and so we defeat them once again. They still don't whine, notwithstanding our victory. Somebody must whine, I say. So we begin to whine. Whoever we are. The world is too silent without whining. The universe is too empty without tears. Thales maintains that tears are the original substance out of which all others are formed. The earth rests on tears, he says. And whining is at the root of all music. That is why I like Shostakovich.

My wife betrays me every day. She goes out and strips her clothes off. A passer-by takes her in his arms. They go to the woods. Or they do it in my room. They seem to work in a factory. I can't help admiring the regular rhythm of their movements. The production of steel would increase enormously if I succeeded in diverting their energy from sex to industry.

What are these people doing here? We have freed ourselves from the influence of the treacherous and cowardly Liberals, they shout. Well and good. What next? Who are you? I ask. We have won for ourselves hegemony in the democratic revolution, they shout. I know

what you are here for, I shout. You want to lift my body into the air and carry it shoulder-high as far as St Petersburg. That's right, they shout. Don't do it, I shout. I suffer from vertigo. You suffer from syphilis, not from vertigo, they shout. You've built a new Tower of Babel and you must climb up on it to hang a banner on the vane. I can't, I shout. Everything would be going round me long before I got half-way. You must, they shout. So I am given a banner and obediently I climb up. Ladies wave their handkerchiefs and the cries of 'hurrah' are echoed down in the street. Then the crowd breaks into a shriek of terror and I fall down.

The Revolution again. I thought I had got rid of it for good. Where is my soul now? In the hands of the Bolsheviks? Have I fallen into their hands? Stalin strokes my cheeks and sings me a lullaby. I die and he puts me in the mausoleum. People bend over my face and kiss me on the lips. Their vodka-stinking breath is thick and slippery like jelly. My wives jump onto their backs. And they gallop around me. And my father bets thirty thousand dollars on those horses. And they gallop faster and faster. And Stalin takes a whip out of his pocket. And he brandishes the whip above my head. And the horses detach themselves from the marble floor and begin to fly. And I remember that I am an English poet.

I cannot write poetry any more. What can I write? I wrote an anonymous letter last night. And I sent it to myself. Your wife betrays you, I said in the letter. And I described her betrayals in minute detail. Your benefactor, I signed it. And I received the letter. And I read it. And I tore it up. I did not believe my benefactor. I don't believe anybody. Why should my wife betray me? I am an ideal husband. I excel all others in the ability to determine the main link in the chain of tasks that confront the Party.

I wrote another letter. I addressed it to the chief of the Police Department. Lenin was observed to be in communication with politically unreliable persons, some of whom now have proceedings pending against them on the charge of committing offences against the state. That is what I wrote in my anonymous letter. Your best informer, I signed it. Lenin is a dangerous individual.

I track myself down. I open a trap, run down a ladder, bump against a wall and listen to my own footsteps that try to catch up with me. My footsteps descend the stairs and I begin to run again. I hear my own voice. Halt! I shout. But I don't stop. Halt! Halt! Halt! resounds

under the vault. I clutch my own hand. But I don't stop. I wrench my hand from my hand and continue to run.

I run on and on. Space swims like a kite in the current of my breath.

I chase the darkness away by wandering up and down with two candelabra in my hands.

Only along this road can the proletariat liberate itself from its dependence upon the chauvinist bourgeoisie, and, in one form or another, more or less rapidly, take decisive steps on the road to the real freedom of nations and Socialism.

There are many old words in my head. They are very old. They are grey-haired and full of wrinkles. I extract them from my head and put them on my couch. They contract and whither before my very eyes. They compress into the shape of small mothballs.

My words cough a lot. They are ill. A skeleton holds a whip, a tottering skeleton covered with dirt. He cracks his whip and they march forward. My words. My adopted children.

Monopolist capitalism. Parasitic or decaying capitalism. Moribund capitalism.

I try to bring my mind back to the problem of personal religious salvation which must be dealt with in view of my impending suicide.

I have already brought my mind back to several spots. I remember balancing my mind in the palms of my hands as if it were my newborn child whom I was lulling to sleep.

Assuming that one is to be born again...when the time comes. Why postpone this breakthrough till some 'happier moment'? There is no such thing...neither within time, nor beyond time...neither in the land of the living nor in the land of Salvador Dali's pliable watches...

Why not extinguish all the stars and thereby put an end to the unbearable contemplation of future calamities?

Where is my wife? Her clothes are here, on my bed. She is not in my bed. Is it my bed? Whose bed is it? Stalin's? What is he doing in my bed? Haven't they removed him from the mausoleum?

On the whole, in spite of a host of drawbacks, this is after all a step towards a rupture with the social-chauvinists.

The social-chauvinists stand in the middle of the room and I go away from them until I bump against the wall.

I remember climbing my Tower of Babel on Jacob's ladder that unfolded itself with the solemnity of a scroll.

I try to forget myself by looking all the time at other people. The point is that I recognize myself in other people. They are nothing but mirrors in human shape. We walk together around the mausoleum. Sometimes I stop walking and they carry me out.

Thou art worthy, O Lord, to receive glory and honour and power: for thou hast created all things, and for thy pleasure they are and were created.

I don't recognise my voice. The voice I hear pretends to be mine. It is not. It comes from outside, and I am not outside. I am inside.

Who hath divided a watercourse for the overflowing of waters, or a way for the lightning of thunder;

To cause it to rain on the earth, where no man is; on the wilderness, wherein there is no man;

To satisfy the desolate and waste ground; and to cause the bud of the tender herb to spring forth?

This time I recognise Stalin's voice. He often boasts about the irrigation canals that were dug on his orders in the first half of his rule.

Shostakovich's last quartet is a long, funereal tunnel. Its air is suffocating, its ground, squashy. It reminds me, among other things, of Tarkovsky's film *Stalker* in the course of which a few men squelch and stagger through the mud of a no-man's land.

My mother must be dead by now. She used to come rather often. She slept in my bed. I would put blankets on her sleeping body. Four or five blankets. She was smothered in blankets. Did I smother her? I heard some screams, many screams. Smothered screams. Where did they issue from? I don't know. I scream myself. I scream around 5 p.m.

Is he really my lawyer? He says so. I don't need lawyers. I need executioners. At this stage of eternity. I've got two axes in my chest of drawers. I cannot wield them myself. And he is paralyzed. He speaks, but he does not move. I wish he were mute and agile.

Do you love me? Why don't you answer? Sex is of no importance. We have a lot in common. Spiritual affinities. *Die Wahlverwandtschaften*. I used to love you when you were alive. And I do love your skeleton. Your skeleton is elegant. Where do you buy all these clothes? Dollars, dollars, dollars. Let's go out and sit on a stump. Let's invite my lawyer to dinner. He promised to kill me tomorrow morning.

Is the world better now? Without me? They see the universe in terms of money. For once, I am not guilty. On the contrary. They are so stupid. Even I am more intelligent. The future is stupid. The past is wise. Everything is useless. Everything is pointless.

The present grave-like stillness in the world must not deceive us. The earth is charged with revolution. The suffering caused by the high cost of living engenders a revolutionary spirit everywhere; and the ruling classes, the bourgeoisie with its servitors, the governments, are moving into a blind alley from which they can never extricate themselves without tremendous upheavals.

History flutters around my skull. I remain immobile and history circles above my skull. History traces vicious circles on the ceiling. Like a moth attracted by light. Everybody is always attracted by light.

Why can't I live normally? Naturally? Like a Chinaman? To speak perfectly I have to put words away. To act perfectly I have to remain immobile. And everything will go around me.

I put my words away, but they return and pester me. I lock my door, but they squeeze in through the peephole. And I cannot remain immobile. I have the fidgets.

Do you think I am still in the land of the living? Well, in another land of the living, then. Abroad, so to speak. Not in Paris, though. Not in Switzerland. On another planet perhaps. Nothing to do with the earth. I cannot fly on this planet.

This up-and-down, life-and-death pendulum creates a semblance of life.

I am full of holes. Tubes are inserted into my body. An octopus-like apparatus. A new soul is blown in through these tubes.

This planet is a huge poem. A bad one. A bad Russian poem. I am hungry. The human body *is* eternal. The human soul is perishable. My soul died in exile. I did not attend the funeral. I don't like funerals. I don't like cemeteries. I prefer mausoleums. I prefer dead bodies to dead souls. I prefer blood to light. When you kill a soul, a ray of light issues from it.

Whenever my thought-rays hit the atmosphere of the earth, they collide with the molecules of the air. Our disconsolate, agitated, jittery universe.

Something rolling...water...waves. Rats leave the sinking ship. I am staying. I am not a rat. Am I a cat? What am I going to eat?

God must be sensitive to the music radiating from my violin whose sobs and throbs seem to carry me through the air, as far as His castle. Am I a part of Chagall's painting?

The endless sprawl of my brain-waves is bound to reach the last page, the last line, the last sign, the last sigh.

Does God have a free hand to torture me before the advent of the Last Judgement? Tonight I repudiated all I had stood for in 1917. The preservation of my personality does not count any more. I said to myself, 'Count me out.' I deducted myself from myself.

Don't switch me off, please! I promise to be obedient and nice. Don't touch my umbilical cord! Why are you tampering with my fuses?

I swear not to undermine the tsarist regime in Russia. I swear to inform against revolutionaries. I swear to forget Marx and read Schopenhauer every day. I swear to defend the Winter Palace against the Bolsheviks. I swear to murder Lenin at the first opportunity. I swear to repay the damage I have done to Russia. How? By selling my body. I swear not to leave Switzerland in 1917. I swear to murder my parents before my birth so that humanity might be spared a great deal of trouble and suffering. I swear to believe in God. I swear to keep myself away from the earth and from the moon. I swear to become a poet and build an ivory tower in Alakayevka.

I am an old dog wailing his heart out on the streets. God has thrown me off the scent.

Suddenly bang, and I am right where I started.

God stood confused and convinced of the weakness and speciousness of His logic.

Humanity continues to march to the beat of the drum towards the common grave. Why can't they walk in silence? Why do they have to march to the beat of the drum? Why don't they stop? Do they really have to go so far? What is there at the horizon? Another mausoleum?

The Body, being severed from the Soul, rests for some time in the mausoleum - the most perfect alembic imaginable. But if the fire is increased and well-tempered, the Soul gradually descends in drops and saturates and moistens the Body. And a plant grows out of the Body. The Tree of Life.

THE IMPOSSIBILITY OF SUICIDE

Chasms. Chasms. I might call them holes
 or downward perspectives. I call them chasms.
 They yawn at my feet whenever I stop.
 I can't be on the move. Always. So
 they split the floor open.

I do not fall into these chasms,
 contrary to what might be expected.
 (One step would be enough.
 A half-step.)

In my mind
 stands a tree.
 I can't find it.

I can't find it. I can't feel it. Is *this* my punishment? Why do mausoleums sprout like mushrooms? Are they mushrooms?

He that is without sin among you, let him first cast a stone at her.

I have eaten two mushrooms. I hope they are poisonous.

My body is an icicle. I hang from a roof. I sound like Papageno's aria *Ein Mädchen oder Weibchen*.

I trip over my bones scattered all along the corridor.

I sprout out of my own mummy. The weather sprouts my limbs. I spread my foliage around the mausoleum.

I have found my Tree of Life! Adieu, adieu. Remember me.

I woke up suddenly and looked around to find out what had caused me to abandon the state of non-being to which I had grown so accustomed in the course of the Stalinist, deep-freezer era. I stroked my head and its familiar relief reassured me: no bumps had altered it in the night. Nobody had clouted me on the head either with a fist or with a walking stick. There must be a shortage of walking sticks, I told myself.

So I was loved and idolised again. I looked at my hand, striving to remember who had stroked my hair a few minutes before. Was it myself or some admirer of mine? A woman?

Nice to be at home! Cosy. Why should I go out? What awaits me outdoors? The same chaos. The world is old, isn't it? God must be old too, by now. Tired of story-telling. Is the Almighty a good writer? Is He a good poet? Far inferior to Shakespeare, in my opinion.

Elisabeth! Elisabeth! Going deaf. That is the trouble with her. And her teeth. I wish she wouldn't bite me so often. A nasty habit. How am I supposed to account for all these bruises? Better stay at home. Helen bites me too.

I wonder if one can fall in love. With a human being, I mean. Not with an angel or God. Am I married?

Whose clothes are these? They smell beautiful. They are not mine. I cannot put them on. They slip away from my hands.

Elisabeth! Have you invited anybody to dinner tonight? The trouble with my wife is that she doesn't remember anything. She invites people to dinner and forgets she has invited them. And they come. They never forget invitations. They come and stare at me. The way those people stare at me is quite unpleasant and repugnant. As if I were an exhibit in some archaeological museum. I don't like archaeology. I don't like digging the ground. It is difficult to dig the ground when it is frozen hard. Besides, one may chance upon a corpse. I do, from time to time. Even when I don't dig the ground.

Singers and sportsmen. Nobody else. Nothing but singing, jumping, running, swimming, skating.

It is cold in here. A hollow body. I saw a painting last week. It was entitled *A Hollow Body*. It represented a human body without bones, tendons. Water was flowing through its veins, instead of blood. The skin was transparent, of course. *The Invisible Man* would have been a more appropriate title. In my opinion. There was nothing on the canvas. Was it a canvas? Not a trace of paint. How did I know it was a human body? Because of the title perhaps. Was it *A Human Body*? Wasn't it rather *A Human Soul*? Something invisible, yet...How should I say? Tangible...the canvas was tangible. Was it a canvas? Was it a painting? I touched it to make sure the thing existed. It did. Is it still in existence? The soul is immortal.

Everything is eternal, if one takes memory into account. People have short memories. There is such a thing as cosmic memory, I presume. Call it history, if you like. An invisible history. Yet it does exist somewhere. In here perhaps.

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Whose voice is this? Doesn't matter really. It is the words that count.

Your subscriptions are sent to our express address located right in lunar crater Tycho. From there, your subscriptions are immediately sent by our special space-courier to Venus. This enables US to process your subscriptions from any location universewide in the shortest possible time.

There are many shops around here. Wonderful clothes! Wonderful!

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be confidentially paid directly to you anywhere in the Universe. Upon expiry of your subscription you will receive a final itemised statement of your winnings.

Today I bought myself a tie.

I bought myself another tie.

I bought myself a cashmere coat. And a cashmere jacket.

No less than 125,000,000 staff members are deployed around the Universe for the companies of the ZUKLR Holding Group. We fly only EZAOU.

We regard our highly-qualified men and women as our most valuable resource, a resource which yields top results for our business partners and investors - day by day, hour by hour, second by second.

After all, it is always worth investing Time and also Space in deciding where your assets will work best for you.

ZUKLR Holding is one of the world's leading financial services groups. Our Jupiter headquarters, combined with our companies' presence in all important universe markets, offers the investor the best possible options.

I cannot keep money in my boots, can I?

Why should you hide money under the floorboards in your bedroom? Are you so anxious to raise the living standards of mice and rats?

Special rates for the weekend. A wide choice of fine personal spaceships. From the very sensible to the absolutely extravagant. So the next time you need to get away from your unfaithful wife, or get back to your faithful wife, call US. Or ask your travel agent for details.

I followed the advice and I asked my travel agent for details. When I finally left his office, I carried a pile of leaflets in my hands and on my head. Soon I began to lose them. A street urchin picked up the Andromeda leaflet and immediately flew off.

If you've looked around recently, you'll know that you could easily pay \$5,000 for just one suitcase. Furito are able to offer you a whole set. Four pieces which give you everything you're likely to need. What about taking your wife with you? Just put her into our largest suitcase 'YUGZ'! She is faithful to you, isn't she? Unfaithful? All the more reason to take her with you!

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After your flight, relax with a professional massage in the privacy of your hotel room, apartment or house. Our masseuses come from Venus.

I order her to strip and fling her on the bed. I strap her down to each bedpost so that she lies spread-eagled on her back, showing everything. When she is totally helpless, I torment her. I flog her, I cut her and watch her body become diaphanous. I kill her, I resurrect her, I kiss her wounds. But I refuse to make love to her. My subordinates file in and have her one after the other.

Any Wy-Ny-Sy enthusiast will tell you that TFZPL Wy-Ny-Sy equipment is well known for its technology, innovation and high performance. He'll also tell you just how low our prices are, for performance that's guaranteed. Low enough, in fact, for us to say that TFZPL gives you more performance per dollar than any other make of Wy-Ny-Sy.

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An informal lecture on the latest technique of transplanting hair is given on 78603-4129758673423064734 each evening after 6.30. It is tape-recorded to avoid embarrassment for men who want to know about having their existing hair redistributed to hide male pattern baldness. The lecture can be telephoned from your own home. Don't talk - just listen.

I love her!

Star-dust developer. Asserted by a leading sexologist to be the only tested electronic appliance that proved successful for the enlargement of the male organ.

Extension sheath. A washable and reusable sheath with a solid tip which effectively triples the length of the male organ.

Tomorrow we are invited to dinner.

The day after tomorrow we shall pay a visit to her grandmother.

She is my mermaid!

I cannot dive.

I cannot swim.

Is that my little skylark twittering out there?

I cannot fly.

When it comes to aroma nothing really compares with Reza pipe tobacco. You might be thinking that a pleasant aroma is all very well but what about smoking pleasure? Don't you worry! Just relax in your armchair, your pipe sticking out of your mouth. And if you want to know how much it's going to cost you, we've got more good news.

KUBRDF. Our new watch inspired by the purest Saturnine elegance. Do you have a bed? You must have one. Otherwise you wouldn't hear our voice. Our potential customers listen to our velvety voice in their beds, often confusing it with the voice of their sweet dreams. You have always dreamed about a watch like that, haven't you? Why don't you have it then? You have a bed and you need one of our watches to know how long you have remained in your bed. You shouldn't stay in your bed for ever. There are other pleasures in store for you. Your life is a dream, but you can have this dream everywhere: on Saturn, on Andromeda, on the moon. Our watch will guide your step. Our watch will tell how long your pleasures last. Do you know the French expression '*faire durer le plaisir*'? Do you know French at all? Even Lenin had a smattering of French.

So take your old watch, crush it under your heel - let it go to Hell! - and visit us in our new shop. Our watches are manufactured in the finest jeweller's tradition. These solid gold masterpieces will measure out your Eternity. Dream-like. Decidedly contemporary. A visual and a musical homage to the metaphysics of Time.

Is it my house? I bought this house in the last century. Did I? How do I know it is *my* house? Do I recognise it? Do I recognise the furniture? Where does this vase come from? And this armchair? Is it a rocking chair? Is it a cradle?

Sleep my dear, sleep my dear!
It is pointless to hear
What I'm saying. Words are mere
Sounds.

It is my bed. When did I buy it? When did I sleep in it? When did I dream in it? What did I dream about? Never mind. Never mind.

Do I recognise the walls? Walls are the same everywhere.

It is my window over there. Is it my window? Looks like my window.

Byzantium, immobility. Disorder is the attribute of a fallen man. Our time – running on the spot.

How does an empire die? Does it collapse in one terrible moment? No, no. But there comes a time when its people no longer believe in it. I should believe in my health, my eternity.

One should keep a diary. Meetings with God?

Goethe didn't want to write about some episodes of his childhood – couldn't remember exactly. Also Nabokov. I don't remember anything. Only what was before birth.

The sick want to destroy others.

The sea. Man came from the sea. Blood is salty.

You charge a computer with your mind and will live forever. Why? No vodka, no bodily pleasures.

As long as one pays homage to the deceased and repeats his name – he's alive. The soul returns to the body to get some rest. So they put food, water and even wine in the tomb. The Egyptians believe that part of your soul consists of what others think about you. Archaeologists prolong the life of mummies.

'Terrific! We're adults, aren't we? Why should we write and think at God's dictation? Why should He always read our notebooks? Why should we share with Him our flats? Our life is short, but we are free to do whatever we desire! A moment of freedom is longer than the eternity of slavery! We're immortal, whereas the Fathers of the Church die in their infancy.'

Another nightmare. I was talking to a man whose features and name I cannot recall. What was *my* name? I was not airing *my* views, was I? At least I recognised my whereabouts

as I saw two police officers show up on Red Square. 'Can you fly?' I asked my companion in misfortune.

'What about you?' he asked.

'Can *they* fly? We'd better stay where we are. Otherwise they'll suspect us of being Bolsheviks.'

'Where are you going?' asked the first policeman.

'We're motionless,' I said. 'At least *I* am rooted to the spot.'

'You're in the open air,' said the second policeman.

'Taking a stroll. I was ill.'

'Good for your health, what?' said the first policeman.

'I don't smoke either.'

'Show me your papers!' said the second policeman.

I took out my passport and handed it to him.

'The doctors think that within a month I'll be able to resume my activities.'

'What's your profession?'

'I'm a concert pianist and a writer.'

'We've got a piano at the police station. Come with us!'

'I can't. I'm ill, I'm drunk.'

I sat down on the cobblestones.

'I'll carry you on my back,' said the first policeman.

'We'll both carry you on our backs,' said the second policeman.

'I'm very heavy.'

'You can't be both dead and drunk,' the second policeman pointed out, his bottom lip trembling. 'The dead don't drink.'

'But drunkards die very often,' I said.

'The dead drink a lot. They don't get drunk,' said my companion in misfortune.

I rose to my feet.

'He is not!'

I lay down again.

'Let's take him to the police station,' said the first policeman. 'We'll put him down in our cot.'

'We'd better put him in the mausoleum,' said the second policeman. 'He's Lenin after all.'

'The name is of no importance,' said the first policeman. 'Shall we find out instead to which category of sinners this man belongs? If vermin eat him, he is gluttonous. If demons sodomise him on *their* bed, he is slothful. If our bankers pour molten gold down his throat, he is avaricious.'

'And if he's a murderer?' asked the second policeman.

'He is a *mass*-murderer,' said the first policeman. 'He escaped from the mausoleum but couldn't go too far.'

'Why couldn't I?' I rose to my feet.

'Because you're drunk.'

'Shall we run a test for alcohol?' asked the second policeman.

'You killed everybody,' said the first policeman.

'I didn't kill *you*, did I?'

'You did,' said the first policeman, tapping on his dead lungs. 'And you killed my grandfather.'

'He didn't kill *me*,' said my companion in misfortune.

'Are you alive?' asked the second policeman.

'No,' answered my companion in misfortune.

'So he did murder you. He murdered everybody.'

'Nobody's alive,' said the first policeman.

Only one first name in Russia. I need more.

More doppelgangers.

Tied to God by a thread.

Take pity! I suffer so much. Pity! Miserly heaven gave me but one week and it was over so quickly.

The flowers of Paradise will gladden my spirit. (Why posthumous fame?)

Purify thoughts in Pure Pond.

Francis Bacon, joyful despair.

Byzantium, immobility. Disorder is the attribute of a fallen man. Our time – running on the spot.

What remains in my memory must be important.

One man's gain is the same man's loss. By sleeping in an oxygen chamber you gain 70 years and lose 100 years.

I dreamt about my teacher, didn't I? I used to hate him so much I murdered him in my sleep. There were other murderers in the cell where I was awaiting the trial. I was bent on saving their lives by stressing the humane aspect of their motives. 'I'll say to the court you did it for humanity,' I told them. 'What about you?' they asked. 'I didn't kill anyone,' I said, opening my eyes. Instantly I realised I'd crossed the border between my dream and reality. In one world I killed my teacher; in the other I was lying in my bed. I wish I were lying in another bed, in the world governed by Dionysus.

I sit in an armchair, on the floor. 'Don't sit on the floor—you might dirty your trousers,' I say to myself. 'Sit yourself down and have a cup of tea.' I don't say it to myself any more: I'm not supposed to drink tea nowadays. I suffer from high blood pressure. Nor do I drink coffee, needless to say. Shall I have a bottle of wine with dinner?

I've sung this song so many times
 I have it off pat. At the beginning
 There are a branch and a bird. Then the bird
 Disappears. So does the sun. Only
 The branch remains, an olive branch.

This novel is a medical document. To study my brain, its decay, through this novel. To write shorter sentences – changes. Longer sentences – the capacity of my mind to think, to sustain an action, a train of thought.

Property—No Admittance. Whatever I do is private: private papers, private gestures, private ideas. My room is empty and the olive branch I see beyond my window is not mine. I'm not even sure the window is mine—a kind of screen where only foreign objects and substances are displayed.

My former mistress often spoke about energy as such; and about my energy in particular. 'When you talk about them, you offer them your energy,' she used to say. 'I'm generous to a

fault,' I used to say. I don't recall our dialogues. I recall her face, her voice. That's enough. I've devoted many poems to the word 'enough'. I know enough about art to recognise a masterpiece when I see one. Do I know enough about life to recognise life and the living?

A sandglass, a lot of sand. I like to feel the sand between my toes, between my fingers. A cat. My cat is still here, in my room, in my study. He usually sits on my writing desk. There are exceptions to this rule. This afternoon my cat is miaowing pitifully outside the door. I closed the door after lunch, longing to remember what I'll never forget. I remember the time. Not Egypt where I wasn't born. I remember the time without bothering about its awesome scenery. And the time I remember is her voice, her eyes, her figure, her gait.

No numbers, only lines. They're
Not made up of numbers,
Of points: only lines that lead
Here and there. They're zigzags and
Spirals, smelling of you.

You were a zigzag, a spiral.
You smelt of coffee.

I won't go through the whole spectrum
Of life. Just one or two things.
Perhaps one thing or once upon a time.
Destiny is always wide of the mark.

I was watching TV the other night. At some point I switched to another channel and saw a woman I fell in love with immediately. I don't think beauty is only skin deep and the woman on the screen was beautiful. Only in the middle of the programme did I realise she'd killed her husband with the aid of her lover. I thought, 'I wouldn't mind being killed by this woman.' On second thoughts, however, I decided not to love her any more. Anyway it was

useless: she'd been sentenced to 28 years' imprisonment. I'll be dead and buried, won't I? I said to myself I was lucky after all: I was neither her husband nor her lover. The latter committed suicide in prison where he was to spend 30 years. It's better to see eternity than to serve a 30-year jail term, isn't it? The other day, in Japan, I met a wonderful woman. She was both beautiful and intelligent. Actually this encounter took place five or six years ago. I said to myself, 'I'd marry this woman today, if she was free.' She wasn't, alas. What would she have told me, had I said: 'Please feel free to marry me'? 'I'm not free,' she might have answered. Anyway she would have said something to this effect. Her husband was my doctor; I was having problems with my index finger. He was vainglorious. A very conceited person. 'It's very conceited of you to assume that your work is always the best, that your wife is the most beautiful woman in the world,' I might have told him, had I met him socially. But I was having problems with my index finger. So I said nothing; I just smiled. He spoke to me about his wife—'She's a famous violinist'—and about his achievements. He showed me the photographs of the artists he'd cured. He showed me no photographs of his wife so I had no idea whether she was really beautiful or not. She was—beyond a shadow of a doubt. Next day I saw an extraordinary woman in his office. 'Is she the wife of this ugly, conceited, foul-smelling individual?' I asked myself. This question of mine was answered immediately—*une fois n'est pas coutume*. I had to wait for five or six years. One day, in Tokyo, a friend of mine said, 'Domestic violence.' And he told me how this woman beat her husband in his presence. 'Did she kick him?' I asked. 'Did she hit him with her bow?' What does it matter! She was free now. I did all I could to get in touch with her. We met in Paris. She was no longer beautiful. 'Has she ever been beautiful?' I asked myself. This question remained unanswered. I was deceived once more. Why doesn't God say to Himself: 'I can't deceive him—it's against all my principles'?

A: While most elements of GP-120 mutate rapidly to escape the immune system, one feature called the 'silent face' always remains the same, making it a prime target for antibodies that could be raised by a vaccine.

B: You may die tomorrow or next week. Why bother about the future and vaccines? Why can't you let your life go through you peacefully? Don't bully it. The virus is also a slice of life. Why expel it? Let it be. Silent faces are also in the land of the living. So are invisible faces. Let them float around us, endlessly, endlessly.

A: At least my son will live to the grand old age of 150.

B: Endlessly, endlessly.

To adopt someone else's body. Samuel Johnson. Strong, witty. Wit – related to the body?

Puppets. Empty cups.
They're so empty no wine will ever
Touch them.

Ah, those untouchable
Cups! The cats roaming
The city streets as if they were
Humans. No

Puppets. Humans. My own
Flesh and blood.

A traffic jam, and suddenly
A train that comes from nowhere.

The nowhere is here, as they say.
The train is nowhere. So

There's no train. Only the main
Railway station in Berlin.

A glass of wine, a spot on my shirt;
I knew I'd forget you too.

This brie smells good and ripe;
I'll never forget it.

I've forgotten the Himalayas
And her cherry-red lips.

A dream, another dream. Another
Pair of glasses, another world.

My television set. If I stand up
For a long time my ankles hurt.

The music changed from a smooth
Melody to a staccato rhythm.

To die, to die, to die, to die, to die.
I should play this piece staccato.

No more smooth melodies. To die,
To die, to die, to die, to die, to die.

I'm not ready yet. Please
Turn your music down: it's very
Distracting.

There's snow
On the hill tops but not in the valley.

My soul is just an image.

I feel fortunate in being that instrument through which music flows.

I saw a stand-up comedian whose dog died and was buried. After the burial the comedian was walking through a courtyard where he sat on a bench every night. He sat down on the bench and recognised a man sitting beside him: they often sat on the same bench, in the same courtyard, in the same city. 'I've just buried my dog,' he said to the man.

'You have my greatest sympathy,' said the man.

'Shall we drink to him?'

'Okay.'

The comedian bought three bottles of vodka and soon his guest was sitting in his room. 'Do you know what they say about me?' asked the comedian.

'No,' said the man.

'He drank, womanised and wasted money.'

'Do they say *that* about you?'

'They do.'

'So why don't you stop? Your lapdog died – it's no big deal. You're a man. You're more important than dogs. Why don't you take care of *yourself*?'

The comedian took a rifle and killed the man.

There are no animals amidst the stars; there are no humans either.

‘You give them your energy as a present,’ she said.

‘My disgust. Is it a present?’

‘Like children they squeal in delight when they see all your presents under the Christmas tree.’

‘It's tempting to blame television for the increase in crime,’ I said.

‘What crime?’

‘They kill art, culture, our civilisation, our values, our ideals. They kill Beethoven and Schubert. Isn't that a crime?’

‘Beethoven and Schubert are dead,’ she said. ‘They're alive. Why don't you love them?’

‘And what about my energy? Aren't you supposed to put your energy under the Christmas tree of your beloved? Aren't you supposed to give and not to take, to yield and not to seek?’

‘If you're in love, you take your own love, you partake of it.

‘Eat your heart out Michael Jackson,’ I said.

‘All your jokes fall flat,’ she said.

‘I'm fed up with the living.’

‘And I'm fed up with cleaning up after you all the time.’

‘The living don't even have the energy to get out of bed.’

‘You don't mix much with your colleagues, do you?’

‘Oil and water don't mix,’ I said. ‘Even if you shake them together they separate into two layers.’

‘You remind me of a story I read one day,’ she said. ‘The hero kept asking, “Have you ever seen how a river flows?”’

‘I know, I know. It's better to dance than to speak. Who were you dancing with at the party last night?’

‘Why didn't you come? You were invited.’

‘Was I? Such gatherings are just inviting trouble.’ I continued to talk to her in spite of myself.

‘Don't you despise yourself for being so cowardly?’ she asked.

‘I don't. Why should I? Why can't I listen to the *Missa Solemnis*, alone, at home?’

‘Beethoven again.’ There was the faintest trace of a smile on her lips. I kissed her on the mouth. ‘You should live in the present, here and now,’ she went on. ‘Immortality doesn't exist. Michael Jackson will be forgotten.’

‘Let’s forget music,’ I said. ‘Let’s forget everything.’

‘I can’t forget you,’ she said.

‘You’ll forget me in due course.’

I love my husband, but he bores me to death. And he can't even spend his money *artistically*. He just buys expensive cars and jewels. I have nothing against jewels, as you must know. But there are other pleasures in life, aren't there? Music, poetry. Life is full of poetry and he simply overlooks it. He leaves poetry to poets. He can't even drink a glass of wine—poetically. Do you see what I mean? Poetically, artistically, spiritually, virtually. He just drinks it and wipes his lips with a napkin. Such a man deserves to be killed, in a manner of speaking. Anyway life is wasted on him. Don't worry, I'm only joking. And I wasn't going to ask you to kill him. I just wonder sometimes what a clever man, an artist, could do with the money my husband has got. And he's got heaps of it. What a pity it's being used in such a fashion. I wonder sometimes what *you* might do with it, what *we* might do with my husband's fortune.'

As a writer I face the problem of choice every minute; sometimes I am tempted to provide this or that work of mine with two different endings, as Tolstoy did in his story *The Devil*, but I have managed to resist this temptation so far. As a musician I deal with the problem of choice by spacing out my recitals to enable the pieces I perform to catch up with my life. (Another lie—it is my managers who space my concerts out.)

Life is a Quiet River—the film shown in France a long time ago. Not everybody would agree with this equation—for many Soviet people life was the silent Don—but Onassis, for one, was in a position to journey through his life in a canoe, in a speed boat, in a yacht. He did glide down the life-river in his yacht which, however, might prove as dangerous as Tolstoy's existential boat. Fishing in troubled waters and mixing metaphors at will—every beautiful woman is a metaphor for Paradise—Onassis jeopardised his health and died at the American Hospital after paying an ultimate visit to Maria Callas who had declined to welcome him in her abode. All the same, $2 \times 2 = 13$ is better than $2 \times 2 = 4$.

Would an *ordinarius* be put off by the above paragraph?

Back to the arduous paragraph. Shall I spoon-feed my *ordinarius* who does not believe in high-brow literature and all that mumbo jumbo? 'Fishing in troubled waters and mixing metaphors at will—every beautiful woman is a metaphor for Paradise—Onassis jeopardised his health—' The metaphor I sustain throughout the paragraph comes down to, 'Life is a river'. The waters of this river may be quiet, troubled or turbulent. A rich man's life is *ordinarily* associated with a quiet river where he might take a swim or catch a trout, contradicting the assertion that thousands of young salmon and trout have been killed by the pollution. The metaphor 'a rich man's life is a quiet river' may be likened to the equation $2 \times 2 = 4$. But Onassis' adventurous spirit did not tolerate this equation: he was looking for a tailor-made happiness unknown to the *ordinarius*—even to his ordinary counterparts, to suspicious multimillionaires. So he often fished in troubled waters instead of gliding on them in his yacht. At this point two metaphors make their appearance, propped up by two objects: a yacht and a fishing reel. In the former Onassis glides down his life-river; by means of the latter he fishes in troubled waters. At the same point the life-river branches into two rivers; one is a metaphor for Onassis' life, the other embodies life in general. In the latter Onassis fishes money, women, islands and villas, foregoing trout and salmon because the adjective 'troubled' is ordinarily applied to a period of history or to a relationship between humans, animals or gods. Actually he might have caught a lot of trout and salmon during his cruises, but that is beside the point. What is more, he must have treated his clients to salmon in the restaurants where he used to spend a good many hour, whenever away from his yacht; but that is beside the point too. Incidentally, trout and salmon are the metaphors for happiness—alongside women about whom I say that they are metaphors for Paradise. So two metaphors clash in the paragraph under scrutiny; let us call them 'cruising' and 'fishing'. Of course you can unpack your fishing reel and use it aboard your yacht, but within a literary framework you are allowed to mix metaphors only with a view to producing a comical effect. By mixing two metaphors I allude to Onassis' notorious penchant for playing jokes on his girlfriends whose number steadily grows as we realise he was mixing them as well. (A lethal cocktail.) After all, every beautiful woman is a *metaphor* for Paradise. He was also fond of making them run into each other during his parties and excursions so that his life was a sort of melting pot where Callas cohabited with Jacqueline Kennedy and many other women. Was his life a river or a melting pot? Can we put this river into the melting pot to eschew another mixed metaphor? It depends on what kind of river we are talking about. Is it a quiet river or the Don as depicted by Michael Sholokhov in his much-overrated masterpiece? The latter

would overflow any melting pot. (*The Silent Don* deals with the Don Cossacks before and after the Revolution.)

Music does not help me when I despair over my sins. My Russian friends would laugh at reading this sentence: they think I do not view my life in terms of sins and virtues—beyond good and evil, as it were. So I play wrong notes when performing the 'notion of sin'. And born-again Christians might hit the right notes as they speak about the end of the world which, according to my watered-down version, has come already. The stock market plummets and governments fall. Aircraft, cars and trains crash as born-again (or elect) pilots and drivers are caught up into the air. Jesus utters a word and the bodies of the enemy are ripped open so that the Christians who so far have not been 'raptured' up to heaven are obliged to drive cautiously to skirt around the splayed and filleted bodies.

The End Times I envisage in my books are centred upon the arts and philosophy—our *raison d'être*. Deprived of them we have neither *raison* (mind) nor *être* (body).

THE FLYING DUTCHMAN AND HIS ROTTEN IMMORTALITY

The Dutchman was often seen walking with branches on which four flowers seemed to blossom in order to seduce the most beautiful maiden of this or that unfamiliar city: the author of the famous dairy did not pay much attention to land- or cityscapes. He offered the flowers to those women whose physique corresponded to his idea of salvation, but none of them accepted his offer and he continued to moon around the streets where no one could help him, let alone sacrifice his or her life for his cause. 'The four flowers, the four elements,' he murmured, studying the faces of the women who walked past him without giving much thought to his discomfiture. 'The dove, or Holy Ghost, descended and united us in a union which was also spiritual,' he said to one of them in a moment of despair.

'I don't care about the Holy Ghost,' said the woman.

'What *do* you care about?'

'I like BMWs.'

'What about a Bentley?' said the Dutchman: he was well versed in car industry.

‘I prefer BMWs.’

‘Would you mind shaking hands with me?’ he said, stretching out his left hand.

Those talks were useless because the Dutchman, instead of inquiring how to court a woman *professionally*, dwelt on subjects which could yield no useful information: nobody was to rid him of immortality. But he was too sure of himself to ask a womaniser how to seduce his victim and so continued to live in Europe and on his ship. The murder of his wife was another subject on which he embroidered with pleasure, telling the story differently every time he came across a person prepared to listen to it. For instance, he would speak about his parents’ attitude towards his crime.

Anyway he would not have managed to talk them out of their beliefs to which they clung all the more desperately since ‘those figments of my imagination are my only *raison d’être*,’ as a middle-aged man put it. ‘Even money is nothing without my beliefs, without Jesus Christ, without you,’ he said, tapping the Dutchman on the shoulder.

‘Would you tap *Him* on the shoulder?’ asked the Dutchman.

‘We are all brothers, aren’t we?’ the man retorted. ‘And you’re our most beloved brother. Why can’t I tap my dear brother on the shoulder? I can also kiss him, can’t I?’ And he kissed the Dutchman’s mouth.

THE FLYING DUTCHMAN AND SCIENCE

‘You don’t *have* to,’ said the scientist. ‘Suppose you didn’t die on the Cross.’

‘I didn’t,’ said the Dutchman.

‘All right, all right. But, after all, you killed a few boys, didn’t you?’

‘I murdered my wife.’

‘You had no wife,’ said the scientist.

‘I’ve lost count of my wives and children.’

‘But you’ve got another life ahead of you. Can’t you live as many lives as you want?’

‘I don’t want anything,’ said the Dutchman. ‘Incidentally, I’d like to know why you take me for Jesus Christ. Why do your colleagues think I’m the Messiah?’

‘Because there’s an aura of mystery about you,’ said the scientists.

‘But it’s not an aura of sanctity, is it?’

‘An aura is better than nothing.’

‘Nothing is better than anything,’ he answered.

All these conversations had been going on for centuries and the Dutchman did not really bother to find out whether they resounded in his head or outside it, in a room where a few scientists wanted him to climb into a contraption which was supposed to take him as far as the year zero. Or was it wishful thinking on his part? He would have given anything to be brought to the year zero where, he hoped, he might die peacefully in his sleep or wide awake: he did not care about the *form* of his death, fully preoccupied by its content.

THE DUTCHMAN AND THE NUT

‘I’d be happier than I am now on condition that I’m allowed to resume my present state despite my blasphemous conduct.’ He did all he could to clarify this idea as he talked to the Russian prince who, after translating a bit of traditional Russian nonsense, was opening a pack of cards.

‘It’s a hard nut to crack,’ said the prince.

‘The Wandering Jew told me a nice story about a family that was cramped for space. The head of the family went to a rabbi and asked him what to do. «Buy a goat and take it to your room,» said the rabbi. A week later the man returned and said his life had become truly unbearable. «Now you can get rid of the goat,» said the rabbi.’

‘So you need a goat to realise how happy you are without it,’ said the prince.

‘Exactly. But what *kind* of goat do I need?’

THE FLYING DUTCHMAN AND HORRORS

The Dutchman needed *another* horror to turn over a new leaf—a tiny last leaf in his personal book of life. From experience he knew that even Russian savagery could not cope with the duration of his life, but what he counted upon was not limited to the skill and energy of his torturers: he thought he might grow disgusted by his own act. In other words, he hoped to die from disgust, from revulsion. He hoped that some day, upon bringing a mirror level with his eyes, he would feel revulsion at his own face, at his criminal lips. And it was not enough to break the mirror: he had broken a great many mirrors already.

‘There’s such a thing as eternal recurrence. At least some philosophers and scientists believe in it. So my massacre will be repeated exactly as it happened today—in a million years. It’s rather plausible, isn’t it? After all, I’m unable to die. So I’ll be here in a million years. And I may grow nostalgic about today’s massacre, chiefly on account. The point is you may *not* show up at the right moment—or not at all for that matter. Not the next day, nor a week after. I’ll commit this crime anyway, but instead of driving with you to this funfair—

providing it's still on the same spot in a million years—I'll just go to a restaurant and spend my money on old wine and Iranian caviar. Russian caviar isn't up to its former standards, I'm afraid. But of course caviar too can be likened to a pendulum, can't it? The Russians may improve the quality of their caviar in a million years.'

THE DUTCHMAN'S PROSPERITY

He befriended her husband and let him believe he cared only about *their* prosperity. (Time branched out once again: he cared about his own prosperity and that of the couple.) The husband would drink champagne in his company, saying, 'To your health.' He was a primitive man.

'You're so fortunate,' the Dutchman said.

'Why do you think I'm fortunate?' asked the husband.

'Your wife's so beautiful.'

'She is,' acquiesced the husband.

'She must have many admirers.'

'She has a lot of admirers,' said her husband.

'I'm of their number,' said the Dutchman.

'Thank you,' said the husband.

'Many of them dream of spending a few hours in her company.'

'Perhaps,' said the husband.

'They might wish to cuddle and kiss her.'

'You must see how my wife cuddles our daughter—she stops crying at once.'

Let us talk about *impatience* for a while. (It is not enough to talk about *im*, although Tertullian seems to insist upon the importance of 'im' as a part of the word 'impatience', leaving it attached to it instead of letting it stand on its own: *im*, *im*, *im*. If you hear just 'im', you think at once about an *imp* and *impact* any *imp*, however infinitesimal, might have on humans. But thanks to Tertullian we realise that *imps* were also part of God's overall design from which they estranged themselves, owing to their unconquerable insatiability, envy, jealousy, malevolence and violence.) Mercutio is too *impatient* and one would not dare affirm that he is patient even when surrounded by a number of Romeo's cousins and uncles. There is no denying he is impatient, but this time, within the context of the play and of the life of that

remote century, we were dealing with the question of life and death (not ourselves, God forbid!). Both Tybalt and Mercury (an alchemical slip) knew that any murder attempt, however unsuccessful and ludicrous, would result in an instantaneous loss of life. (Prince Escalus was widely known for his high moral principles.) Yet two words are enough (word, blow) to trigger off a duel in the wake of which both banishments and poisons begin to bombard Verona and even Mantua.

Everything happens quickly in a theatrical play, due to the unity of everything (unless we attend the last performance of the Jan Fabre company). And if protagonists drag their feet, a prompter whispers wrathfully, 'Get a move on. Stop it!/Stop that! Kill him.' I wonder why they always let Mercutio go into detail on the threshold of Capulet's house (Queen Mab, of course). 'Stop it! Let him see Juliet at once! Thank you, control tower. Over and out.' We are *impatient* too; so is life. Instead of saying, 'Life is short,' we should rather say, 'Life is impatient.'

New Russians *are* blind. And wretched. And naked like many kings of the past. And they are too small to be seen with the naked eye. They are wretched, pitiful and poor. So are the other inhabitants of Russia, old Russians. They look old whatever their actual age. They are naked too—in the literal sense.

And you're just healthy skeletons. Bursting with health and death, boasting about your non-existence.

'Why have I failed?' This question pursued me like the Hound of the Baskervilles or like the wheels of a train under which I could not perish. 'Perhaps I'll be able to perish under its wheels if I find an answer to this question,' I thought.

The women I meet are also young and mostly rich, which has a considerable bearing on their conduct and future. I must have put their future first because they have no fear of the 'next day', as the Russians put it. So they lay particular stress on the freedom they enjoy; and they enjoy it to the extent of ignoring those they come across or even rub shoulders with,

which is quite unpleasant: I often happen to be their victim. One of these women has the knack of making people feel so comfortable they can't help thinking she is in love with them. If you speak to her about a three-star restaurant, she says, 'Let's go there together.' And yet you hardly know her, for you are relishing her company for the first time in your life. Or else she touches upon Spain only to suggest you should go to this country in her company. You fall into the trap and begin to talk about the cathedral of Burgos and even mention your hands.

We were having dinner in a small restaurant which had nothing to do with stars and culinary delights. I have no idea why my friends had chosen it: they're relatively rich and can afford any restaurant situated in France or Hong Kong. 'How did you come here?' she asked all of a sudden.

'By car.'

'By *your* car?'

'Yes.'

'But you live in Versailles, don't you?'

'Yes.'

'Is it a long way from Paris?'

'Not quite.'

'You've drunk a lot of wine. You can't drive.'

'I've drunk two glasses.'

'Please be careful. I'm very worried about you.'

I believed her, believe me or not. I just attended a show or rather a public demonstration of her freedom and I fell into the trap once again. This woman is so rich she doesn't need to pay attention to what she says or does because she never thinks about the consequences of her actions. Whatever the consequences, she'll remain as prosperous as ever, even if she loses a billion pounds. She may say, 'I love you' and forget about your existence in a few minutes or seconds. No point in ringing her up: she sees your phone number on the display and doesn't answer your call. She doesn't even take the trouble to say, 'I don't love you any more.' But usually she gives neither her phone number nor her email address. You don't deserve it even if she loves you.

She takes a walk through life and a dignified Christian always recalls *The Pilgrim's Progress* – alongside the Bible, needless to say. His life follows a well-trodden path that leads him to Paradise on condition that he belongs to the group of the 'chosen few', according to St. Augustine. If he does not, he is a pilgrim nevertheless because he doesn't

think in terms of money and prays to God whenever he has enough time for a prayer. The woman I'm talking about might pray to God, for all I know, but it is her freedom that comes first and her freedom depends on the money her father stole in his youth. Then he left his native land so as not to spend the rest of his life in prison. I'm sure he continues to steal in whatever country he happens to find himself, but he does it on a lesser scale: he is weary of running away from the police and other representatives of what is called 'order' or 'law'.

The elect follow their path without turning this way and that. This woman turns right or left; she says, 'I love you' and strokes a cheek. She knows whose cheek she strokes – for a few minutes. Then she forgets it and goes to another cheek. Under the circumstances, many people turn the other cheek, provided they know beforehand she has no intention of slapping their faces. But you never know what such women have in mind unless you belong to the chosen few who shouldn't be confused with the elect, contrary to what I said earlier. (I couldn't remember how we usually call the people chosen by God and not by crooks.) So you turn the other cheek and she strikes you viciously.

For the woman I described a few hours ago I was smaller than life – her life, I mean. In a way, she must have regarded me as a corpse brought in by a fishing net or another net or box or whatever. Somehow I was sitting by her side and she bore with me for a while – for the sake of decency or something else. I have no idea what the word 'decency' means in her free world, but I know that she took the poems I had written for her. I had even written my phone number on one of the sheets to enable her to call me. 'Could you please call me to say what you think about these poems?' She answered, 'Of course I will' or something along those lines. There are a lot of words along those lines and she uttered some of them. So what? She hasn't called me because her freedom doesn't include my decay, my incapacity to live the rest of my life with dignity. She is reluctant to walk with me through my death – just another pilgrim's progress. Or regress. All depends on the side from which you watch this ghostly walk.

So I'm walking alone in spite of the presence of a few people who embrace me warmly – too warmly perhaps – and often remind me of the expression 'bear hug'. Is it an expression or just two words? I don't care for the moment because I'm bent on enumerating all the tricks to which some people resort in order to show me how they appreciate my poor self. They kiss

me and lie down on my lap or on the rest of my body, hoping I'll understand how humane and nice they are. They shower me with praise and presents, and I'm unable to pay them in kind because I don't believe in their sincerity. So they disappear without reading my poems, let alone my prose works which are much longer than my poems. They have no time for me; and yet they might think I deserve a portion of their time and brain. They just embrace my body: this action doesn't take much time and requires no effort. Even a bear hug requires no effort.

Today, one of these goddesses left my house and I took her to a bus in which she must already have reached the airport in spite of the dark and the rain I mistrusted and feared: I'm a Sunday driver. So I just drove her to the bus station and she said she wasn't likely to forgive me for leaving her alone – in Paris, of all places. I still recall her thighs and also her bottom on which one might have put the Earth and even the entire solar system with all its satellites and meteors. At some point I thought I would never be able again to enjoy lovemaking and whatever is connected with it: moans, sharp jerks, closed eyes. Some time ago – at the point I touched upon in the previous sentence – a young woman was lying on *my* thighs and I didn't budge as if I had been asked to hold her body without touching it. I did touch it, however, but nothing responded either within my body or outside it so I said to myself, 'I used to have a lot of nymphs in my bed, but that's all over now.'

This time there was a goddess in my bed, for I firmly believe that a woman deserves the honorary title of goddess only if she is almost two meters in height. We drank two bottles of champagne and I went to my bathroom to swallow a vitamin tablet called Viagra. She realised I wasn't ready to shower her with the presents one is likely to get in the company of Don Juan or his secretary. I said I had drunk too much champagne and I even quoted *Macbeth*, which I'm used to quoting in bed and elsewhere – whenever my age comes to the fore and I say to myself I've been destroyed by both space and time. 'Therefore, much drink may be said to be an equivocator with lechery: it makes him, and it mars him; it sets him on, and it takes him off –' I quoted it in English and she seemed to have enjoyed my pronunciation: she is Lithuanian and has only a smattering of English and French. Her Russian isn't perfect either, but we understand each other when she removes her clothes and I'm allowed to contemplate her body from every angle for half an hour at least.

I swallow the magic pill and two hours later I'm ready for the exploit I'll never forget: even on my deathbed I'll recall it with a smile. I may even give a chuckle in response to this

exceptional memory which haunts me as I write about goddesses and nymphs; yet I'm alone and no one will pay me a visit in the days to come – next week, next year. I may remain alone to the very end. I'll devote my time to primitive tribes, to architecture, to the Jewish Museum in the corridors of which I continue to walk as if there were no room for me on the surface of the Earth, not far from heaven.

Along with unfinished symphonies and operas, there are a lot of unfinished men who can no longer imitate Don Juan, Casanova and ordinary youngsters whose pockets are usually stuffed with condoms. I don't think I was really unfinished, given my age and the number of times I had enjoyed myself in beds, on divans and Persian carpets, the beauty of which would inspire my body and some of its members. I was somewhat finished – at least that's the word I used whenever trying to depict my body and its infirmities related mainly to my incapacity to replenish the Earth. This incapacity of mine didn't have a dramatic impact on demography and I can't say I felt guilty when I read in a newspaper: 'Overpopulation is one of the country's most pressing social problems.' On the contrary, I thought that in a way I was making a major contribution to the safety one is entitled to enjoy in the country where one lives and prospers.

My exploit is all the more astounding since I didn't expect any laurels despite Viagra or rather its presence in my bathroom where I had also put a glass of sparkling water. My interior monologue sounded thus: 'Of course I believe in God, but now I also take into consideration the dead and their capacity to leave their tombs. In other words, I think I may rise from the dead to provide additional proof of Christ's genius that Chateaubriand calls "*génie du christianisme*". "Resurrection" is the right word and one is allowed to use it not only on the day of the Last Judgment but on other occasions as well. How many last judgments have I lived through in the course of the 21st century?'

The point is my partial resurrection can't be likened to the Resurrection for the simple reason that I went neither to Heaven nor to Hell: I *combined* them to some degree. I'm not in the habit of identifying with Hamlet or any other hero because they have little in common with my ego, super-ego and other terms one may chance upon in Sigmund Freud's writings. But my father's ghost does make his appearance whenever I attempt to make love in a bed or on a carpet: the ghost pays no attention to what our bodies are lying on. I often talk to my father's ghost who looks like the one described by Freud and his followers.

It has always been my declared intention to marry a young woman. And I was planning to get married before Christmas, for marriage is another birth and we always marry our mother who is omnipresent, according to Freud's conclusions. Am I confusing Freud with Goethe and Jung? I think that Jung spoke about our desire to get back into our mother's womb and, as everybody knows, Goethe used to enlarge upon our numerous mothers waiting for us under the surface of the earth, not far from our future or present tombs. I'm still walking along the underground passage I touched upon in relation to the Jewish Museum that I'm not likely to leave on account of its striking similarity to my life and destiny. I mean I accept my destiny and welcome it in underground caves and corridors, in my room and elsewhere, for my destiny is everywhere and I have no desire to flee from it to the mountains where one no longer plays the role of a mole.

I dedicated a lot of poems to this woman, maiden, Beatrice, Laura, Adelaida. To write these poems, I had to experience severe mood swings and I didn't cross love off the list entitled 'My Supply of Inspiration': I knew I was unlikely to form a strong attachment to this homemade Beatrice. Last week I finished the cycle of poems I wrote for five women, but the book is entitled *Rita* and I have no intention of altering the title because it doesn't really matter whose name adorns the title page. Why don't I put my own name on it? Am I not in love with myself? Many people think so and today I'm in no mood to contradict them. Actually, I agree with my opponents on this issue.

Drifting with the tide is not the best policy one can adopt when dealing with problems and others who are likely to oppose your ideas and thwart your plans on a regular basis. Taoists think otherwise, if I remember rightly, but I'm too lazy to go and fetch one of their books that can be found in the living room, 20 metres away from the spot where I'm working now, in accordance with my daily ritual. Besides, it is not enough to fetch a book and open it; you also have to select a suitable passage, which is too tiresome an operation.

At this rate, I'll soon remember my former lives and identities, provided I study thoroughly the animals I come across during my walks in the woods and along the roads I follow as I try

to combat my hypertension: walking is good for one's health. I might have spent a few years in the shape of a wolf, for instance; at least some of my mistresses would opt for this particular incarnation. Others would compare me to a Russian bear, I suppose, inspired by the French expression '*un ours mal léché*' (an uncouth fellow).

Apparently the mask is a sort of social costume which enables a member of other social groups to say on closer inspection: 'At first I thought this man was a pianist. But now I can see he's a poet, otherwise he wouldn't have written a poem on his mask.' Why not wear such a mask during the appointment I'll have with the Almighty either on the threshold of death or beyond the threshold of birth? Have I already been given an opportunity to meet Him on equal terms? Of course no one is as omniscient and powerful as God, but if you're allowed to meet Him when you feel you're ready for such a meeting, in a way you're on equal terms with the Substance Whose influence over the universe cannot be overestimated. God is not in the habit of patronising His children: after all, they seem to have been made in his image and so they're godlike and divine, relatively speaking.

In Petersburg I saw a collection of bones that seemed to shake as if the winds activated by Yeats' poem had been at work in a hotel where even draughts do not disturb the customers or the owners. Actually, the lady in question was sitting at a table covered with croissants and teapots over which her hand was moving as she chose an appropriate pastry and beverage for her breakfast. I didn't recognise her at first; I saw only a movement that alerted me to a potential danger I feared whenever I thought of the 26-year-old woman whom I might encounter during my stay in Petersburg. Well, I did encounter her in the restaurant where many people breakfast and dine to fill their bodies with meat, smoked salmon and cheesecakes that I used to love 30 years ago – especially in New York and San Francisco. She recognised me and hastily put her mobile phone in her bag that I might have seen a month before when I had invited the lady in question to a restaurant called Café Pushkin situated near Pushkin Square in Moscow. She saluted me and I sat down opposite her; and yet I had already finished my breakfast and consequently did not desire to eat her croissants and drink her green and black teas. 'If I drink a cup of black tea,' she told me once, 'I just have to drink some green tea, otherwise I can't live properly.'

‘How are you?’ I said to her.

‘I’m all right.’

‘So you brought our love adventure to a close,’ I went on.

‘Did I?’

‘I think you did. Why didn’t you call me?’

‘When I feel that something goes wrong, I lie low.’

I looked at her bones and thought she was telling the truth: her bones were lying low despite the breakfast and the table over which her hands might have moved at any time in search of honey or orange marmalade. ‘Why should I speak to bones?’ I asked myself. I couldn’t say anything to her and so I fell back on my memories which showed me a sequence from a film I had watched at home when trying to rest after my literary exertions. ‘I can’t forget you,’ said a young woman.

‘I must go home,’ said a young man.

‘Stay with me,’ said the woman.

‘Rita’s waiting for me,’ said the man. The woman sighed deeply and sat down in the snow.

‘Get up,’ said the man. ‘I don’t want you to catch your death of cold.’ The woman lay down on the snow and made as if to bury herself in it. ‘You’re not going to help matters by lying there sobbing!’ said the man. Let me skip a few episodes and come to the denouement of the story.

The scene is set in the young man’s house where his daughter’s body is shaking with sobs. ‘Everybody seems to get hysterical,’ I say to myself as I reach for the remote. ‘There’s someone knocking at the door,’ I think about leaving the remote where it is – in the middle of my table. The same woman comes in and listens to the sobs I attempted to describe some time ago. ‘It’s my daughter,’ says the man. ‘Her name’s Rita.’

‘I’ll never forget you,’ says the woman. ‘I can’t live without you.’

‘I love you,’ says the man.

The name of the woman I met in Petersburg is Rita, but it doesn’t mean she can utter the same words and feel what women in love are said to feel and experience as they fall in love with young and old men. I offered her my poems, saying I wished to get them published on condition that she didn’t mind my doing so for reasons best known to herself. She might have found them offensive, but she didn’t because I had asked her to drop me a line and no lines are about to reach me – at least that’s what my sixth sense imparts to me whenever I deign to consult it. She cares neither about my poetry nor about my wisdom nourished by the

poets and philosophers I study as I try to penetrate my own secrets and become what I am at last. I continue to think of this shallow woman as if my thoughts could interfere on my behalf and reverse the situation by means of telepathy or any other means accessible to thoughts that have no arms, no weapons, no bombs and no powers of persuasion, generally speaking.

For once, I'm reminded of Stanislavsky – usually I recall other people – who would send his letters to Moscow, anxious to inform his theatre and artists of the stage directions destined to enliven the production of Shakespeare's *Othello*. One day, he sent a ten-page missive to the council, detailing his objections and voicing his grievances. At the time he was recovering from a heart attack in Germany – in the hotel where I spent a few days in the early Eighties. In the same hotel Chekhov spent the last days of his life and my memory can't forget the garden where I read two books that had nothing to do either with Chekhov or with Stanislavsky, *Othello* and *Desdemona*. Stanislavsky didn't know that *Othello* had been premiered already: his missives were missing the mark all the more piteously since no amount of trouble could improve on the production completely botched by Stanislavsky's collaborators. He ought to have switched to Verdi's opera and executed Othello's short aria – in Italian, not in Russian:

*Ora e per sempre addio santé memorie,
addio, sublimi incanti del pensier!
Addio schiere fulgenti, addio vittorie,
dardi volanti e volanti corsier!
Addio, vessillo trionfale e pio,
e diane squillanti in sul mattin!
Clamori e canti di battaglia, addio!
Della gloria d'Otello è questo il fin.*

Sure enough, Stanislavsky could have said farewell to his holy memories and even to his mind that was no longer useful and vital to the art of the Moscow Art Theatre fêted by audiences both in Russia and abroad: in Europe, in the United States. He could also have taken leave of his troops – of the actors with whom he had worked for many years: they had proved to be turncoats and you cannot rely on such people, even if you are known all over the world. You may say to yourself, 'I'm famous so everyone will listen to what I say and execute my orders.' But your collaborators say to you, 'You *are* famous, but your orders mean nothing to the actors because it galls us to take orders from Mister Gaga.'

Singing day and night: '*Della gloria d'Otello è questo il fin.*' Well, Stanislavsky did nothing of the sort: he was loath to perform Othello's aria for the simple reason that he had no time to learn Italian and the art of singing arias in romantic operas. I *could* perform a few arias centred upon my age, forthcoming death and defeats, but I refrain from singing because I hate my own voice and the notes I use to convey my thoughts and fears by means of music. Let me just say that I've lost all my battles and the women I see in my dreams and outside them no longer say to me they'll never forget my hand and ideas because they manage to live without me, and any other man or woman is able to replace me on a regular basis and in any country of Europe.

A woman is drinking inside my television screen and I wonder what she would do in this room of mine if I offered her a drink, saying, 'You're beautiful, beautiful, beautiful. Let's drink this bottle together. You can't open a bottle of wine and leave it as it is because wine begins to breathe and if you don't drink it, it'll breathe its last in a few hours. Wines also die because they're alive as long as they remain in our wine cellars or in our glasses on condition that we don't leave them in our cellars and our glasses forever.' What would I do with her? I know the feeling that comes to the surface whenever I see a beautiful woman in a café and am tempted to offer her a glass of cognac. If she refuses to accept the offer, the gift on which you count – you're an inveterate womaniser – you heave a sigh and go your way; there's nothing you can do and no matter what you do or say to her, she won't spend a few hours in your room, sipping cognac or whisky, stroking your face. And if she does empty the glass you offered her a few minutes before, you can invite her to your table and strike up a conversation with her with a view to inviting her somewhere, not necessarily to your place.

All this takes place inside my TV screen and the man who offers a glass to a beautiful woman doesn't deserve anything: neither a kiss, nor a word of encouragement. But she gives him everything and I wonder how she would behave in my presence, in my company which is far more precious than whatever the man I'm watching can offer her: even his cognac must be second-rate, undrinkable. They're already in a room where he is allowed to stroke her and even lie by her side; but he doesn't, for some reason, and I wonder what I would do in his shoes. How often do I wonder within the space of an hour? Do I still show any interest in images and words, and in the beds where so many youngsters cuddle and kiss?

‘I recall with delight our meeting in Italy,’ I wrote in my email. “‘In my beginning is my end’”, as a poet put it. I hope it is just a beginning that will last to the very end.’ I’m not sure T. S. Eliot put it this way, although I’m pretty sure the verse I quoted can be found in *Four Quartets*. But I remember neither the wording nor even the meaning of this verse which seems to approach both beginnings and endings from another angle, another point of view. It’s just the other way round, if memory serves me right: ‘In my end is my beginning.’ This does make sense, for no one is eager to die except for certain Christians and long-term sufferers. And if you have no wish to die, you think that your end encloses a beginning, a new birth – another life, in other words; whereas your beginning should on no account engender an end or a destructive force.

Actually, T. S. Eliot wrote: ‘In my beginning is my end.’ At some point I thought that the Italian aristocrat I had met near Pisa was disappointed by my ignorance of English (or American) poetry. But now I know I got the verse right and so her silence may be ascribed only to her bad manners or to a sort of coquetry I fail to grasp. Does she want me to dial her number and ask the count for his daughter’s hand in marriage? But she lives alone and I’m not likely to hear her father’s voice if some day I gear myself up to give her a phone call. Nor am I bound to hear her master’s voice because she ditched her boyfriend almost two months ago. I have no idea whether he was her master or not, but I might have become her master, had she answered my email three weeks ago. To tell the truth, I might have accepted the role of a slave, had she fallen in love with me. I don’t mind being a slave, for we all know that, sooner or later, a slave will become his master’s master.

I sent an identical email to Emilia whom I met in Vilnius where I spent a few days, walking around the city and talking to one man and two women. The other woman is in a class of her own – not only on account of her body whose affinities with Rubens or rather with the women he painted can be neither ignored nor disputed. I singled her out for special treatment on account of her name which reminds me of the most touching and charming woman I have ever seen; and my acquaintance with her is confined to the cinema screen. I’m speaking about Audrey Hepburn to whose charms I succumbed in my youth spent in a country where women are beautiful and often vulgar. Audrey was elegant and her image stored in the most precious part of my memory enables me to combat vulgarity whenever I happen to come across it. Luckily for me, I don’t have to resort to this stratagem in the presence of my Audrey who is not mine yet, to tell the truth. She is coming at the end of December and today is my cat’s birthday – November 12, 2012. I envy my cat: he knows nothing about death and consequently has no itch to describe his own decline and fall.

So I sent Emilia an email where my love was expressed more discreetly, although it wasn't conspicuous by its absence, as often happens when a man in love does all he can to hide his feelings and hopes. 'Natasha. I'd like to say to you...Well, you know...' Natasha says she doesn't know anything and her shy admirer resumes his declaration of love. 'He stutters a bit, so let him finish what he's saying,' Natasha's inner voice cuts in. Natasha follows her voice's advice and patiently waits for the word 'love', but her future partner doesn't manage to finish his speech at the end of which the magic word should stand like a monument.

'I recall with delight our meeting in Vilnius. "In my beginning is my end," as a poet put it. I hope it is just a beginning and there will be no end.' The emails I sent to Lithonia and Italy are not identical twins for the simple reason that, even if you're in love with identical twins, you shouldn't court them in the same manner. At least you should alter a few letters in your missives, which might enrich your courtships with nuances and particular traits. Not to confuse the objects of your love, you'd better differentiate between them in your mind and, to some extent, in your body.

In the email I sent to Vilnius I speak about the absence of any end that is supposed to put an end to a relationship, a conjugal life or just life itself. In the previous email I seem to evoke the formula 'till death do us part'. In other words, I allude to death which, sooner or later, is bound to interfere between a man and a woman or between a man and a man. In the second email I boldly dismiss such a possibility as if determined to live with Emilia until Doomsday, spending a few thousand years in Paradise. Oddly enough, upon finishing the second email, I thought the first one was more explicit, more love-permeated. Now I think I was mistaken and this second conclusion is all the more logical since I often make mistakes in the domain of love.

*In my beginning is my end. In succession
Houses rise and fall, crumble, are extended,
Are removed, destroyed, restored*

What T. S. Eliot means boils down to a number of metamorphoses we undergo as we struggle for life on the surface of the Earth and even under its surface, in our graves. We die and are risen from the dead and this happens almost daily in spite of our conviction that everything goes smoothly and that death is neither on the horizon nor even beyond it. Our body or rather its parts are removed and extended. They crumble and God (or nature) restores them to their

former condition, sometimes replacing them with other parts: nature has a lot of spare parts in its possession. (The same goes for God, needless to say.) We mumble, crumble, fall and scramble into our clothes as our wife or husband races to fetch a doctor. ‘We’ll soon have you back on your feet again,’ says a nurse and she is right; yet we are used to mistrusting the sincerity of nurses and doctors.

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

Unlike the aristocrat I met in Italy, Emilia wasn’t slow on the uptake: she answered my email by return, as it were. ‘I so appreciate Your kind attention to me. And a Poem... It is wonderful...’ I love neither Emilia nor the Italian aristocrat whose name I’d like to forget so as not to hurl abuse at a beautiful and innocent arrangement of signs. The beginning of Emilia’s answer didn’t predict any end except that of the email which couldn’t last forever. This beginning may be defined by Dickens’ title *Great Expectations* and I expected a happy ending which actually ran thus: ‘One more thing... Could I be honest with You? I am concerned about one little thing. At the end of the evening You mentioned wife, marriage and... This left me a little confused... I am sorry I’m asking, but I need to know – could I just forget?’

Only a man in love can understand what the object of his desire means whenever words replace glances and gestures. There’s no denying that Emilia has a smattering of English, but her mastery of the words she uses to try to convey her message doesn’t exceed the dose required for shopping and a non-committal exchange of views. So I didn’t understand her email; actually, I didn’t think it was important to understand her ideas and aspirations because I had already decided not to waste my time in her company either in Lithonia or in France. I don’t mind wasting time, for time cannot be wasted, in my opinion: you live and

that's quite enough, according to Montaigne. But I had no wish to waste time in Emilia's company; I feared it might have turned out to be a double waste.

I answered her email promptly, saying we could meet after January 5, 2013, but I didn't put her in the picture about how I intended to spend Christmas. 'As to our marriage,' I wrote, 'let us wait and see. After all, we hardly know each other and anyway you should think twice before marrying an old man.' An old man doesn't usually dwell upon his age either in a letter or in an email, let alone in the course of a tête-à-tête unless he does his best to get rid of the woman to whom he speaks or writes.

Here is her answer I received by return: 'Unfortunately, my letter was misunderstood. I did not like when our conversation in that evening turned from music and books to marriages and so on. I asked to be sure that my intentions was understood right. I respect you, I admire your way of life, your Ideas and, of course, your poems. I would be interested to talk with you, to discuss, if you don't mind? And to visit Versailles.'

Her English hadn't improved in the space of one week, but this time she expressed her ideas and voiced her grievances in plain English, carefully avoiding the elliptical style she had seemed to favour when writing her first email. Well, she is keen to talk to me about life in general – not only about *my* way of life, I suppose. She might think I would become a wonderful, world-famous guru if I renounced my sexual ambitions and focused my attention on yoga exercises. Why should I talk to her? Is she a guru – a woman from whom one is likely to learn the ins and outs of the universe? Does she know *anything* inside out? I saw only a part of her legs and I was longing to broaden the scope of my knowledge during her visit to Versailles. Well, my project fell through and I'll have to content myself with a partial image of the nether half of her legs: I've already forgotten three-quarters of this half. She seems to respect me, but the respect she has for my ideas and poems is unlikely to give me quick and easy access to the invisible parts of her body. So I'll never answer her email.

The priest says to Moses: 'Madmen you are! How can the wasteland give you nurture?' And Moses answers him: 'In the wasteland pureness of thought will provide you nurture, sustain you and advance you...' My thoughts are impure: they're focused upon the woman I drove to the bus station, leaving her in the company of men and potential lovers who will stroke her thighs and the rest of her body, making her forget my thighs, belly, hands and lips. I'm again in the desert about which Moses speaks to the priest and the Jews he sees in front of him; for once they're in front of him and not behind as if no longer willing to carry out their ritual.

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

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

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

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

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

Nothing, nothing. For quite a while I thought I was a sort of wasteland apt to purify my thoughts and even sublimate them into artistic pursuits: sometimes I do trust Freud's assumptions. The thought itself was sublime – I mean the one related to the wasteland and the result of my imaginary impotence on which I began to count as a poet and essayist. The doctor I went to on the eve of her visit – again I feel like touching upon the goddess – promised only two hours of effortless lovemaking, but I beat all the records as I continued my exploration of her body, in spite of her fatigue. She even asked me if I had swallowed anything and I said I wouldn't have been able to make love for *three* days after swallowing *one* magic pill. 'I'd have to *eat* them,' I said. 'And I'm not sure it is a healthy and balanced diet.'

Along with unfinished symphonies and operas, there are a lot of unfinished men who can no longer imitate Don Juan, Casanova and ordinary youngsters whose pockets are usually stuffed with condoms. I don't think I was really unfinished, given my age and the number of times I had enjoyed myself in beds, on divans and Persian carpets, the beauty of which would inspire my body and some of its members. I was somewhat finished – at least that's the word I used whenever trying to depict my body and its infirmities related mainly to my incapacity to replenish the Earth. This incapacity of mine didn't have a dramatic impact on demography and I can't say I felt guilty when I read in a newspaper: 'Overpopulation is one of the country's most pressing social problems.' On the contrary, I thought that in a way I was making a major contribution to the safety one is entitled to enjoy in the country where one lives and prospers.

My exploit is all the more astounding since I didn't expect any laurels despite Viagra or rather its presence in my bathroom where I had also put a glass of sparkling water. My

interior monologue sounded thus: ‘Of course I believe in God, but now I also take into consideration the dead and their capacity to leave their tombs. In other words, I think I may rise from the dead to provide additional proof of Christ’s genius that Chateaubriand calls “*génie du christianism*”. “Resurrection” is the right word and one is allowed to use it not only on the day of the Last Judgment but on other occasions as well. How many last judgments have I lived through in the course of the 21st century?’

The point is my partial resurrection can’t be likened to the Resurrection for the simple reason that I went neither to Heaven nor to Hell: I *combined* them to some degree. I’m not in the habit of identifying with Hamlet or any other hero because they have little in common with my ego, super-ego and other terms one may chance upon in Sigmund Freud’s writings. But my father’s ghost does make his appearance whenever I attempt to make love in a bed or on a carpet: the ghost pays no attention to what our bodies are lying on. I often talk to my father’s ghost who looks like the one described by Freud and his followers.

I no longer go outside of myself, for there’s nothing outside, it seems to me – not even birds, let alone humans who have withdrawn from my field of vision. Some time ago, I put up a fence to stop people walking across my field of vision and they obey my command, complying with my dearest wish. Now and then, however, I let them in and they wreak havoc in my garden, uprooting trees and blowing the fence down. They’re evil spirits I ought to have killed by using the arrows I spoke about in the previous chapter, on another page and probably in another life. In *this* life of mine I have no arrows and I’m not likely to have some in a minute or two, no matter how brilliantly I depict them in my book. So I’d better not waste my time on them; I shouldn’t forget that time is running out. Oddly enough, I often forget it, and I don’t blame this lapse of memory on my memory.

We need to think about how to proceed from where we find ourselves at the moment and if asked to describe the spot in question, I would resort to the simplest of formulas: no-man’s land. I don’t know where we stand, in other words. I know she didn’t wish me a Happy New Year; nor did I wish her anything, as a matter of fact. Why? Because I got really angry with her in the middle of December and my anger didn’t subside in spite of the festivities associated with Christmastime. I mean it didn’t subside in 2012 and I’m still angry with her: a new year doesn’t necessarily go hand in hand with some turning point, whatever the latter’s

size. We expected the end of the world, but even my anger didn't die on December 21st, 2012. So much for the end of the world.

I enlarged upon our quarrel some time ago and I'm reluctant to repeat what I said earlier because I'm short of words and therefore I should save them for a rainy day. Even sunny days need my words in case I feel like writing something about my life that is still on God's agenda, if I'm not mistaken. If I feel like writing about my life on a sunny day, I should be able to do so by means of words: no one would see my gestures or hear my sobs, my groans, my screams. That's why it is important to patch up our differences in Petersburg where we might meet at the end of January 2013, unless she follows my instructions to the letter. At the end of our last talk, I asked her if she would come to Versailles on the 8th of January and she said she would not, in spite of the promise she had made at the beginning of December 2012. 'But we'll meet in Petersburg,' she said.

'I will not meet you in Petersburg,' I said. I was so angry I just slammed the phone down. I'm not sure I'll see her in Petersburg, let alone in Versailles where the weather doesn't seem to welcome anyone, no matter how beautiful the woman in question is and how rich her parents are. I hope the weather will not think I'm anti-social if I don't join it or rather its mood: I'm dreaming about her stay in Versailles. Is it another dream or the same one? How many dreams is one permitted to have within a month? I've dreamt about her visit for more than a month, according to my calculations; but the calculations I made might contain a few inaccuracies.

What a pity she didn't send me an email on December 31st, 2012. 'I can't live without you.' Actually I would have been content with a watered-down expression of the same feeling: 'It is hard to live without you.' I hope she'll say so in Petersburg where we are to stay in the same hotel the name of which seems to correspond to my wishes and petit-bourgeois dreams: Europe. Sure enough, I would like to live with her in Europe: in France, in Italy, in England or in Switzerland. Yet I'll never repeat the words one can hear in Mussorgsky's *Boris Godunov*: 'Even in a flimsy wooden hut I'd be happy with you.'

I arrive in Petersburg and somebody takes me to the hotel where I find a message I've been longing for since our last conversation at the end of which I told her I would never see her again. But she didn't take notice of this outburst of anger because everybody knows how poets conduct themselves in the presence of their models, muses and mistresses. So she said to herself: 'I'll leave a message for him at the reception desk and he'll invite me to dinner.' The point is I'm not really in love with her: at my age people don't fall in love every day and if they happen to think of life in terms of love, the object of their desire is God and not a man

and a woman who are unable to save them from Hell. God, on the other hand, can do it rather easily: He doesn't even have to get in touch with one of the angels who traditionally run errands for Him – or fly errands, come to think of it. A thought of God is enough to save your soul and even your body, for we shouldn't forget that we are supposed to resurrect with our decrepit bodies. But a woman we love and cherish may stroke our body day in, day out; she may even stroke our soul, assuming that she's aware of its whereabouts and of the way that leads to it. But she'll never save us either from Hell or from eternal death because she is neither God nor the Archangel Gabriel. We'd better fall in love with God and not with a woman or man, especially if we are old and decrepit.

Leonardo da Vinci speaks openly about his aversion to the genital area and organs. He writes in his diary: 'Tigers mate repeatedly over a period of several days, but they do not mate all year round. Humans mate round the clock and their mating is as ugly as their genitals. It is true that their faces are beautiful and they make up for their rudeness and also for the ugliness of their love-making. Why not call this process "mating"? In those moments, they are akin to animals who, however, do not mate on a regular basis. But for the beauty of human faces, the human race would have become extinct a long time ago.'

I recall a woman who used to ask many questions related to her genitals that I was reluctant to stroke and kiss on account of what Leonardo had said about them in his diary. 'Why don't you do it?' she would say, looking at me imploringly. Had I spoken to her of Leonardo's remark, she would have said, 'You're not Leonardo da Vinci. Anyway, he was homosexual. Are you homosexual?' She would hitch her skirt up and show me her genital area and the organs I couldn't bear in the light of a few incidents that had marred the pleasure of my youth. I still cannot bear them because my memory is incapable of forgetting the smell of decaying meat. Anyway the smell of hospitals always makes my stomach turn.

I'm always harking back to my childhood and saying how things were better then – in the halcyon days of my youth, my childhood and my babyhood. I had no sister; no female was tempted to exhibit her genitals in my presence on a regular basis – without forgetting angles and their importance. That's why I'm always harking back to my childhood and also to my immaculate youth: only at the age of 20 did I taste a female body for the first time. I wonder when I'll taste it for the last time and whenever I ask myself this question, I say to myself I should banish such thoughts from my head and also from my life: they remind me of decaying meat and teeth, of dead fish and dirty rivers. Incidentally, the woman I referred to as

a goddess keeps ringing me up to say she thinks about me all the time. And I wonder why I was so elated by the resurrection of my libido. I ought to have been thinking about God and the resurrection promised to humankind.

According to Freud, girls realise their bodies are deficient because they have no penis to speak of – actually they can't boast of *anything* comparable to penis with the exception of their noses. But they know perfectly that penises don't adorn men's *faces*: one has to look for them *elsewhere* – in the area where those girls have a sort of absence about which Lacan and Freud speak so voluptuously. Actually I'm not sure Lacan was interested in this particular kind of absence, although he seemed to have adopted Sigmund Freud's doctrines without casting doubts on their validity. He often spoke about the phenomenon of *presence* which might come to the fore through a mirror or what he called 'an identification with the other party'.

Certain beasts have the knack of assuming the insignia and colouring of their surroundings as if bent on protecting their bodies (and souls) against predators. But many investigators – and I am of their number – found that those animals were just as likely to be eaten as the ones whose indifference towards masks and other disguises couldn't be questioned either by specialists or poets. Lacan argues there is a sort of natural law whereby organisms become captured in their environment and consequently no one should wonder why the child identifies with an image outside himself, be it a real mirror image or simply the image of another child. (I'm still concerned with my childhood and so I don't have to add 'or herself'.) I've never done anything of the sort and even now I'm not tempted to identify with Dante – or Plato, for that matter. I may write about those I hold dear, but I remain *myself* throughout the process because my mirrors reflect only *my* image and not that of my mother or wife. Even in my childhood I saw only myself – either in mirrors or in my bed where my body was lying alone as if to prophesy my future solitude and autism. We shouldn't forget that autism is four times more common in boys than in girls.

You can remove a red wine stain from a carpet by sprinkling salt over it, but how to remove a stain left by love-making – a stain that can be removed neither by salt nor even by prayer? I don't remember if George Bataille speaks about human beauty; I know that he does justice to the negative effect brought about by the ritual to which we all are more or less addicted. He calls it '*souillure*' and I don't know if I agree with him or not because there are many stains in our history; no one can say where one stain ends and another begins. In other words, no

one can know for sure where the origin of our ugliness lies and hides. I don't dye my hair to hide my grey streaks because I'm not accustomed to playing the role of a handsome young man: even in my youth I never resorted to this ploy. In Versailles where I live there are only a couple of men that to my knowledge dye their hair instead of taking care of their sins. They also mix their stains in such a way that no one can understand what they stem from and how they're related to human nature. The easiest thing to do would be for us to regard them as inhuman, but people continue to salute them in the streets and even indoors, which means they still belong to our species and no one is prepared to exclude them from our clubs.

I cannot forget the goddess who did all she could to drag sex into our conversations and I'm very sensitive to words and their various meanings. This time, however, all her words were marked or stained by one meaning only and I had no alternative but to follow her wherever she led; and she always headed for my bed where I wasn't supposed to talk to her about Heidegger or Wittgenstein. Though a goddess, she is not really beautiful and I don't think there's a marked contrast between her physique and the stains I left on her body, in my bed and in our respective lives. Why am I talking about her now? Because she keeps ringing me up and I have no alternative but to listen to her declarations faithfully memorised by my answerphone. Actually I wonder if I've ever had any alternative to getting out of an imbroglio, a marriage, a chore, a dark chapter in one's life.

'It surprises me how much I miss you when you're far from my life. After all, we do nothing but fight when we're together!' That's how the goddess speaks to me or rather to my answerphone; and the 26-year-nymph doesn't say anything as if determined to pay homage to the saying 'out of sight, out of mind'. To tell the truth, I'm relying on my silence and absence to make her realise she can't live without my presence, words and poems. But, contrary to my expectations and hopes, she doesn't seem to be tearing her hair out and once again I have no alternative: I admit that my plan has fallen through. Once again Spinoza – our legendary upholder of determinism – easily triumphs over those who lecture on freedom and its advantages; he always wins this debate hands down.

'If you cast your mind back,' I say to myself, 'you might recall what you wrote some time ago.' I cast my mind back, but I don't recall if I spoke about Sendai and its multimedia library that I admire so much on account of the fluidity that seems to rule over the whole structure. I wonder now if fluidity is firm enough to rule architectural games with strength and skill; in other words, I ask myself if being fluid doesn't mean adaptability which is a

necessary quality in an ever-changing work environment and in our daily routine. Drifting with the tide is not the best policy one can adopt when dealing with problems and others who are likely to oppose your ideas and thwart your plans on a regular basis. Taoists think otherwise, if I remember rightly, but I'm too lazy to go and fetch one of their books that can be found in the living room, 20 metres away from the spot where I'm working now, in accordance with my daily ritual. Besides, it is not enough to fetch a book and open it; you also have to select a suitable passage, which is too tiresome an operation in view of what happened to me this morning – on the threshold of my own house.

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

My mother continues to warn me against whores and when I turn to the quick and find a 26-year-old woman who is neither a whore nor calculating – she has enough money to drink Romanée Conti every day, until doomsday – I feel offended and shaken. (What will she drink on doomsday, I wonder?) Unfortunately she doesn't drink alcohol and so is unlikely to avail herself of what I'm dreaming of even now, in spite of the pain I feel in my ribs, muscles and stomach. Perhaps my metaphysical thirst – Romanée Conti is a metaphysical wine – has increased *because* of my pain that I'm sure to forget while drinking this wine; a bottle of Cheval Blanc would also fit the bill, come to think of it.

My maiden would have left three messages for a famous artist, a phony star and wealthy swindler, but I don't deserve a phone call, let alone an email or a telegram. This is not a tsunami and I shouldn't pay too much attention to it; nevertheless, I wish the roof of my temple could be held up by a row of thick stone columns and not by a number of tubes leaning to the right, to the left. I wish I could turn into Nelson's Column in Trafalgar Square, which might enable me to emerge victorious after a 65-year life on Earth. (I didn't say on the *surface* of the Earth, did I?)

And yet I'm not in love with this young woman and I'm not prepared to kowtow to her for the sake of messages and declarations of love. Why do I respond to her negligence by marching off and slamming the door behind me – behind my angry mind and discontented body? It is a disease that affects mainly older people: they're always making a mountain out of a molehill. Actually this woman doesn't count for anything in my mind and also in my body – at least to some extent; but it is often the little things that count the most. (Another disease that affects mainly older people.) I ought to have told her: 'Be careful with this thinking reed – it's very fragile' or 'Be careful with this library – it's very fragile' or 'Be careful with this temple – it's very fragile.' I said nothing of the sort, needless to say. I've said a lot of things in this paragraph, but I didn't say anything to *her* – nothing along the lines of what I've just said. Be careful, be careful, be careful! If an old man keeps silent, being content to socialise with a very small circle of people, it is no wonder that a lot of rude young women brutalise him day and night.

What procedure did Orson Welles follow in order to conquer his wife and punish his rival? I hardly recall what the film is about and for once my digressions do a great disservice to my cause – to my book, in other words. Well, Orson Welles plays the role of a husband betrayed by both his wife and son who disport themselves on the grass. Their daily ritual can be described as follows: his son sits on the grass, strumming his guitar and his wife listens to him, her eyes full of tears. And what about the grass? The grass glistens in the early-morning dew. The lovers know that Orson Welles isn't an early riser: he doesn't care about the early morning dew they enjoy so much. I suppose he is quite romantic – he sends his wife flowers on her birthday and tells her she's looking beautiful and so on. But flowers, birthdays and kisses prove nothing except that one may prefer flowers to empty vases and kisses to insults.

Orson Welles does what anybody would do in his shoes: he murders his wife and encourages his son to commit suicide in a quite spectacular fashion, thanks to Claude Chabrol's skill and experience. What am I to do in Petersburg? Should I kill somebody? How? I can't raise my left hand to fetch a bottle of wine, but fortunately I don't need it because I'm not left-handed and therefore can use my *right* hand for this and other purposes. And what if the person I'm bent on killing touches my fragile body ever so slightly? In this case I'll lie spread-eagled on some carpet or other – on the grass where other people lunch or make love, betraying their husbands, wives, sons and nephews.

It's all very well having a joke but sometimes you go too far – that's what they say anyway. What you write in a trance *is* a joke and sooner or later you're bound to admit it to yourself and even to your next of kin. I no longer have my relatives within my reach so I just admit it to myself and tear my diary to pieces. I say to myself that Paradise on Earth exists insofar as we are able to pave the way for a more detailed exploration of its delights. Last night I saw a Soviet film in which they showed a businessman whose hobby kept him busy and stopped him from working full-time for a computer company. Someone asked him: 'What's your hobby?' He answered: 'I find customers for my own mistresses and take some of the money they earn.' I'm tempted to say he was a pimp by profession, but in this particular case our terrestrial words are not as important as the Word and the whole of The Gospel According to St. John.

The camera showed his country house where a number of foreign guests took shelter in the sauna and enjoyed themselves in the company of the women supplied by their generous host who charged a flat rate of \$500 per hour. The sauna was in the basement, but that didn't mean that the guests and occasionally the host himself had to go all the way down to their births and the Big Bang where so many secrets await us as if they could reveal to men and women some ultimate laws of physics and everyday life. There's no denying that we are unhappy and pretty miserable without those laws, but at least we can go to a sauna and stroke the bodies supplied by our hosts, managers and merchants of Venice (or merchants of Venus). They sell us both saunas and bodies and all we have to do is go to a basement or climb quickly to a height of 30,000 feet in a plane where a hospitable host can also install a sauna with dozens of bodies inside. The word 'underground' doesn't always lead us to some 'search for oneself' or 'Absolute Truth': they are often found in an ordinary sauna, provided its owner is a professional pimp well-versed in the intricacies of jurisprudence. In the film I saw such a host was brought to justice and at some point he was accused of obstructing the course of justice – because he wasn't aware of its intricacies, mazes, labyrinths and so on. He was amazed to hear that the law specifically prohibits acts of this kind. 'Of what kind?' he asked.

'Selling bodies.'

'Isn't the soul more important than the body?'

'It is not – we are in the Soviet Union.'

'I thought I was taking part in a film made in Russia.'

'Do you think that in Russia one is allowed to sell bodies?'

‘Yes, on condition that there are people who want to buy these bodies.’

‘You mean “supply and demand”?’

‘Isn’t capitalism directed towards making the greatest possible profits for successful organizations and people?’

‘It is.’

‘I am a successful pimp and my country house allows me to make a lot of money. My company is a rare success story in these times of recession.’

‘Nevertheless you’ll go to prison because the film and our court are situated within the bounds of the Soviet Union.’

Well, I’m no longer within these bounds which have always reminded me of Prometheus, his chains and liver. Now I live in a free country and can go to Russia whenever I wish to profit from the generosity and knowhow of today’s professional pimps who take desperate measures to keep the economy running. Western economists think that until recently the Russian economy has been insulated from recession by its reserves of raw materials. Usually economists take no account of pimps, talking only about raw materials and interest rates, and they complain if their bank accounts are in debit at the end of the month – as if there were no pimps and bodies to give a much-needed boost to their confidence

For once, I’m reminded of Stanislavsky – usually I recall other people – who would send his letters to Moscow, anxious to inform his theatre and artists of the stage directions destined to enliven the production of Shakespeare’s *Othello*. One day, he sent a ten-page missive to the council, detailing his objections and voicing his grievances. At the time he was recovering from a heart attack in Germany – in the hotel where I spent a few days in the early Eighties. In the same hotel Chekhov spent the last days of his life and my memory can’t forget the garden where I read two books that had nothing to do either with Chekhov or with Stanislavsky, *Othello* and *Desdemona*. Stanislavsky didn’t know that *Othello* had been premiered already: his missives were missing the mark all the more piteously since no amount of trouble could improve on the production completely botched by Stanislavsky’s collaborators. He ought to have switched to Verdi’s opera and executed *Othello*’s short aria – in Italian, not in Russian:

Ora e per sempre addio santé memorie. Addio, addio, addio, addio.

Sure enough, Stanislavsky could have said farewell to his holy memories and even to his mind that was no longer useful and vital to the art of the Moscow Art Theatre fêted by audiences both in Russia and abroad: in Europe, in the United States. He could also have taken leave of his troops – of the actors with whom he had worked for many years: they had proved to be turncoats and you cannot rely on such people, even if you are known all over the world. You may say to yourself, ‘I’m famous so everyone will listen to what I say and execute my orders.’ But your collaborators say to you, ‘You *are* famous, but your orders mean nothing to the actors because it galls us to take orders from Mister Gaga.’

Singing day and night: ‘*Della gloria d’Otello è questo il fin.*’ Well, Stanislavsky did nothing of the sort: he was loath to perform Othello’s aria for the simple reason that he had no time to learn the art of singing arias in romantic operas. I *could* perform a few arias centred upon my age, forthcoming death and defeats, but I refrain from singing because I hate my own voice and the notes I use to convey my thoughts and fears by means of music. Let me just say that I’ve lost all my battles and the women I see in my dreams and outside them no longer say to me they’ll never forget my hand and ideas because they manage to live without me and any other man or woman is able to replace me on a regular basis and in any country of Europe.

In Petersburg I saw a collection of bones that seemed to shake as if the winds activated by Yeats’ poem had been at work in a hotel where even draughts do not disturb the customers or the owners. Actually, the lady in question was sitting at a table covered with croissants and teapots over which her hand was moving as she chose an appropriate pastry and beverage for her breakfast. I didn’t recognise her at first; I saw only a movement that alerted me to a potential danger I feared whenever I thought of the 26-year-old woman whom I might encounter during my stay in Petersburg. Well, I did encounter her in the restaurant where many people breakfast and dine to fill their bodies with meat, smoked salmon and cheesecakes that I used to love 30 years ago – especially in New York and San Francisco. She recognised me and hastily put her mobile phone in her bag that I might have seen a month before when I had invited the lady in question to a restaurant called Café Pushkin situated near Pushkin Square in Moscow. She saluted me and I sat down opposite her; and yet I had already finished my breakfast and consequently did not desire to eat her croissants and drink her green and black teas. ‘If I drink a cup of black tea,’ she told me once, ‘I just have to drink some green tea, otherwise I can’t live properly.’

‘How are you?’ I said to her.

‘I’m all right.’

‘So you brought our love adventure to a close,’ I went on.

‘Did I?’

‘I think you did. Why didn’t you call me?’

‘When I feel that something goes wrong, I lie low.’

I looked at her bones and thought she was telling the truth: her bones were lying low despite the breakfast and the table over which her hands might have moved at any time in search of honey or orange marmalade. ‘Why should I speak to bones?’ I asked myself. I couldn’t say anything to her and so I fell back on my memories which showed me a sequence from a film I had watched at home when trying to rest after my literary exertions. ‘I can’t forget you,’ said a young woman.

‘I must go home,’ said a young man.

‘Stay with me,’ said the woman.

‘Rita’s waiting for me,’ said the man. The woman sighed deeply and sat down in the snow.

‘Get up,’ said the man. ‘I don’t want you to catch your death of cold.’ The woman lay down on the snow and made as if to bury herself in it. ‘You’re not going to help matters by lying there sobbing!’ said the man. Let me skip a few episodes and come to the denouement of the story.

The scene is set in the young man’s house where his daughter’s body is shaking with sobs. ‘Everybody seems to get hysterical,’ I say to myself as I reach for the remote. ‘There’s someone knocking at the door,’ I think about leaving the remote where it is – in the middle of my table. The same woman comes in and listens to the sobs I attempted to describe some time ago. ‘It’s my daughter,’ says the man. ‘Her name’s Rita.’

‘I’ll never forget you,’ says the woman. ‘I can’t live without you.’

‘I love you,’ says the man.

The name of the woman I met in Petersburg is Rita, but it doesn’t mean she can utter the same words and feel what women in love are said to feel and experience as they fall in love with young and old men. I offered her my poems, saying I wished to get them published on condition that she didn’t mind my doing so for reasons best known to herself. She might have found them offensive, but she didn’t because I had asked her to drop me a line and no lines are about to reach me – at least that’s what my sixth sense imparts to me whenever I deign to consult it. She cares neither about my poetry nor about my wisdom nourished by the

poets and philosophers I study as I try to penetrate my own secrets and become what I am at last. I continue to think of this shallow woman as if my thoughts could interfere on my behalf and reverse the situation by means of telepathy or any other means accessible to thoughts that have no arms, no weapons, no bombs and no powers of persuasion, generally speaking.

I listen to Mozart's quartets, quintets, sonatas, concerti, but I am still in Hell because Stravinsky's second wife adored her husband to the point of excluding from her field of vision any other genius she had come across in the course of her life. 'My husband is the only genius I've ever met,' she would say to journalists and her relatives. Rita doesn't say *anything* about me and our adventure as if I had always been an invisible man – even before our meeting in Moscow. 'Why should I talk about invisible men?' she says to her relatives.

'H. G. Wells talked about one of them,' her brother cuts in.

'But the man he talked about had discovered the formula of invisibility. And the man I don't want to talk about is just a nonentity. He hasn't discovered anything, not even America.'

There are lots of God's emissaries in air, water, fire and earth and there are psychoanalytical commentaries that enable us to unravel the secrets of their genetics, growth and death. One emissary sends a letter; another emissary receives the letter and sends it to yet another emissary. Thus the world comes into being and remains where it is to prevent the world from vanishing into thin air. There is only thin air in the world: there's no such thing as *thick* air. One of my friends always speaks about 'thick *cares*', but I don't listen to him.

A journalist says, 'He now thinks that retiring early was a stupid thing to do.' He speaks about the former Pope and he is wrong: neither the Pope nor I think it was a stupid thing to do because it is never stupid to retire, considering that you can play the piano and read Montaigne instead of making speeches in Rome and elsewhere. You make a speech and people listen to you because they know they can't live without your speeches and spiritual guidance inspired by the spirits whose help cannot be overestimated, given that they are closer to God – the main source of human information – than material bodies and tomb-enclosed bones.

You say to them: 'Now that the war is over may there be lasting peace between our nations.' The nations applaud and whistle.

You say to them: ‘Stop fighting, you two – shake hands and make your peace with each other!’ The two applaud and whistle.

You say to them: ‘God has worked for peace during the long era of conflict.’ They applaud and whistle.

You say to them: ‘The Vatican released a statement condemning the recent terrorist attacks.’ For some obscure reason, they neither applaud nor whistle. The reason is so obscure you add immediately, ‘I have exerted my authority to restore peace in the area.’ They applaud and whistle.

You say to them: ‘It is not easy to love with a deep love, but it is easy to love with a shallow love. I find you physically quite attractive but a bit shallow. Only what I call “our shallow love” is accessible to your senses and minds. Never mind. You should love each other at all cost. So love your neighbour superficially – it is better than to beat him with a stick or a club. Last night I was shocked by the advertisement which depicted a woman beating her husband.’ They applaud and whistle.

Today on Russian TV they show a beautiful actress who talks to you about the most important thing: at least that’s how the Russians call this programme devoted to one’s health, not to one’s motherland. Is Russia more important for me than my health? I don’t think there are many Russians for whom their motherland is more important than their bowels, stomachs, hearts, eyes, lungs and so on. And they may go on for hours and hours as they talk about their aches and headaches, about their imaginary cancers and the Alzheimer’s patients some of whom are their cousins and sisters-in-law.

They also talk about diabetes and I also think about this because my mother suffered from this debilitating disease when I was living in Moscow, in the Soviet Union where one couldn’t get appropriate medicine and had no alternative but to die, looking out of the window and enjoying the beauty of snowmen – or snowwomen, as they are called in Russia. Every year I go to my hospital and allow a nurse to take blood and urine samples for analysis; and yet I know that no analysis will ever save me from death, from its final appearance. The nurse picks up a syringe and a small amount of my blood makes its appearance inside it as if my blood could travel freely from one vein to another, from one syringe to another, from a syringe to a phial and so on. Once again the process goes on for ages and as a result I’m told I am suffering from the diabetes that my mother must have given me as a birthday present on the day of my birth, otherwise I would never have suffered from anything of the kind. One

can say, ‘A lot of children in the school caught measles last term,’ but no one ever thinks in these terms about diabetes because even if you make love to someone who suffers from it, you’re unlikely to get contaminated..

I call one of my friends – she is a doctor – who says to me that I’m not yet fatally ill and that the process revealed by the analysis can go on for years, building up my strength – ‘I mean, your weakness,’ she said. Scientists think it unlikely that any species will actually become extinct as a consequence of the oil spill. You hear on the radio, ‘Reports are just coming in of a major oil spillage in the North Sea,’ and you say to yourself that it doesn’t concern you in the least because you live in the South, not far from Nice or Cannes or Majorca. And a few years later some species actually become extinct as a consequence of this oil spill because these species are allergic to oil spills and to oil in general. Of course you don’t care about these species and you stroke your cat as you think that no oil spill will ever contaminate *his* body; but the matter stands differently with diabetes and other diseases one can detect through a blood or urine test.

There’s such a thing as a country of the blind; there must be a country where only diabetics live and I can’t say they prosper there; and yet I’m used to adding the verb ‘to prosper’ to the verb ‘to live’ – just for the fun of it. But, according to my doctors, I’m still on the border of this country and if I go on a diet, I may return home, assuming that what I call ‘my home’ is situated *outside* diabetes and its sphere of influence – of its consequences, in other words. Beware, beware, beware, beware, beware. There’s a warning on the cake packet that says ‘Sugar seriously damages health’ – especially if you’re *already* on the threshold of the house where diabetes lives and prospers. Just a word of warning — restaurants in this area are stuffed with diabetes. You go to another area and find a series of restaurants where you encounter only dwarves – short diabetes, so to speak. But even dwarves can damage your health and destroy all your egos, one by one, let alone your sub-egos and a few corners of your unconscious. ‘The point of no return’ they call it and they’re right, judging from my mother’s condition about which her doctor spoke to me in the hospital where she spent the last week of her life. ‘Your mother has no brain to speak of,’ he told me. And he added, ‘Diabetes has a voracious appetite.’ Why did he speak of my mother’s brain?

Only God can help us, as Heidegger put it. Bouvard et Pécuchet also thought about God at some point; and yet they didn’t suffer from diabetes, as far as I know. It is an illness which afflicts women more than men. Is it? Am I a woman? Whenever I look for an envelope in my

desk drawers I invariably get sidetracked by some old letters, photographs, postcards, greetings, meetings and so on. My investigation to which I have already devoted so many pages sidetracks me into idle and superfluous enquiries à la Descartes: I doubt my very existence and hastily replace the Almighty with an evil spirit or the Devil. He immediately turns the tables on his rival – alias God – with allegations of corruption and my wits begin to turn, as King Lear might have put it. The uncommon reader may spend hours and hours, probing for any inconsistencies in my story, but whatever conclusions may be drawn at the end of such an investigation, one thing remains certain – beyond a shadow of a doubt, as they say. I am a man and not a woman, whether I'm afflicted with diabetes or not.

So the Devil is not likely to help me, even if some artists – Adrian Leverkühn, for instance – may seek His help in the hope of writing a masterpiece akin to the *Missa Solemnis* or *Kunst der Fuge*. I may aspire to write something along the lines of *À la recherche du temps perdu*, but I probably should try to restrain my ambitions and be more realistic. Well, I sound realistic when I say I suffer from a mild variety of diabetes that varies in accordance with the amount of sugar my blood conveys to my brain in an attempt to turn it into candyfloss.

They talk a lot about radiologists who see your diseases and cure you in no time, provided you believe they can cure you either with the help of God or on their own, using some sort of energy that you also doubtless have - though you don't know how to use it. They do know how to use and focus it. They focus it on your diabetes which liquefies under pressure; all you have to do is go to the lavatory and get rid of the harmful liquid. Some of them say that God is on their side and others obliterate all divinities, trusting only their energies and powers, their bodies and rays – their X-rays mostly. All right, I'll tell you what I suffer from because we don't have much time and it's pointless to waste it trying to make an initial diagnosis: I'll show you my blood test and you'll know everything about my body and soul.

Could you please liquefy the diabetes I'm nursing in my body as if it was my baby or the woman I had fallen in love with before my birth? No woman I'm acquainted with clings to my heart with such frenzy, which means that the woman I'm talking about was in my heart before my birth, in one of my former lives, and only she can remind me of my genes, these carriers of diabetes and other symbols of death. Can you liquefy this woman, this hereditary disease? In Russia they're fond of snowwomen, as I pointed out earlier, and in Rimsky Korsakov's famous opera one of these women melts because she can't do otherwise despite

the proverbial Siberian winter. (Actually I'm not sure the action is set in Siberia.) Can't you visualise my diabetes in the shape of this snowwoman or snowmaiden? Even I can do it. But I can't get rid of her, even if I fall ill and begin to run a temperature.

With the help of God, anyone could do it, but God doesn't seem to help me and I feel lonely once again and this time I don't think about life in terms of human beings who intrude upon your privacy when they need your money or professional advice. I must pray God and, as many books seem to insinuate, the wording of your prayer doesn't really count because it is your desire to go towards God and His abode that is taken into consideration by God's secretaries who note your moves down in their notebooks – they've got no computers – and announce to the Almighty the results of their calculations.

Even indifference is an attack in disguise – the most vicious attack I'm aware of because any criticism transports you to Speaker's Corner where you can stand and talk for the sake of the people gathered around you or that particular corner: I'm told there are always a lot of people on that spot, even if it rains. Perhaps I was told a pack of lies; and yet I asked no questions because the person from whom I heard this news put me in the picture about what had happened in Hyde Park several days before spontaneously, without being driven to the brink of a nervous breakdown. On that brink people say whatever comes into their heads and have no control over the information they supply you with in the heat of the moment, on the brink of a fatal moment.

Never mind, never mind. To cut a long story short, I'm often attacked and I know I'm attacked by humans, for most wild animals will not attack unless they are provoked. And how could I provoke the people I'm not acquainted with and whose days and nights leave no vestiges on the horizon I contemplate from my window? They don't know that the more they attack me, the longer my works grow as they endeavour to reach the threshold of eternity where they yearn to settle down after getting married to the Muses; otherwise they wouldn't attack. (I'm speaking about humans, not about the Muses. Let the latter attack me as often as they wish.)

It's easy to draw parallels and I'm keen on performing this task that gives me an opportunity to create a compact world – a CD in a way – where the structure of God's thoughts and intentions comes to the fore and can be seen more clearly. Lévi-Strauss talks about that in

relation to every work of art which enables us to perceive the whole – the cosmos, for instance – *before* its constituent parts. Of course in such moments we deal with an illusion, but this procedure as well as the illusion itself gratify human understanding and sensibility and are therefore at the very root of aesthetic emotion. (I continue my search for roots.) Unlike its ‘full-scale’ counterpart, this analogous object can be taken in at a glance and you need no binoculars, no opera glasses to do so without let or hindrance. I’m still under the impression I can hold Burgos cathedral in the palm of my hand, although I haven’t seen it for five months, and Lévi-Strauss uses the phrase ‘weighed in the palm of one’s hand’ as he enlarges upon works of art and their ability to reduce the world to a speck of dust without losing anything. In other words, not a speck of dust gets lost as the world turns into a work of art under the guidance of an artist of genius (and God).

In his last speech, the Pope spoke about boats and I have no idea whether he thought about the fact that we had always been in the same boat and that consequently there’s only one boat we should take into consideration as we ponder our next move in the game of life. It goes without saying that, once upon a time, this boat was given to us by God Himself – at the time when we were still unable to build a boat or even a raft because we enjoyed our life on terra firma and had no wish to leave it for stormy waters. We looked at the sea – Robert Frost speaks of it in one of his poems – and saw only storms and the horrendous damage that might have been done to our contraptions and bodies, had we left the earth and ventured into the unknown space where only water and wind were allowed to hold sway.

O.K. The boat is in front of us and we know it shouldn’t be confused with Noah’s Ark because there are many arks and arches; the boat I’m talking about is in a class of its own – like the universe itself. Never mind, it is right in front of us and one of our prophets says, ‘This boat comes straight from God’s shipyard so we have nothing to worry about.’

‘It’s too small for us,’ we say to our prophet.

‘There are various points to look out for when you’re judging boats in a competition.’

‘What point of view are *you* looking at?’

‘This is a lifeboat,’ says the prophet.

‘What’s a lifeboat?’

‘A large boat which is kept ready to go out to sea.’

‘What for?’

‘To save people who are in danger.’

‘But this is not a large boat, is it?’

‘It is not. God also has a smaller boat kept on a ship for people to leave in if their ship is not safe or likely to sink.’

‘Why have we been given a small boat? We’re not on a ship, are we? And please don’t talk to us about fools. Once we saw a picture in the centre of which there were a lot of fools on a boat. We’re not those fools and we feel stones under our feet.’

‘The Lord gave us days of sun and of light breeze, days in which the fishing was good,’ says the prophet.

‘What do you mean by fishing?’

Be that as it may, the boat is now in the centre of the world and the wind does its best to ill-treat it as if God’s wrath hadn’t subsided at the very outset of the voyage – in spite of the numerous prayers and sacrifices carried out on the seashore and in seaside resorts. ‘Where’s our King?’ asks a nervous passenger.

*Contending with the fretful elements;
Bids the wind blow the earth into the sea,
Or swell the curled waters ‘bove the main,
That things might change or cease*

‘Does He want to destroy us? Where is He?’

‘In the middle of nowhere.’

‘Where’s nowhere?’

‘Somewhere on this boat.’

‘Let’s kill Him.’

‘Why? Did you hear the word “cease”?’

‘I applied it to my life.’

‘The fishing is bad today.’

‘What are you talking about?’

‘Are we fishing for tuna?’

‘For men, not for tuna.’

‘How many men did you catch this morning?’

‘I’d rather have a morsel of tuna.’

‘Let’s fish in troubled waters.’

‘There were also moments when there were stormy waters and headwinds, as was the case in the whole history of the Church, as if God was sleeping.’ The Pope continues to speak as he looks at the boat or ship where we are huddled together for warmth. Usually we are so frightened by life that we huddle up in a corner of our room, but we no longer have any room at our disposal with the exception of this boat that no one calls a ‘room’ or a ‘house’, for it is just a boat built by Christ or God Himself. But God is asleep and Christ’s mission is ‘to isolate the enemy by destroying all the bridges across the river’, our prophet points out showing us a letter marked ‘Personal. Strictly confidential.’

‘What enemy should be isolated?’

‘Satan and his troops,’ says the prophet.

‘What about us?’

‘You’re already isolated.’

I pick up a book where I’m likely to find someone else’s childhood and open it at random, somewhere at the beginning, trusting the author who must have put his birth and childhood in the opening chapters of his autobiography. The author’s name is Bunin and his fame seems to content itself with the space offered to it by Russia, in spite of the fact that in the Thirties Ivan Bunin was awarded the Nobel Prize for literature. I read about his childhood and I can’t help wondering how one can accept this childhood as one’s own experience to live it through, becoming another man, adopting a new life in which there are evolutions and revolutions, loves and hates that call for mixed relationships. Is it better to have *another* childhood than the void?

Bunin speaks about his tutor who used to tell him stories, writing his own autobiography in the presence of a child who listened to his tales of woe and tales of bliss as if they were his own tales rooted in his genes and destiny. I had no tutors and my grandmother told me no stories because I had too many stories in my head and my parents were preoccupied on account of their number: they thought I should pay more attention to *real* life. And of course whenever you say ‘reality’, you add ‘whatever that is’ as you open a book lying in your lap as if to demonstrate that reality is a multiple-choice test.

Bunin also speaks about his father’s dagger and about the way he killed a rook, which can elicit only one reaction inside my head where there are no *madeleines* to speak of because I wasn’t born in France. I shudder with horror and recall the birds destroyed by my cat who always lines them up in front of my country house as if to prove he is permitted to commit

many murders with apparent impunity. Why should I read about the rook and the dagger which doesn't remind me of anything, considering that my father had no similar object in his study and the rifle he used when going on a deer hunt was too cumbersome and too noisy; and I mistrust and fear dangerously high noise levels.

In the next chapter Bunin speaks about his former lives and the castles where he might have lived in the 14th century. Once again I don't remember anything of the kind. I don't think I lived in one of these castles in the course of my former existence centred upon Europe and its medieval treasures. Did I spend many years in a monastery, watering plants and listening to birds who were protected from cats and daggers, from sadists and boisterous children? Perhaps, perhaps. But this morning I think about madeleines and Proust whose masterpiece I'm tempted to quote in English so as to fold it, making a few creases that always crop up when you read a translation and take the trouble to compare it with the original.

Wearily after a dull day, Marcel thinks about the time he'll have to spend in his own company, doing nothing and renouncing the search for time to which he is supposed to devote his huge, interminable novel: time isn't worthy of his search. Why should one print it in capitals? Marcel does not and he raises instead a spoonful of tea to his lips that anticipate what is about to happen: they know both the spoon and its contents. They also know the cake that Marcel soaked in the tea about which I know next to nothing; I just know it wasn't a Krasnodar tea.

What should I do in order to experience the same feeling of bliss that seldom invades human beings unless they resort to drugs? I drink my tea and I feel its taste that I enjoy to the utmost because my tea comes from the best tea shop in Paris and probably anywhere; its name is *The Palace of Teas*. I'm speaking about the shop and not about the teas I buy there when I'm patient enough to open my car and drive as far as Passy – the arrondissement where I would settle, if I didn't live in Versailles, near its market place.

The tea I drank this morning bears the name that is likely to remind one of the hustle and bustle associated with big cities and city centres – Hilton. I seldom stay in such hotels because I prefer old-style accommodation and whatever goes with it, but I like the tea I'm talking about; and I also enjoy the other teas I find in the same box whenever I open it. I see and feel this Aladdin's cave as I fish out the tea I've just selected for my tea ritual, deprived of cakes, bread, jam and other constituents of what they call the 'continental breakfast'. Well, I don't have a single *madeleine* at home as if I hadn't fallen in love with Proust in the early Seventies, in Moscow, when reading *Swann's Way* in Russian. I began to dream about this

legendary cake after reading the passage I quoted an hour ago, before going to bed for the nap I usually take in the morning, which doesn't prevent me from taking another nap in the afternoon.

So I enjoy my tea without exploring any episode of my childhood because my grandmother, for all her attachment to France, was in no position to offer me the cake that Marcel mechanically soaks in his tea: he has no inkling of what is in store for his soul and his gargantuan literary project. He is bent on finding the origin of the sensation he avails himself of during *his* tea ritual; whenever I'm permitted to take advantage of the same silent ecstasy, I don't even try to unravel its mystery because I'm pretty sure I'll never get to its core for the simple reason that I have no idea where to look for it.

A precious essence, the end of Marcel's mediocrity and mortality: he is the precious essence that cannot die because in two centuries there will be enough grandmothers on this planet and the proverbial madeleine can be replaced by an ordinary *millefeuille*. Anyway you become eternal as soon as you experience the doctrine of eternal recurrence either at your dinner table or in your bed, provided that your wife or husband is prepared to bring you tea and an emotion-charged cake. No more vicissitudes of life the brevity of which is a mere illusion, according to many people – to Brecht, for instance. Unfortunately, in the light of my recent blood test, I'd better not eat cakes and even madeleines, though not as sweet as *millefeuilles*, should be excluded from my life. In the light of, in the light of – there are so many lights around I have no time to study all of them. And some of these lights are mortal: death doesn't *always* go hand in hand with darkness.

Actually Marcel has just drunk a cup of linden blossom tea. 'And suddenly the memory returns. The taste was that of the little bit of madeleine which on Sunday mornings at Combray (because on those mornings I did not go out before church-time), when I went to say good day to her in her bedroom, my aunt Léonie used to give me, dipping it first in her own cup of tea or of lime-flower infusion –' For some reason, I confused this aunt with Marcel's grandmother who is almost omnipresent in the novel because, in fact, she was his mother, his dear unforgettable mother. Never mind – what counts is the new brand of eternity he found as he racked his brain, saying to himself from time to time: 'I've been racking my brains all day but I can't remember his name.' And then he would remember the tea and the morsel he was still holding in his right hand and to all outward appearances this morsel had nothing in common with the name he had forgotten forever. 'But what does it matter!' he said to himself. 'Why should I remember the name of that boy? He is unlikely to guide me towards eternity. I should concentrate on the morsel I'm holding and the cup of tea I've just

emptied. They lead to eternity, bypassing accidents and disasters, fatal diseases and other unpleasant episodes that lie in wait for us on the ordinary, death-oriented road.’ October 11, 2012. Marcel Proust writes a note to his housewife, Céleste: ‘I have just coughed more than three thousand times.’

Aunt Léonie and her madeleine. I had several aunts and uncles, but their presents had no affinities with the cake I often see in Versailles and on the pages I reread whenever I need to forget our bestsellers and prize winners whose books have the knack of boring me to death – not to eternity, mind you. One could be bored to eternity, I imagine, given that boredom always seems eternal, even if it’s fairly short-lived and doesn’t attempt to usurp the whole of your time and space – the whole of your living room, for instance. It stays in a corner of this room where you talk to somebody who talks to you about Philip Roth and Milan Kundera. What do *I* say to such people? I say I like Milan, especially the period when one could hear and see Toscanini at the La Scala – at the beginning of the 20th century.

I wish I had been born in Paris, for I feel attuned to the songs I hear in the old films where Paris, teeming with shoppers and tramps, resounds like a concert hall dedicated to Edith Piaf’s memory. My mother wouldn’t have minded living in Paris and getting married to a Frenchman whose genes might have included Montaigne and Pascal, Flaubert and Debussy. But all this reminds one of those virtual worlds about which I wrote a few pages at the end of the 20th century and I’ve had enough of them and of the results one can obtain when dealing with them directly and seriously: you have to take everything they say with a pinch of salt. They tend to exaggerate and so lead one astray as if one couldn’t trust one’s mother tongue and other languages that supply one with the ‘vocabulary of life’ – the Tree of Life, in other words.

A friend of André Breton and Salvador Dali, Lacan was to become Picasso’s personal physician and a contributor to Surrealist publications from the early 1930s. Of course, in those days – I’m speaking about my life in the Soviet Union – I adored both the surrealists and the abstractionists, but at the end of the 20th century I was mainly seen in the company of Klee, Mirò, and I strongly disagree with my computer’s in-built dictionary that is eager to replace Mirò by ‘mirror’. Or should I accept this substitution? To some extent, Mirò *was* my mirror, although I’m loath to use his biography as a springboard for my own existence, into the maze through which I walk towards my ‘*svetloe budushchee*’ (radiant future) promised by Soviet leaders and the communist propaganda that held sway over Italy and France. *Avenir*

radieux. Let us keep these words, discarding the rest: communism, food shortages, queues, censorship, lunatic asylums.

I'm fond of Mirò's series *Constellations* – another version of the *avenir radieux* to which I grew accustomed in the Soviet Union where one was bombarded by slogans, promises and triumphs. Again I discard the context, leaving only triumphs, constellations, radiance and the cosmos where a few Russian satellites are allowed to stay on condition that they throw no bombs on France where I'm busy with my own constellations. Mirò rediscovers unity – the fundamental unity of the world where the stars talk to each other as if influenced by Lermontov's memorable poem; where dreams and reality hug each other whenever they meet in a Mirò painting or in my novels.

When talking to the duchess, Don Quixote enumerates Dulcinea's qualities, turning her into an ideal woman. In one of my poems I say that the young woman I'm about to meet in St Petersburg is an ideal woman, intended as a substitute for Beatrice. Yet you can't make a silk purse out of a sow's ear. 'A flawless beauty; dignity without haughtiness; a tenderness that is never immodest; a graciousness due to courtesy and a courtesy that comes from good breeding; and, finally, a highborn lineage, for beauty is more resplendent and more nearly perfect in those of lofty extraction than in creatures of a humbler origin.'

I'm surprised to find that, in the same monologue, Don Quixote questions the wisdom of his own behaviour, saying that Dulcinea might turn out to be a figment of his imagination – a fanciful creation, in Putnam's distinguished translation. Actually Don Quixote did give birth to Dulcinea whose appearance and virtue spring from the knight's deep-rooted faith in rituals and the legends where these rituals are enacted using music, dance and mime. In a way, Cervantes follows in Dante's footsteps when he hoists Dulcinea onto his shoulders so as to carry her as far as Paradise where only absolute virtues, truth and beauty, are allowed to live forever. Beatrice's action on Dante's nervous system might be borrowed from Don Quixote's appraisal of Dulcinea and her sun-like qualities: 'Let but one ray of the sun of her beauty fall upon these eyes and it shall illuminate my understanding and fortify my heart to such a degree that I shall be matchless and without an equal in wisdom and in valour.'

And Sancho Panza discloses Beatrice's real, down-to-earth nature: 'To tell you the truth,' said Sancho, 'when I saw the lady Dulcinea del Toboso's sun, it was not bright enough to shed rays of any kind. This must have been due to the fact that, as I told you, she was winnowing wheat at the time, and this raised a lot of dust which came before her face like a

cloud and darkened it.’ Of course Beatrice wasn’t in the habit of winnowing wheat, but there was a cloud before her face; at least her prosaic nature, which has nothing in common with tercets, constantly brought her down to Earth so that she couldn’t stay in Paradise round the clock, thereby violating professional ethics.

My Beatrice – one of the ‘ideal women’ to whom I dedicated my recent cycle of poems – appears in the company of many clouds hanging around her face and even all along her body. I don’t think her beauty is as flawless as that of the creature imagined by Don Quixote, and her dignity, if any, borders on insolence and arrogance. Her courtesy is limited to the immoderate use of the word ‘*spasibo*’ that many foreigners use in Russia, which doesn’t mean they have a smattering of my native tongue. Her tenderness is often immodest. I can’t decide whether it is really tenderness or a sophisticated version of depravity. Let me not enlarge upon her lineage on the grounds that today this problem is dealt with in a twinkling of an eye by English royalty and Prince Albert of Monaco.

At first she was tender and seemed to be in love with my old age: when I asked her if she would ever forsake her new father – I said nothing of the kind, needless to say – she shook her head. I know another young woman who wears a ribbon in her hair and whenever she removes the ribbon, she shakes her hair loose from it. This time the movement was different because this particular young woman doesn’t wear a ribbon in her hair and consequently doesn’t need to remove it in order to shake her hair. She shook her head to signify her agreement to stay with me for the rest of her life: sometimes women *shake* their heads to signify agreements; and they *nod* their heads to signify disagreements.

A tall dignified woman; she is no longer dignified. Another enchantment. How to disenchant her? How many roles am I prepared to play tonight? Don Quixote, Sancho Panza, the duke and duchess, a postilion and so on. The duke and duchess are about to play a nasty trick on Don Quixote and Sancho – a sort of elaborate hoax. ‘Of a sudden it seems as if the entire wood were on fire, and the sound of trumpets, drums, and other martial instruments is heard, along with frightening battle cries. A postilion rides dressed as a demon and announces that he has come in search of Don Quixote de la Mancha, for whom he has a message from Montesinos. The message is to the effect that Montesinos will soon arrive, bringing with him Dulcinea del Toboso, in order to show her lover what must be done to disenchant her.’

I might have spoken about my head and the scar which adorns it, making me fear for my future or rather for my exterior that always belies my inner nature, my spiritual adventures. Behind that cold exterior there's a passionate man, as one might put it, but now my exterior is rather hot, given that scars are usually associated with duels and quarrels of all sorts – and also with the swords and daggers one often sees in the films devoted to gauchos and other local warriors. What can one say about me today and probably tomorrow, next year – in 20 years, as Dumas might have put it? What to do with my exterior and my interior? They're not interchangeable, contrary to what one may presume. (One always presumes too much. One always jumps to conclusions.) My interior has not become cold in the course of this illness which is rather imaginary, to tell the truth: scars may disfigure you, but they don't harm your internal organs.

Yes, I have a long scar across the crown of my head. Actually I wrote in my diary: 'My scar healed, but the redness remained for a long time.' Well, I can't roll up my trouser leg and say proudly: 'Just look at this scar,' for the simple reason that there are no scars on my legs and on my belly. And soldiers my exhibit their bodies, showing all their scars to those who are still alive and kicking thanks to those soldiers, to their valour and exploits. I'm not a soldier, far from it; I just knock my head against walls and projections of all kinds. I can't see a foot sticking out from under the duvet; the foot is sticking out and I trip over it. Another scar, another redness. But I wished to speak about death, not about scars, duvets, feet and walls.

I never paid attention in class and seemed to be in a permanent daydream from which came forward giants and knights, damsels and fairies; all of them were good swimmers. Pushkin and his fairy tales were instrumental in bringing about the state of mind which enabled me to estrange myself from a reality stuffed with slogans and nonsensical speeches. In a way, I was caught between two opposing ideologies, although I'm reluctant to range my daydreaming along some *ideological* route: my dreams were independent of each other and even of my thoughts that had no control over them. Yet I didn't feel I was losing control of events and I would switch off our teachers and their nonsense whenever I was in no mood for toeing the party line. Only mathematics appealed to my senses because of its abstract beauty which I trusted in Pushkin's absence – a rare occurrence, to tell the truth. Frankly speaking, from time to time I would grant him leave of absence, carried away by Don Quixote's ultimate victory

over reality that seemed to fawn upon him as it asked permission to exist alongside Montesinos and the palace inhabited by damsels and benevolent giants.

The cat I encountered at the beginning of Pushkin's long poem was in the habit of telling fairy tales – whenever he directed his steps to the right side of the oak tree to which he was sentimentally attached. As for the left-hand side, it was showered with presents that always started to take form as the fog cleared: mists, freezing fogs and snow are common in Pushkin's fairy tales. What I saw amounted to a number of songs I couldn't hear, for all my efforts focused on silence and its echoes. But I was permitted to *see* those songs as they loomed in front of me or on the left-hand side so that I often turned my head towards a song, anxious to see all its nuances, harmonies and intervals. According to Keats, inaudible melodies are sweeter than the ones one is permitted to listen to and enjoy within the peace of one's mind. But visible melodies are sweeter still, if my memory serves me right: I can no longer contemplate Wagnerian infinite melodies, let alone harmonies and dissonances. They're much sweeter, provided no one performs them on flutes and other Arcadian instruments, or represents them on Grecian vases and in prehistoric caves. What about unheard-of melodies?

In Pushkin's introduction to *Ruslan and Ludmila* – a fairy tale in its own right – there are lots of unknown paths on which invisible animals err from their itineraries, leading them to a sort of revelation, for the animal kingdom is not deprived of what is accessible to humans. If I could I would embark upon *my* journey, following the same paths meandering in the same woods or moods and thus I often managed to separate the higher part of my life from the lower one connected to the regime I began to hate at the age of 14. At the time I no longer recited *my* excerpts from *Ruslan and Ludmila*: I had more apposite images for the decaying society in which I lived and loved, suffering from human cruelty and stupidity. One of these images represents a graveyard – a place where Soviet citizens spent their time, queuing in shops or rather outside them, drinking vodka and carrying placards.

Do you think your wife is betraying you with a sailor or a boxer, or do you have no reason to suspect her honesty and loyalty? You have every reason to suspect both. You hire a private detective to find out if she is having an affair. When did you hire him? You ought to have hired him two months ago, but you kept putting it off because you were afraid your wife might come across him and say to herself, 'That car has been tailing me for the last 10 minutes.' So you said to the detective, 'Don't use your car.' The detective took your advice

and followed her on foot; and whenever she took a taxi, he followed her in a bus. She couldn't have said to herself: 'That bus has been tailing me for the last 10 minutes.' Could she?

The detective has apparently unearthed some fresh evidence and you're studying this evidence now as if you had to pass an exam the next morning, describing your wife's moves. Two months ago you ought to have held a gun to her head and said, 'One move and you're dead!' You did nothing of the kind and your wife has moved a lot over the last two months, tossing and turning in her lover's bed, lying under him, on him, under the canopy one can see above the sheets if one looks carefully at the photograph.

You show the photograph to your wife and she says, 'I hate the way you watch and photograph my every move.' What do *you* say? Do you say, 'Let the great Gods –' Do you really need the great Gods on this particular occasion? You don't even need the small Gods, whoever they are. (Actually I'm in the dark about the great Gods and their identities.) No, you just call your solicitor and say, 'I want a divorce,' or you whip a gun out of your pocket and write in your diary, 'She was shot three times in the head.' But for God's sake don't talk about the great Gods and their dreadful pudder (hubbub, turmoil) that they keep over the head of the world because there's nothing overhead except a few clouds. And there's a gun on your writing desk and your gun doesn't make much noise, otherwise King Lear would have heard your shot. Nor should you speak about the wretches who tremble as they hear the storm set off by both Shakespeare and King Lear: your wife is lying motionless on the carpet, as if dead. She *is* dead, as a matter of fact.

Yesterday I saw a film I must have seen in the Soviet Union 45 years ago, if I remember rightly; and I admit that my memory is unable to deal properly with time, let alone with space which it seems to despise. This film speaks rather pompously about Japanese wrestling and I don't even know if I can apply this term to whatever happens in Japan in this field. What is judo? At least I know the name of this discipline because I heard it many times in Moscow where our sportsmen were brought up to speed with the latest developments, whatever ground these developments could explore. The other discipline is called jiu-jitsu – the word that I also heard many times in Moscow and in the suburbs of Moscow where I spent my holidays in the company of my parents.

First I read a commentary appended to this film and I realised I wouldn't see the complete version of it because many sequences had got lost during the Second World War;

and everyone remembers what happened to Japan at the end of the Second World War. I wonder which version I saw in the Soviet Union: the long one or the short one? ‘Of course in the West they must have the longest version,’ I said to myself as I inserted the cassette into my VCR and sat down on the divan that is used to my body to the point of making the folds I am keen on during my escapades into imaginary worlds created by film directors. But I was wrong and I can’t say I was wrong for once, for the West is not always superior to the East and even to the former Soviet Union which belonged to both the West and the East.

For some reason, I remember the end of the version I saw in the Soviet Union, in the Western part of the country of my birth. The last episode of the fierce rivalry between two wrestlers took place in the mountains covered with snow and I’m not likely to forget snowy landscapes in spite of their eternal presence in my past. Usually one remembers unique opportunities and events, but this time my memory seems to opt for a commonplace, for the snow I couldn’t get rid of in my childhood, in my youth. I was fed up with it because of the snowballs flying towards my face, my fragile eyes; and I often slipped on the ice hidden and to some degree protected by the snow which was reluctant to protect my body and mind. How many times did I hear this sentence, ‘He’s been a bit dizzy and confused since the accident. Do you think it’s mild concussion?’ My mother got in the habit of calling my falls ‘accidents’ and she remained faithful to this habit to the end of her life, ignoring my protestations.

In the short version the two rivals fight their duel in the mountains, but there’s no snow around them and therefore they can’t slip on the ice, exposing their bodies to the manoeuvres associated with flight and death. One wrestler tries to strangle the judoka and is surprised at the latter’s resurrection: he doesn’t know that the judoka needs only one flower to triumph over his rivals and this flower is stored in his memory, not in his faraway cupboard. He just pictures it to himself – no folds, no pluses – and the duel doesn’t end in a draw, contrary to the referee’s expectations.

How could I describe the end of the *long* version? ‘After a short break, the match resumed with both players seeking to attack.’ Sure enough, they met in winter and the flights they executed for the sake of cinemagoers were quite spectacular on account of the snow that continued to fall throughout the duel: the director of the studio had acquired a brand new snow machine. How could I describe its efficiency? The snowflakes that can be found inside it fly through the air as if they didn’t feel comfortable in the bosom of the machine and the bodies exposed to the snowflakes also fly in the sky, although they don’t fall at once, having

to cross a portion of space before landing on the ground where they may remain forever unless some funeral directors take care of them.

In the short version they just try to strangle each other and whenever a post-mortem shows that a wrestler died from strangulation, one is tempted to conclude that the fight was deprived of flights and consequently wasn't very spectacular. Unfortunately the Japanese agency affirms that the rest of the film is irremediably lost, due to the hardships endured by soldiers and ordinary people during the war, especially at the end of it. And yet I saw the end of the film – not the end of the war, I must admit – and I can assure everyone that the duel was neither lost nor destroyed by merciless bombs and shells. A few Soviet soldiers must have saved the precious sequences for the sake of communist wrestlers who needed these sequences to win the Olympic Games, dedicating their victories to the glory of Stalin.

For years and years I couldn't forget the spiritual energy I had seen in the Japanese film dedicated to the glory of judo; now I relish it as I watch a beautiful young lady pray so intensely that two judokas don't dare introduce a dissonant note into the harmony achieved by the lady whose beauty is not lost on the young judoka. In the Soviet film inspired by Gorky's insipid novel *Mother*, there are two forces that collide at the crossroads and the proletarians run, anxious to stay alive for the sake of the eternal fight with the rich. 'If we die today,' they say to each other, 'we won't be able to kill the tsar, his family and relatives. So we have to stay alive. If we don't manage to stay in the land of the living, we won't be able to kill millions of people – for the sake of our ideas.' They run and jump on columns and lampposts, seeking refuge in the sky instead of plunging headlong into the Neva where ice floes offer them their hospitality and even a degree of help because a moving target is more elusive than a motionless one. A workman – a proletarian *par excellence* – jumps onto one of those ice floes and a police officer aims at the target, for he is a police officer and the target is a potential revolutionary. Russia seems to be heading towards revolution and the police officer is aware of the fact. Besides, he is a former workman himself and consequently hates his colleagues, his shameful past and even the future promised by the communists. Video footage clearly shows a police officer aiming a pistol at a demonstrator and we have every right to affirm that the police officer one can see in the footage is the one singled out by Pudovkin for his masterpiece entitled *Mother*. Another fold, another facet of memory.

According to the Encyclopaedia Britannica, Gorky was 'working on the reader's nerves by the piling up of emotive adjectives, and by tending to overstate'. 'Among Gorky's other

defects, in addition to his weakness for philosophical digressions, are his lack of any sense of humour and a certain coarseness of emotional grain. But his eye for physical detail, his talent for making his characters live, and his unrivalled knowledge of the Russian “lower depths” are weighty items on the credit side.’ At least in Pudovkin’s film, his characters *are* alive: they run, brandish their fists and their mothers brandish saucepans at them as they run out of kitchens. They run onto bridges, into kitchens and out of courtyards where one spots a few rifles and a lot of white uniforms. The proletarians carry red flags and their eyes radiate so much energy the tsar trembles in his palace; the Winter Palace begins to tremble too, for palaces know that proletarian revolutions do not spare them. If you ask them to spare the women and children, the revolutions answer, ‘We can spare a few children to whom we’ll teach Lenin’s doctrines. And we’ll spare Gorky’s mother. We’ll destroy the others.’

Gorky’s novel was dramatised by Bertolt Brecht in *Die Mutter* and emotive adjectives continued to pile up in spite of Brecht’s determination to keep at bay emotions related to screams, tears, sobs, hysterics and victories. Proletarians are victorious; they’re still in prison, but the dawn of their new life is breaking somewhere – outside the prison walls where the bourgeois eat and dance as if resolved to ignore proletarian victories and their own defeats. A few people walk around a courtyard and they know they’re surrounded by walls and barbed-wire fences, but beyond the city walls there are lots of proletarians carrying flags and stones. They brandish both and a policeman calls the governor of the prison to say the walk is over. ‘What are you talking about?’ asks the director’.

‘Where are your prisoners?’

‘In the courtyard.’

‘They should go back to their cells.’

‘They really should take more exercise,’ says the director. ‘Incidentally, they’ve escaped already. But the police have assured us that the escaped prisoners will not evade recapture for long.’

The prisoners run across the stage because they’re no longer prisoners and freedom is so intoxicating they can’t resist its allurements in spite of Brecht’s suggestions. ‘Don’t run too fast, otherwise they’ll take you seriously. They might think you’re free and can fool the police whose officers are very clever, by the way.’

Gorky’s mother opens her mouth, but no one hears her scream because it is a silent movie, as some neophytes think as they watch Brecht’s version of *Mother* – or *Father*, as Stalin used to call the illustrious work. The mother waves her flag and theatregoers think they see a handkerchief that some people use when saying goodbye to their relatives at the station;

so no one thinks about the forthcoming revolution. Brecht says to his actors: 'If we don't prevent the audience from forgetting that it is all an illusion, they'll have some inkling of the forthcoming revolution. They'll say to each other: "The rebels now have thousands of people under arms." And the tsar will say: "The army is said to be ready for action." Our soldiers should seize power in a bloodless coup.'

The proletarians run, but Brecht reassures the audience, saying, 'Don't jump to conclusions! The Summer Olympics are on the agenda. They run and jump. But they don't jump to conclusions, do they?' At this point Lenin interferes in Brecht's internal affairs and says, 'Our tendency to convince the reader or spectator that it is all real happens to be a big improvement on bourgeois art. Communists maintain the illusion that signs are natural.'

'When one sees an actress playing the role of mother in the way that Brecht intended, there's never any danger of this,' says Roland Barthes.

'The future of our planet is in danger if you continue to act like that,' says Lenin.

Gorky's mother begins to shout: 'Down with capitalists! Down with the bourgeoisie! Down with moneybags! Down with money-grubbing! Down with money-laundering! Down with money markets! Down with money-makers! Down with money-spinners! Down with money-sinners!'

Do I exist in spite of everything? I've already made up my mind on the subject and it is pointless to resume the questioning that seems out of date and even out of fashion because my loneliness doesn't prevent me from following my own fashions. From time to time, I give you the lowdown on my train of thought in a paragraph, in a sentence, in a word, although you can't really extrapolate a trend from such a small sample. Never mind – I'll go on creating causes without which no effect will ever be produced and I need effects, results and tangible facts, otherwise my earthly existence will lose its stuffing.

What is the cause of the forthcoming paragraph? I suppose I need to write something this morning because, as creative artists usually put it, a true artist is chosen by art and can't live without it; he has to breathe it – the ordinary air is no longer satisfactory –inhaling its substance, its movement and the divine aspect of the whole affair. Through art a creative artist comes to know God or at least a few angels among whom there are angels of death eclipsed in the religious iconography by angels of birth who announce the Messiah and promise another future; and yet they don't say the future they're speaking of is radiant and cloudless. There are demons in this future and they should be vanquished, annihilated and

buried on another planet; but one has to wait for a thousand years before one can say to oneself, 'Here's the radiant future I've dreamt about for two thousand years.'

Can the previous paragraph be regarded as a valuable cause? What effect can one expect in the wake of the previous paragraph? The birth of the Messiah? It is not easy to give birth to the Messiah and even a thousand books wouldn't be instrumental in bringing about His birth on the Earth unless all these books are sacred and learnt by heart not only by bishops and popes, but also by ordinary citizens, by practising Christians, Jews and Muslims. It is easy to learn the previous paragraph by heart and I'm prepared to memorise my own thoughts for the sake of my personal history, of my personal museum of nonsense. Well, let us go on because no single cause is spacious enough to sustain a multitude of effects and defects that are vital for the future of our planet.

What's the cause of all this? God's will? An angel's announcement? Well, an angel made an unexpected announcement this morning and there was a deathly hush after he made the announcement. (After *she* made the announcement?) So what? All right, they listened to the announcement, whoever they were, and they said to each other, once the deathly hush was over, 'What does that mean? What does that mean?'

'The Messiah is coming,' somebody said.

'Is it the Second Coming or the Third Coming?' somebody else said.

'What does it matter! It isn't an arithmetic test, is it?'

'What kind of test is it? Are they testing our faith?'

'Their constant announcements really put my patience to the test!'

'I believe in the Messiah.'

'So do I.'

'Our church's foundations will have to be reinforced to prevent the house from sinking further into the ground.'

'The Messiah's job.'

'I'm sure the Messiah will take drastic steps to reduce pollution.'

Philip Roth, Milan Kundera. We cannot be mutually understood, whatever they write about and whoever they communicate with as they look for their doppelgänger, for their mirrors and applause. Lacan says that if we are bold enough to ask a question, we already know the answer, otherwise we wouldn't rummage in the right drawer in search of our question. All right, I already know the only answer to the question: 'What do you have in common with

today's writers, poets and essayists?' I write for Jupiterians with whom I have a lot in common, whatever they say. Who? Earthlings and Jupiterians.

On television they show two girls who claim they belong to the sixth race and to the family of the Sun Goddess, alias the Sun Mother. They're either her daughters or sisters and their breasts are bigger than those for which their earthly counterparts are known through erotic magazines such as *Penthouse* and *Desire*. They say they'll live for 600 years because they feed their breasts and the rest of their bodies on the sun's energy, not on meat, cake and fruit. Again, no one talks about the mind and its intricacies: you can be a dim-witted, floozy blonde, but if you say you're a creature of the future and love is more important than a great poet, you're respected and even worshipped by television viewers who think that the future will teach us a lesson about love and longevity. Of course love is not incompatible with greatness; I merely become increasingly suspicious of those who talk exclusively about love as if one could write Dante's *Commedia* by falling in love with Beatrice and the whole of humanity with the exception of the Guelfs and a few popes. 'If you manage to fall in love with those popes and the Guelfs, you'll be able to write a *real* masterpiece and scholars will say it is far superior to the *Commedia*. Why? Because love is the chief source of human imagination and whoever loves everybody is at least able to write Schiller's *Ode to Joy* or Beethoven's *Ninth Symphony*. And what if you don't write them? Never mind – love is more important than symphonies and comedies.'

As usual, these representatives travel through the universe and they live as long as they wish because they keep time and its constituents under control. They often say to instants of time: 'Stop shouting – you're giving me a headache! Yes, you shout. Every instant shouts, so does every minute. Time is always screaming with pain and begging for an anaesthetic because time is used to what happens in the world where only five races live and die. We belong to the sixth race and our time is peaceful. Other people say, "I like to get everything done before the guests arrive and relax for a moment in the calm before the storm." In other words, even if they do happen to enjoy peace and quiet for an hour or so, a storm is always in store for them. It's better to define their lives as follows: "The storm before the storm." The calm they talk about is just an illusion as if they were actors involved in a theatrical performance conducted by Brecht.'

A true idea must agree with that of which it is the idea and the sixth race neither agrees nor corresponds to the idea associated with another race or the Sun Goddess whose

credentials command a great deal of respect – in Japan, among other countries. In Russia they don't seem to believe in the Sun Goddess. Her daughters or distant cousins are rejected on the grounds of their incompetence: instead of relying on their *natural* beauty, they undergo cosmetic surgery and exhibit their breasts whenever they're invited by producers and other VIPs. 'Have you never seen the sun?' they ask. 'Don't you know it's much bigger than the Earth? Our breasts are proportional to its size.'

Lacan speaks about the so-called 'mirror phase' and I don't know whether he coins this definition or someone else does when looking at reflections in some mirror or other. You look at these reflections and say to yourself it is not you your eyes catch a glimpse of and you realise there are many other people or identities around you and they go so far as to usurp your mirror, let alone your life which is never too far from your life, your house, your bedroom, your bathroom. All these reflections say to you, 'We are you, if only in part, and you should take us into consideration. Certain beasts have the habit of assuming the insignia and colouring of their surroundings. Why not follow their example? You're also a beast, aren't you? You're an animal and you should think in terms of animal kingdoms whenever you think about yourself and your wretched life. Lacan draws your attention to an ethological curiosity known as "mimicry". Do you know mimicry? You don't know anything. You should consult your mirrors and books where your authentic selves lie scattered and forsaken, your Godforsaken selves and egos.'

I assume the insignia of my surroundings and predators take no notice of me because they think I am a morsel of nature; and they don't feel like swallowing this morsel, saying, 'A tough and indigestible piece of steak.' How does the child come to master its relation to its body? 'Here's my body,' says the child. 'What should I do with it? Well, I'll go to the lavatory first thing tomorrow morning. I'll no longer wee in bed. And then I'll assume a disguise to protect myself from my parents and their guests.'

'The animals which assume an image or disguise are just as likely to be eaten as other animals,' says your mother.

'Do you want to eat me?' asks the child.

'No, I'm not hungry. But your father is, if you must know. And he'll devour you first thing tomorrow morning. He'll start with your penis because his dearest wish is focused on your masculine potential.'

'Does he want to castrate me?' asks the child.

‘Of course he does, otherwise you’ll never know what the Oedipus Complex means.’

‘I know what it means,’ says the child.

‘What?’ asks his mother.

‘I love you,’ says the child.

‘Don’t you want to kill your father?’

‘Which identity of his should I kill?’

‘The one you see in the mirror.’ And the mother takes a pocket mirror out of her pocket. Actually it is just one of her husband’s photographs. The child tears it up and devours the pieces. ‘Yes,’ says Freud. ‘Sons should eat their fathers. Didn’t Turgenev enlarge upon this ritual in his famous novel?’

Organisms become captured in their environment because they can’t do otherwise: they’re social animals and nature is their mother on whose lap they should lie, wholeheartedly lapping the milk offered by their mother’s breasts. They don’t ask themselves whether their mother is the Sun Goddess or not; whether she has undergone several cosmetic surgery operations since she realised she was the Sun Goddess’ cousin. They just know their mother has a big heart and a pair of big breasts and that’s enough to make them feel happy and cared-for.

A poem by Pushkin, another influence that stems from languages and goes back to languages, for there’s nothing else in the world, provided you write all the time and have no time for other distractions and continuations. Your show must go on and it does go on, obeying an instinct or some destiny or other. With the passing of the years you come to know all these destinies and you’re even allowed to choose the one that suits you best today, in Versailles. I am still the spirit of negation or rather one of those spirits that negate whatever they’re allowed to negate and doubt as they proceed from one object to another, from one slice of life to another slice of something they may regard as life. And they may be right, for all I know, because life is what it is and if you say anything along these lines, you have to admit that life is life – and also death of course; and the afterlife and whatever is situated in front of life, not beyond it or on the left-hand side, somewhere in the middle.

A woman comes to a man and says, ‘For several months our mothers have been scheming to prevent us from marrying whoever we want to marry.’

‘I don’t want to marry anybody,’ says the man.

‘Don’t you? And what about our mothers?’

‘What about them?’

‘They want you to marry me and vice versa.’

The woman is rather beautiful and I think I would have married her, had I been allowed to see her body at the beginning of the 21st century, before they came up with the idea of shooting the film I’ve been watching for two weeks at least. Such situations always arouse my curiosity; and yet I know it is useless to identify with actors because they’re just actors who must obey the film director’s orders and can neither marry nor divorce without his or her permission and benediction. And their mothers have nothing to do with the schemes we watch and admire, for their mothers are not their mothers and they are not what they represent on the screen, carried away by the film director’s inspiration. I don’t think I’ve fallen in love with this woman, but any tender feeling, however fugitive, denotes a positive aspect of my personality and propels me into that category of beings who are neither demons nor angels: they live and act somewhere in between. On the southern fringe of London, for instance. Does this have anything to do with the lunatic fringe?

And what about the bliss I experience whenever I recite a poem in Russian? Sometimes I do it in front of my biggest mirror which reflects not only my present state and mind, but also my past frolics and the ecstasies stored within my body, its own memory, its personal Treasure Island. The Russian language is obviously the root I’m looking for, but what can *one* root accomplish on the Earth where my personal tree of life should stand and show my vitality, my capacity to survive a sleepless night, a nervous breakdown? It is true that I’ve already felled a great number of trees to provide space for other lives and moods, for other poems and problems. So what? That is what life is about, I suppose: you have to renew your experience every day, otherwise you die – and not necessarily in your sleep, contrary to your hopes and great expectations. Why have we got all these days and nights? Why not enjoy one eternal day, an uninterrupted flow of light which is the most tangible proof of God’s existence? Who would dare to doubt God’s existence if we could rely on light and its benefits round the clock? We wouldn’t need electricity and other sources of energy, would we? Solar energy, I’m told, is far more powerful and efficient than the nuclear industry that we can no longer trust, according to the Green Party and its loud-mouthed members. Of course we still don’t know how to use it and what instruments are appropriate for the taming of the beams to

which we owe the beauty of the world, its transparency and closeness: the nocturnal sky is so inaccessible and aloof.

My contemporaries adore children and are ready to sacrifice their lives only for the sake of their children, leaving aside the *patria*, poetic ideals, beauty, the past and even music that they reduce to Michael Jackson's achievements and the beating of a drum – not the one we hear in the first scene of *Macbeth*. Today, if you happen to meet a young woman, you learn at once she has studied economics or jurisprudence or both, and what you see beside your body doesn't entice you into writing a poem for this newfangled Beatrice because she has no affinities with Dante's version of the Blessed Virgin.

Leopardi's guru is one Gino who says it's pointless to explore one's heart in a century which is bent on singing the praises of the outside world and of other people's hearts that beat like drums – rhythmically, healthily and defiantly. I, for one, know nothing about other hearts and drums; I have my own rhythm to take care of and listen to so that there's no room for others in my room and the rest of my house. These others are part and parcel of my heart unless they pay too much attention to triumphs and hollow crowns – aren't all crowns hollow – bestowed on those who do not denigrate our time and, generally speaking, keep up with the times, saying there are no other times, no other opportunities, no other lives, no other spaces.

Within my heart there's no room for the representatives of the sixth race or any other race that our gurus and gods impose upon our future as if we couldn't enter it as human beings endowed with poetic gifts and an aptitude for philosophical investigation. We don't need to travel from one star to another because we indulge in this pastime whenever we embark upon a new novel, a new opera, a *vita nuova*. Our heart belongs to our species and not to extraterrestrial travellers who can remove their internal and reproductive organs so as not to carry them around the Milky Way. 'How do you get your bodies so wonderfully light?' we ask them.

Yes, I continue to explore my heart where I find everything, provided I spend enough time inside it, in my basement, in my underground corridor along which I walk in search of myself, of my former and future selves, salvations and solutions. And I don't listen to our gurus who say in Italian, in English and other languages: '*Lascia i propri affetti tuoi*.' No, I'll never get rid of my sentiments, feelings, affections and infections. Didn't Nietzsche cherish

his sickly constitution which, according to his biographers and his long unfinished autobiography, was the fountainhead of his inspiration? Language may let you down, but your diseases will accompany you everywhere you go to remind you of who you are and what you should do in your lifetime. Don't I say to myself from time to time, 'That illness has been a faithful companion to me for nine years, and I will miss it dearly'?

Suppose your mother says as she gives you a tablecloth, 'Leave the cloth to steep in the dye overnight', and you obey your mother because you're not used to disobeying her orders. The same goes for the language your mother speaks, although she doesn't ask you to put it anywhere, not even inside your body and mind. She doesn't say, 'This is your language, your most precious tool. Put it in your heart so you can use it whenever you need it. And you'll always need it. Your mother tongue will always come in handy, if you're patient and obedient.' She doesn't say that one's mother tongue is one's best prison guard and tyrant whose doings can be compared to those of Stalin, Lenin and Hitler.

We grow up and eventually are allowed to enter the symbolic, which means that everything acquires a meaning, two meanings or even three meanings and we spend hours and years reasoning out the solution to the puzzle: every symbol is a puzzle, as our symbolists put it. The maternal phallus is one of these symbols, for many symbols are conspicuous by their absence and the only way to recognise their symbolic value is to realise they're non-existent. The phallus is not the same thing as the penis: it is the penis plus the idea of lack. Or minus the penis, in other words. So when the word 'phallus' is applied to our mother, we realise that it is just a word and nothing else. In other words, it is not the penis we are looking for.

We undress in front of our favourite mirror and see our penis, the most fragile part of our essence, unless we belong to the category of mothers or to that of daughters. But if we are fathers and sons, we find what we are looking for and our hands are even allowed to touch the object we have come to terms with; and if we dare to touch it, we realise it is just another way of coming to terms with it. Now we are really on intimate terms with our or someone else's penis.

And what about Pushkin's poems? Aren't they the symbols I'm looking for as I rummage in my body's drawers, paying homage to Dali's famous picture? Of course they are and they don't let me down, contrary to what I experience when studying the maternal

phallus, its non-existence and stillborn aspect. But apparently its absence affects almost every aspect of the child's life, provided the child is taught the science of symbols and knows how to enjoy the absence of phalluses. 'This woman has no phallus, it seems to me,' says a child. 'I therefore can't have a heterosexual relationship with her. So much the better!' And the child gives himself over to heterosexual sex, saying to Lacan, 'We had a whale of a time on holiday.'

My bicycle was resting against a wall. *The object B?* I think I was fond of this bicycle because it had five gears and I knew I could ride up mountains without getting weary and fed up with travels. Why was I fascinated by these gears? Once I read in a brochure I found in my father's car, 'Push the clutch in, put the car into gear, rev the engine and then gently let the clutch out.' What I pictured to myself when sitting on my bicycle was this ritual minutely described in the manual I had found in the glove compartment of my father's *Volga* – the best car an ordinary citizen could have in the Soviet Union.

I always grew tired of myself and the contraption I was riding, even though my ride didn't last the whole afternoon. I was never late for afternoon tea which we used to have on the terrace of our country house. The tea I drink today is far better than the tea we would buy in Moscow where, in those remote days, one *could* buy a decent tea: the Soviet Union had a very good relationship with India. But even *that* tea – the one I could find in tea shops – was inferior to the one I drink now after moving from my bed to the room where my computer is half asleep: I seldom switch it off. So one could say, 'The room is so warm it's making the computer feel drowsy.' My rooms are *too* warm – even in winter – and I can't do anything about it because I have central heating. And whenever my friends ask, 'It's too hot in here, can we turn down the heating?' I just shake my head or resort to another sign the meaning of which can be found in Roland Barthes' significant works.

I tried to learn how to ride a bicycle while reading a book: I wasn't eager to explore the landscapes I saw as I rode through our countryside, their countryside and all other countrysides I was allowed to visit during my escapades. I needed two hands to hold the book in question and whenever I left my bicycle to its own devices it would land up in a ditch so that I knew I had to admire God's masterpieces instead of reading His creatures' works – His second-hand creations, so to speak.

I never used the bicycle as an ideal vehicle for increased cooperation between men and women, to put it mildly. In other words, I never rode to a remote corner of the Earth to meet a

woman I had set my heart – and the rest of my body – on because I mistrusted my ability to handle it properly and I had no wish to land up in *another* remote corner of the Earth or in a remote corner of *another* planet. It is better to land up in a ditch near your country house or your private house of the dead.

Plato was a symbol I could rely upon in my childhood and even now I sojourn in his caverns and other underground spots in order to understand what awaits me in the universe, far above our planet and right below the stars I'll always see around me, whatever vehicle I have at my disposal.

My memory makes no effort as it pictures to itself these voices that inhabit any darkness with the exception of the one entirely devoted to silence. Yes, you can picture to yourself a lot of sounds, provided you assume that sounds are as visible as the pictures you can admire in an art gallery. What if we call this gallery a 'sound gallery'? I can picture to myself Beethoven's quartets and I don't need Walt Disney's *Fantasia* to achieve this result because to some degree images and sounds are interchangeable. As I already pointed out, the stars talk to each other – according to Lermontov. They also perform Beethoven's quartets that we listen to as we look at the stars.

My fellow men turn pages and think that a number of new lives are already under way, heading for their rooms, beds, breakfast trays and whatever they happen to hold in their hands – as if new lives had nothing else to do on this Earth. And let us not forget that there are other earths they must take care of, otherwise the cosmos may collapse and become what everyone fears and calls 'black holes' into which we'll fall sooner or later unless we manage to put corks into all these holes, barring the way to their interiors. We can walk along their edges, but we shouldn't look down, let alone fall into the chasms that attract so many people – especially Pushkin's admirers, his fervent and loyal readers.

Suppose death is just in front of us, which is actually true whenever our body happens to move: death is *always* near it, even if we walk away from death by building the body's

natural defences. Fresh fruit and vegetables are an essential component of a healthy diet that is believed to keep death at bay and no one says, 'Death is just round the corner' because you turn the corner and see only health in front of you – health, prosperity, money and love. But somehow death appeals to you, according to Pushkin, even if you think that you love only danger and not death, not the outcome of many dangers, however innocent-looking and superficial. It would be foolhardy to try and predict the outcome of any danger at this stage, as they say, and we may agree with them if we find out what stage they have in mind when speaking of death – of the perils of unsafe sex, for instance. Well, in this case it is easy to locate the stage in question: you've just made the acquaintance of a man and you don't know yet if he is an Aids patient or not. (The same goes for women whom you meet for the first time in the streets or concert halls.) But what about other death-charged situations? Suppose you're drunk and at this stage of drunkenness you no longer remember that drinking and driving is dangerous to the point of making you lose your life on one of the roads you're about to take as you think about the woman waiting for you at the end of your journey. Well, at this stage it is not easy to predict the outcome of your road-focused adventure because you may *narrowly* avoid the disaster that seems to lie in store for you. But if someone keeps you company in the course of your drive, they may say after watching your way of handling the steering wheel: 'You're driving me to an early grave.' And both of you end up in an early grave – or just in an ordinary grave which is very similar in appearance to both early and late graves.

Incidentally, the 26-year-old girl continues to spurn me: she doesn't call me to say she can't live without my numerous talents, my sense of humour, my wisdom and intellectual vigour, my inspiration and the poems I write in the heat of a moment. This girl is reluctant to offer me such moments and their heat: I haven't written any poem in Russian since our last meeting in St Petersburg. I adore you, you alone, Rita, with all the weakness of passion. Pity my poor soul's affliction! Pity my poor body's affliction!

I transferred my hopes and yearnings to *Taras Bulba* which I bought yesterday in Paris where I was supposed to wait for a friend of mine who didn't turn up as if determined not to prevent me from indulging in the heroine's beauty *immediately*, after a short trip back to Versailles.

The film dates back to the early Sixties and I said to myself that in those days they could find a beautiful woman inside and even outside the Hollywood studios because that stretch of time was propitious for the birth and growth of dignified beauties among whom one could however stumble on Marilyn Monroe whose dignity might be questioned by a few European aristocrats. Anyway I felt a lot of great expectations within my body and on the outskirts of my mind as I dreamt of this invisible heroine in the train where I could devote almost half an hour to my musings and longings. Alexander Block wrote a poem entitled *A Stranger* at the beginning of which the reader makes the acquaintance of a lady who reminds the author of the snow and fog, if I remember rightly. The reader meets this lady at the very outset of his adventure: reading a poem can be regarded as an adventure one may justifiably rank with mountaineering or diving for pearls. My adventure began on the train where I visualised the heroine whose features I tried to recall, using my last visit to Poland as a springboard for my imagination. I knew that Gogol's heroine was a Polish beauty and I thought about a lady I had seen in a restaurant, in Cracow, and the images I got in the course of my musings kept me company throughout my journey to Versailles: the lady in question was beautiful enough to turn any short trip into a round-the-world cruise.

Rita converts to Catholicism and throws a wad of banknotes out of the window after making sure the poor have already gathered under the same window in the hope of seeing a few banknotes fly amidst the clouds. 'He always, always has a preferential option for the poor,' says Cardinal Donald Wuerl as he looks at the pope, and Rita throws another wad of banknotes out of another window under which another bunch of former hooligans contemplate the sky. These hooligans promised a bunch of judges that they would set up their own business – a gigantic office where they might work together for the sake of their community. 'But before we announce the start of this new commercial venture we must get two million dollars,' say the hooligans. 'What do you take us for? We're not liars.'

'If you go on throwing money out of the windows, that will be a million pounds' worth of investment down the drain,' says her father.

'I'm getting rid of dollars, not of pounds.'

'Pounds are also money,' says her father. 'Why do you do it?'

'Did you read St Francis' biography?'

'No,' says her father.

‘He used to throw everything out of his father’s windows. Have you read anything about today’s St Francis?’ And Rita reads out loud, “‘Celebrating his first Mass as pope on Thursday, he wore simple black shoes and an ordinary wristwatch with a thick black band.” What about your Rolex, Father?’

‘What about it?’ asks the father, throwing his wristwatch out of the window.

‘Well done!’ says Rita. And she goes on reading out loud, “‘After appearing at the Loggia of St Peter’s Basilica on Wednesday, he turned down the papal Mercedes and rode with his fellow cardinals in a minivan back to the Vatican residence where they had stayed during the conclave.’”

‘What about your Audi Q7?’ asks the father. ‘You can’t throw it out of the window, can you?’

‘I don’t have to – it’s already in the streets,’ says the daughter.

Ignoring the end of the dialogue, her driver leaves the car and a few hooligans make themselves at home in it and also on the roof, saying to each other, ‘To get off to a good start, you need either an Audi or a BMW.’

‘What about a Jaguar?’ asks a passerby.

‘Owning a Jaguar involves a lot of expense – that’s the nature of the beast,’ say the hooligans. ‘But we’re a little short this week – could you lend us ten thousand dollars?’

Rita is invited to a party and she attends it in her charwoman’s dress, and everybody thinks she wants to surprise the bourgeoisie in accordance with the well-known French custom dating back to the 19th century and the beginning of the last century in the middle of which I was born. I was born somewhere in the middle and yet the Middle Way about which both the Buddha and Aristotle spoke so eloquently doesn’t seem to be within my reach, no matter how often I speak about it myself. Well, Rita is standing in the middle of a ballroom and she happens to be too far from the nearest window: she can’t throw anything out of it, not even a tennis ball. And she wants to throw *everything* out of it: all the money her friends and relatives own in spite or because of the crisis that enables some people earn a lot of money by swindling other people and the angels who always try to let humankind off the hook – by hook or by crook.

‘You should give your money to the poor,’ says Rita.

‘We’re not Catholics,’ say Rita’s friends. ‘What’s more, we’re neither St Francis nor Francis I. We’d like to be François I, as a matter of fact. We’d like to sponsor Leonardo da Vinci.’

Rita begins to undress and her dress can be thrown out of the window because a few poor women are waiting outdoors and traditionally the poor wait only for money – not even for love, for you don't love anybody if you're starving to death. Of course you continue to love God, hoping He can get there just in the nick of time. Where? You don't need to communicate your address to God because He knows not only your address – the bridge under which you waste your life – but also the number of your mobile phone: today, even tramps own mobile phones. (I do not.) Lacan laughs when he utters the word 'communication' and he even says to those who listen to him, 'You laugh? I see you understand what communication means. You understand that it means nothing. All right. To get off to a good start, you need either an Audi or this piece of knowledge – communication is a Freudian dream.'

'This consoling message is addressed above all to those who, afflicted by a particularly harsh trial –' I must have culled this excerpt – there are nothing but excerpts around and above – from a book on John-Paul II and I suppose it comes from one of his sermons, orations or gospels that one doesn't have to learn by heart in spite of everything. And what does 'everything' mean in this context or out of this context, for even a thing in itself which is not far from the context may change your life – repaint your life from top to bottom? Your life is a house, a castle, and you redecorate it on the grounds that it should be redecorated for the sake of your health, wealth and future, whatever this or another future may mean in this context about which one may write a novel. 'We've succeeded in drumming up a lot of universal support for our attempt to stop the world being destroyed,' says the new pope. And what about John-Paul II?

'The value of every human being.' Well and good. You're a human being, aren't you? You *are*, aren't you? You think, you dream about women and men, therefore you are and no one can say 'you are not' because Descartes says you are and our Cartesian law doesn't contradict Descartes, not even for the sake of argument. You wonder what you may do for the sake of argument, but you grow weary of arguments and yourself. You say to yourself, 'I am not' and you are not, for you are what you think you are and your time is subjective, according to St Augustine and probably to St John-Paul II as well. Your time is subjective so you stand up and say something about the value of every human being. They ask you if you're a human being. You say, 'I am.' You're probably wrong, but no one contests any claims made against the fragility of human beings. You say, 'I'm not fragile' and they begin

to pummel you into submission, saying they have several Gulags where you can spend the rest of your life unless you repent like Boris Godunov. At least you should see a few ghosts who are likely to accuse you of murder, assassinations and other machinations.

I know I am precious in God's eyes and I see His eyes that impart to my being, 'You're precious even if you don't exist.' And I say to God and John-Paul II, 'Didn't Christ give His life for me, for my blasphemies and superfluous novels? What does His intimacy mean? Does He read my books? I don't need other intimacies. Last night I read the beginning of my last novel to one of my former mistresses. I read out loud an excerpt from a novel written by a famous writer who got a literary prize two years ago. I should have read it silently, for she said, 'This is wonderful. And the other excerpt is boring.' My text is boring so I don't exist. Am I precious in God's eyes? Even non-existent people can be precious in God's eyes, especially if they're writers. What's more, I write about God and therefore deserve an Audi Q7 and a villa on God's Riviera where so many saints disport themselves, playing soccer and thinking about Argentina where football is veneered along with Borges and books in general; along with new popes. It is this love which must inspire humanity today: Borges, God, my books, their textures, Dante's texture and Beatrice, the women I loved. Some of them are dead.

Am I afflicted by a particularly harsh trial? I don't think so. What I think, however, doesn't count at all, for I have to *help* the poor, the women in love and all those who need God's blessing and assistance. It would be better to fly to Rome and, giving up all thoughts and musings, say to the popes one might meet in picture galleries: 'I am crushed by the weight of the sins I have committed. And I have committed many sins, believe me! I have lost confidence in life and am tempted to give in to despair – to Kierkegaardian despair, come to think of it.'

'Do you often think?' say the popes.

'From time to time.'

'What do you think about?'

'I think about the message of divine mercy.'

'What do you think about this message?'

'I think about this message and also about the dignity of humankind.'

'What do your thoughts consist of?'

'I think we're stupid. Our dignity has a lot in common with our stupidity. Our lack of dignity, I mean.'

'Only God is wise. All other creatures are stupid.'

I don't think I deserve the pope's special thanks for all my efforts; yet I've made many efforts in the course of my life and these efforts are still God-oriented because I always think about God and His mercy on which one can count not only during economic and psychological crises but also on a cloudless day when one thinks one is protected by God and His peaceful army. And suddenly one sees a serpent behind a bush and this serpent doesn't bite one's leg, contrary to what one might expect after reading a lot of books on serpents and other venomous animals; the serpent speaks of the forbidden fruit and one plucks this fruit out of the air because there are no trees in the neighbourhood: one can't pluck anything from an apple tree renowned for its forbidden fruit.

Well, there are no serpents in the neighbourhood despite the multitude of bushes and trees I can see whenever I take the trouble to look out of my window which doesn't seem to believe in God, for all my efforts. I wish my house could fall in love with God and if my dream comes true, I'll be supported – both morally and physically – by my house, by its faith, in a moment of doubt and despair, during a week when I am too weak to believe in anything, even in the next minute, let alone in the next hour. And in such moments one just has to look at the walls of one's house and these walls may tell one how beautiful Christ's face is on a cloudless day, and one is permitted to contemplate His face for an hour or two, being cut off from the daily rounds and the world where people ignore God's face and other attributes of our divinities.

Perhaps I don't deserve the special mercy thanks to which one may contemplate Christ's face even on rainy days with moody and gloomy dispositions: one can't always be on the same wavelength as a rainy day. But sometimes one needs raindrops for one's crops because one eats a lot of bread even if there's no butter for one's bread, for one's breakfast. Yet one needs to eat *something* and if there are no rainy days to live through, one can't count on one's crops and one's wheat fields where so many croissants seem to grow and acquire more character. Wheat is a staple crop for millions of people across the world and one knows this maxim by heart; but I am not 'one' and I don't care about one's needs and appetites.

'To them the gentle face of Christ is offered; those rays from his heart touch them and shine upon them, warm them, show them the way and fill them with hope.' To whom is the gentle face of Christ offered? To 'one', to 'ones', to the poor, to the rich who give everything they own to the poor, to the people who spend their lives on their knees, to the knees that support and sustain those people during their prayers. I don't belong to any of these categories and groups; and yet my knees are ready to perform a variety of tasks, provided I

give the signal they need to understand what I want and what God allows them to do tonight, at 8 p.m.

Actually I typed out, ‘Those rays from his *heat* touch them and shine upon them, warm them, show them the way and fill them with hope.’ One’s heart can warm a lot of people, provided these people know the heart in question and stand in the neighbourhood of the village where this heart displays its generosity, heat and love. I don’t know why these events always happen in villages – not in New York – but I think it is easier to find and tame the gospel-distinguished animals in villages and not in the centre of a big city. Christ wasn’t born on Fifth Avenue, was He? Well, Christ’s heat may *touch* you on condition that you don’t keep your body in another world – too far from the Cross; it can also *shine* upon you because heat is usually associated with light and you don’t need to attend a series of lectures on the subject if you have a fireplace in your house.

Christ’s heat can also *warm* you – not only because our pope spoke about this warmth in one of his speeches delivered from one of the balconies for which European cities are renowned all over the world. A pope stands on a balcony and says to you, to everyone, ‘To them the gentle face of Christ is offered; those rays from his heart touch them and shine upon them, warm them, show them the way and fill them with hope.’ You understand the words you hear, but you don’t see the rays that the pope’s speech seems to hammer home because it is a message you don’t understand. I mean – and others mean this as well – that Christ’s rays are a message or perhaps *the* message you have to pay attention to, otherwise you’ll die prematurely, far from your bed and not in your sleep – far from it. And the message you ought to hear has nothing to do with the message you see on your computer screen whenever you’re about to buy a few cases of wine: ‘Excessive drinking is a health risk.’

I always had it hammered into me that I mustn’t lie. So I don’t lie, whatever happens when I look at someone’s face that doesn’t necessarily shine, telling the truth – for the simple reason that Christ is in a class of His own and His face doesn’t look like anybody else’s face. You look at somebody and say to yourself, ‘She is not Christ,’ and you’re right because she is *not* Christ, even if she agrees to climb on a cross and spend three minutes on it if no nails are used in the process – no nails, no swords, no swear words. Would she show me the way? I’m used to Lenin’s statues and all of them used to show the way and fill Soviet citizens with hope, if I remember rightly. They used to say, ‘We are killing you but in five years’ time you’ll be happy and wealthy. You’ll be able to buy whatever you need and your children will buy American, German and Japanese cars.’

Lenin stretches out his hand: not all of his statues have been dismantled. Do you dismantle statues and monuments? You don't take them apart, do you? You just topple them from their pedestals. What about Christ and His face? Of course you have no intention of toppling *Him* from His pedestal, from the pedestals you can see in His churches where everybody kneels down and prays in front of these statues. What *are* your intentions, one wonders? You say, 'Rays, rays, rays.' No priest will ever ask you what rays you're speaking of because every priest knows that you have *these* rays in your mind and if you pray – your mind is always praying to these rays – you'll see the way and feel a certain amount of hope in your heart and elsewhere. Even in your lungs you'll feel a certain amount of hope; and yet no one knows *what* amount of hope you have in your lungs. Only your soul knows everything and it looks at you when asking this question, 'What do you want?'

'Rays and hope.'

'What rays, what hope?'

'I don't know.'

'Small plots of land were used for keeping animals. Do you care for animals and land?'

'I do. But I don't understand this piece of information.'

'Some theatres receive a small amount of funding from the state. Do you have a theatre?'

'The whole world is a theatre. My life is a theatre, a play I take part in.'

'Do you need this small amount?'

'Of course I do. I need *any* amount you can offer me.'

'Here are ten dollars. I hope these dollars will fill you with hope.'

I was about to talk of the French government, but fortunately I don't know what to say about it. I have to read an English newspaper that is likely to tell us or extraterrestrials a sort of objective truth of sorts on which I could rely when talking about these sods. As usual I'll quote the *Herald Tribune* because it is easier to find than any other English-speaking paper and anyway all papers look alike and they say what they want to say and convey. And for once I choose to listen to one of these papers to find out what our government is up to and what is about to happen here and in the rest of the world, elsewhere and on Mars.

'Crisis of confidence in France.' They always speak of this or that crisis and confidence is not the right word, especially if one lives in this world where one cannot count on St Peter and his keys that open all the gates of Paradise. 'President François Hollande, below, tried to

restore confidence as France drank in the revelation that his former budget minister, Jérôme Cahuzac, had lied to him and to Parliament about foreign bank accounts.’ Hollande is below and, as everybody knows, from the top of a skyscraper the cars below look like insects, which means that Holland is an insect, provided you see him from a skyscraper or even in a newspaper.

I can drive to the nearest skyscraper and look on humanity and its members among which I’m sure to find François Hollande: a President of France can’t be a plant or even an animal. He can be an insect though, even if you have no time to climb trees, the Eiffel Tower and other towers offered to you by Donald Trump and similar individuals. So Hollande is an insect unless we recall that there’s such a country as Holland which is no insect; yet there are many insects in it, considering the importance attached to ecology by many politicians and green parties.

But let us go back to the word ‘confidence’ which happens to outstrip the bounds assigned to mere words because this word is often used in relation to politics, and politics as well as politicians can’t be ignored, disregarded and disposed of in the way one can dispose of animal carcasses and nuclear waste. What does my soul say about ‘confidence’ and the synonyms associated with this word, notion and motion? What motion? Any motion, for instance: ‘This house believes that capital punishment should be abolished.’ I don’t mind this abolition and many other methods of this kind, but I wouldn’t mind killing Hollande, especially since you’re *not* forbidden from swatting flies with a rolled-up newspaper.

‘I have every confidence in him,’ says my soul. ‘He is perfect for the job.’

‘Who are you talking about? Winston Churchill?’

‘Who are *you* talking about?’ asks my soul.

‘Doesn’t matter,’ I answer.

‘Anyway, I don’t share your confidence that the market will improve next year,’ says my soul.

And what does the *Herald Tribune* say? I remember what it says and insinuates all the more distinctly since I also have a bank account in one of the lands situated outside *la douce* France and even outside the Kingdom of Belgium where I’ve just bought a house. (A land of antiquated social rules and suffocating traditions.) We are used to lying about our bank accounts because we aspire to become as rich as Russian swindlers who keep their money on the Moon and even on Venus where they may also pick up some bathing beauties. I don’t

know if these beauties can bathe on Venus, but they count on the Russians to help them and the Russians say, 'Once you've tasted luxury it's very hard to settle for anything else.' They're right, of course, and the bathing (sunbathing) beauties believe them because they believe in money and want to bathe twice a day or even more often, weather permitting. And nature permits anything and everything, on condition that you have enough money for the sun, for a warm or cool breeze and also for the lap of luxury.

So Jérôme What's his-name invested the money in a high-interest bank account, which can be done even today in spite of currency restrictions, but both the account and the money were situated in Switzerland and not in France where Jérôme and probably his family had always lived. Actually, he continues to live in France and for the moment he can walk around Paris and even drive over to Versailles, if he happens to take advantage of his freedom. At least that's what I would do in his shoes, for he could face up to five years in prison, if found guilty of fraud; and you're unlikely to go Versailles if you're in prison unless you are released on parole. And what if he is sentenced to life *without* parole? What if they find out he has as many as ten accounts all over Asia and even on the Moon where bankers don't reveal their clients' secrets? And what if they learn that on Venus he raped a dozen Lolitas who are certainly not as compliant as Nabokov's heroine?

'Scientists find new clues to mystery of dark matter.' For many years they've sought to find out what makes up the mysterious dark matter that gives shape to the visible structures of the universe. And what about the dark matter we come across every day, in both uncivilised and civilised countries? We don't always see it of course, but from time to time our visible structures disclose the presence of an immeasurable darkness and Jérôme's case is just another incontrovertible proof of what I'm talking about in connection with the newspaper-glorified scientists and their mystical clues. Apparently some local interstellar space is crackling with an unexplained abundance of high-energy particles, but I don't care about interstellar spaces: the world I see all around my body has been crackling for more than a century. Wars, revolutions, car bombs, cluster bombs, Kalashnikovs. Our visible structures disclose the continuous presence of death and vice versa: death gives shape to the visible structures of the universe.

Gibbon's masterpiece is voluminous to the point of making me feel tired when I hold its volumes for hours on end; and yet there's no room for immortality within its pages unless we admit that immortality doesn't only concern our body but also our posthumous fame. Of

course this fame of ours counts a lot in our lives and also in our afterlives that wholly depend on how we behaved during our lifetimes because we do not behave at all in our tombs, even if their spaciousness might allow us to jog and go swimming in the Black (or White) Sea of the Hereafter. We lie there motionless and constantly mock Dante's heroes who are either doubled up with pain or dance in white robes as they listen to the hymns I mentioned earlier, just a few minutes ago when I heard a sort of hymn somewhere below: my neighbours often listen to Gregorian chants. I live on the last floor and I wish I could hear these hymns above my head, as if their source was in Paradise and not in Hell, as one might presume when reading about my neighbours who live on the second floor. Unfortunately my personal wishes are not relevant in this case. There are exceptions to every rule and some people may *not* wish to live in Paradise forever, watching saints and their dances from the various spheres depicted in Dante's *Commedia*. But a large majority of people (and animals) dream of Paradise and hope they'll live up there after their untimely deaths, after their ignominious lives in the course of which they must conform to a strict code of conduct. 'How can God ignore the wishes of the majority?' I ask myself from time to time and I find no answer to my question as if I doubted not only the omnipotence but also the very existence of God.

Gibbon's volumes are not far from my writing desk and sooner or later I'll pick them up to leaf through their pages in search of suitable heroes or antiheroes, for any page of this masterpiece may throw light on my personal history and that of my body which, during a long period of suffering, I try to keep at bay, even though I'm quite aware that not only my death but also my very life are indissolubly linked to my body and its cancerous cells. Death is not the only subject I'm interested in, whatever one may conclude on perusing these pages in search of life or something related to it, but death *is* related to life and even leads to it in a way and we have to take it into consideration whenever in the mood for going on a spree. There's no life without death, as the saying goes, and we exchange such commonplaces over cups of tea: we don't *always* talk about the weather and our holidays.

Many lovers meet at a secret rendezvous in the park or perhaps it is a thing of the past, given the number of computers they might use for their secret and ostentatious meetings which need neither benches nor trees to satisfy any desire, however daring. In the quote above death and life meet openly and not only on my computer screen or in Gibbon's book: Severus did live and suffer, according to historians, and his death was mingled with life, making him disillusioned with power and all the things he had acquired in the course of his reign. He went so far as to say that nothing really had any value in his eyes; and yet he had to thank his fortune for his elevation, for his journey from the bottom rung of the ladder to the

highest. Of course he wasn't blessed with the vision for which Jacob is justly renowned and therefore *his* ladder didn't allow him to meet our Father, who art in heaven, as they say so eloquently. Nevertheless, this ladder brought him to the throne and it wasn't the ladder's fault he derived no satisfaction from this imperial seat, from his stature and the statues they had erected to him in Rome and elsewhere.

According to Gibbon, he was careless of fame, and if this is true – I have no idea what historians say on the subject – I should take lessons from him to learn how to disentangle my mind and soul from the very notion of fame, of glory in which I could bask if my works were properly understood and admired. I wonder, however, if in this case I wouldn't bask in the reflected glory of my works, for I'm not sure I've written them; and yet I've written every word that can be found inside my works and also outside them, in the world they reflect. I don't mean to say they've been written by God or at least by one of His emissaries, but there are other sources of inspiration stored in heaven and elsewhere – under the earth, for instance. Many writers say they're just mediums through whom all sorts of messages come from above and from Hell; they just sit in front of their computers and type these messages out, often remaining in the dark about their meanings. Do *I* know the meaning of what I've written over the last six months? The meaning of a sentence often depends on stress and intonation, and my sentences depend on many other things, including the weather, the time of the year, time, space and other components of our world and underworld.

It's pointless to speak about my ascent to greatness because I'm still on the lowest rung of the ladder and I don't see how I could go any further, given the decline and inevitable fall of our civilisation or what passes for our civilisation. I don't think it deserves any name except what they call 'four-letter words' that you can utter 24 hours a day if you feel like talking about this day and age for such a long time without taking a break. If you do take a break, however, you think of the past, of what is now a thing of the past, and since we have no time machines in our garages, this past will never come back, even if we fall down on our knees and implore it to join us on our road to death. The past is dead and we can't take the road that leads to it or at least to some parts of it – the 18th century, for instance – because our common road forked half a century ago and now we squelch through the mud and this mud has nothing to do with *La Bohème* and romanticism.

Are all my prospects of life closed? Some of them seem to be open or stand ajar like the doors I often see when walking along the corridor of a hotel where I stay during my visit to a

museum. These doors stand ajar and I hear a vacuum cleaner and sometimes a song performed by a chambermaid who has no ear for music and no rhythm in her veins; yet I listen to her as I wait for her body to come out of the room so that I can appreciate what might become the next object of my lust. But this never happens – I mean, my union with the beautiful chambermaids I meet during my travels never results in a *real* union, in a union of bodies and souls, of arms and legs, of breasts and shoulder blades. They're probably not allowed to sleep with clients and I can sleep without them, for I sleep much better during my travels than in my own bed, at home, as if I were the Wandering Jew whose legs are different from ours and whose sleep depends entirely on his moving from one country to another.

These doors – those of my prospects, I mean – still stand ajar, if I'm not mistaken, but whenever I get closer to them so as to peep through the crack into the depths, I don't see anything except emptiness and disorder as if my (and their) chambermaids had disappeared forever. And if I dare to come in and have a closer look at the situation, I realise that the bed hasn't been slept in for many years and that the remains of someone's breakfast continue to rot on a tray, not far from the window beyond which no skyscrapers or castles can be seen. Of course I could just get a sponge and wipe the crumbs off the table, but I'm too weary after my long journey and anyway I won't be able to cope with the dust and emptiness of the room where no one will ever talk to me, let alone kiss me on the cheek.

I continue to leaf through the book lying on my lap and my journey through history allows me to peep through many a chink disclosing a vista of episodes and characters who seem to perform their tragic plays, but instead of Lear or Cordelia I see – or rather stumble upon – other corpses whose life depends only on words, on Gibbon's inspiration. 'The dark and sanguinary soul of the tyrant was open to every suspicion against those among his subjects who were the most distinguished by their birth or merit. Whenever he was alarmed with the sound of treason, his cruelty was unbounded and unrelenting.' Of course one immediately thinks of Stalin or other dictators whose lives often depend on the servility and flattery of their subjects and I'm reluctant to find out the identity of this particular tyrant, for they all look alike and their cruelty is unbounded and unrelenting.

'As long as the cruelty of Maximin was confined to the illustrious senators, or even to the bold adventurers, who in the court or army expose themselves to the caprice of fortune, the body of the people viewed their sufferings with indifference, or perhaps with pleasure. But the tyrant's avarice, stimulated by the insatiate desires of the soldiers, at length attacked

the public property.’ At last I know the name of the tyrant, but it is a useless piece of knowledge, for any other name would fit the bill rather nicely except that Stalin attacked both the illustrious senators and the public property – at the same time and with the same unrelenting vigour. He might have begun with a few senators, but then he exterminated a million poor citizens who had never read Gibbon’s masterpiece and thought only in terms of the tsarist regime and its supposed (or real) cruelty.

A friend in need is a friend indeed. This saying doesn’t seem to be true in the light of my own experience inside which I find many rooms where invalids and dying patients wait for either their relatives or their friends, their oranges, flowers and smiles. A friend comes in and sits by his intimate friend’s side, resolved to exhibit the treasure of his generosity, kindness and inborn humanity on which every friend of his can count in the hour of need – not during an ordinary run-of-the-mill hour. During an ordinary dinner, this friend of yours can insult you with another smile – it is not a compassionate smile he exhibits this time – and you’re at a loss to understand why he touches a raw nerve when he speaks about your former girlfriends and your solitary life. You fail to understand why he *wishes* to touch a raw nerve, for he knows exactly what you feel when he talks about Nina or Dina, about their husbands and happy lives, their children and swimming pools.

Again you fall ill and he pays you a visit to sit by your bed and console you with a box of chocolates or with other boxes he puts on your blanket where there are many flowers brought by your generous friends – as if you were already lying in a coffin. They come to see how you are and if you were getting worse they might rejoice in their own good fortune which enables them to enjoy life to the utmost, drinking, eating and sleeping with beautiful men and women in five-star hotels. They might even say to you, ‘We spent a luxurious weekend at a country hotel.’

‘At a country hotel?’

‘We’re tired of five-star hotels, you know. Nothing changes, does it – I always stay in five-star hotels and they look exactly the same, believe it or not. And all these women also look alike, provided they’re really beautiful. In the long run, beauty can get on your nerves and I often prefer a plain chambermaid to a beauty queen. By the way, I would dearly love to sell my flats and move to the country. Why not buy a few castles and villas? Your hospital is wonderful, isn’t it? Do you feel comfortable here?’

‘Yes.’

‘There are over a hundred staff in this hospital, I hear.’

‘Perhaps.’

‘Some hospitals are so short-staffed that nurses and doctors are having to work 20-hour shifts.’

‘Perhaps.’

‘How are the nurses? Are they plain or beautiful?’

‘I don’t look at them.’

‘Don’t you? Why? Are you praying all the time or what?’

‘I’m always praying.’

‘Does this really prevent you from looking at the nurses?’

‘I don’t know. Perhaps it does.’

‘I’ve got some really juicy gossip for you.’

And your friend begins to talk about distant objects, people and countries where you’ll never go because this hospital is your death-hospital – a huge bed with lots of doctors and nurses lying on it. They lie on this bed and you can neither embrace them nor slap their faces to pay them back for their indifference and furtive smiles which, try as you may, you’re unable to decipher. What do their smiles mean? Death, as usual?

‘The enthusiasm of liberty was seconded by the promise of a large donative, in lands and money; the statues of Maximin were thrown down, the capital of the empire acknowledged, with transport, the authority of the two Gordians and the senate, and the example of Rome was followed by the rest of Italy.’ They promise you the Earth – the moon is too far and useless – and you believe them and God’s emissaries who talk to you about your free will and deny the doctrine of pre-determination. You demonstrate the power of your free will and topple a few statues; Maximin, Stalin, Caligula, Hitler and Lenin are at your feet today, lying in the dust or in the snow, as the case might be. You acknowledge someone else’s authority and erect many statues to compensate for the absence of the former tyrants whose bodies are no longer lying at your feet: you conveyed them to the nearest cemetery or museum.

But the Gordians were no tyrants and I realise that history can be merciful now and then – for a short period of time at the end of which it resumes its bloody course, saying to its critics, ‘Changing the course of history would cause serious environmental damage to the whole world.’ So it hastens to reassure the critics by getting rid of ‘good emperors’ and other

‘benefactors of humankind’ to pave the way for decline, destruction, fall, ruin, death and other nightmares about which James Joyce spoke in *Ulysses*.

You’re victorious and no one calls you tyrant because you’re a benefactor of humankind and of all other kinds that can be encountered on Earth and in the universe – not only in *our* universe, mind you. You say to yourself, ‘It’s been a tough six years and I feel I’ve earned a few weeks off,’ but an army goes here and there and you hear a few shouts that remind you of your status: after all, you’re at the head of a gigantic army. Being killed on a battlefield is in the line of duty and you know that you’re even better than any other soldier because you’re a general. You’ve seen many deaths in the course of your life: either on battlefields or in courtyards where soldiers are court-martialled for disobeying their commanding officers. Be that as it may, you make a speech and your army marches through marshes and woods, hoping to see the enemy in the near future – before starving to death in one of the deserts that are strewn all over the world, especially if you’re at war. You’re being acclaimed as the greatest strategist of your generation and once again you live up to all our expectations except that you lose the battle because you can’t win it: no reinforcements, no food, no horses, no bullets, no cannonballs, no cannons, no luck. A bullet finds you, although it can’t really bear a grudge against you: Why should a bullet avenge itself on a general? He killed neither its brother nor its father; what’s more, he has never met this bullet before, in spite of his venerable experience and his acquaintance with death as such. Why should the bullet bear him a grudge?

You earned a few weeks off, but you never took advantage of this thought, of this right which might have spared you the trouble of fighting another war, of dying on a battlefield. Actually it’s not very difficult to die on a battlefield so one could say, ‘I should get killed in the forthcoming battle without too much trouble.’ For some reason, however, one never says such a thing because one does all one can so as *not* to die in any battle, dodging bullets, cannonballs, lances and even motorcars: after all, every street is a battlefield in its own right. Anyway you earned both a few weeks off and the respect of historians who put you in their books, dictionaries and suchlike – historians like filling gaps in their histories. Is that what they call immortality – or eternity, to use Spinoza’s terminology? Well, I’m not a general and even if I was one, I wouldn’t be a victorious general and there’s not enough room for an army of generals in books and dictionaries which are, however, lenient enough to tolerate within their pages a multitude of minor poets. Would I have more luck as a minor poet?

And then your son dies on a battlefield; you're too old for wars and uniforms, but your son is in his prime and it is high time to die when you're in your prime – even when you're in your childhood, for those whom the gods love die young, as everybody knows. Don't you wish to be loved by God Himself, not just by a few of His angels, by your guardian angel? But if you're old, God no longer loves you; what's more, your son dies on a battlefield and you can no longer rely on *his* love, *his* loving care, *his* smiles and witty comments. What to do? Of course you have no alternative but to put an end to your life upon hearing about your son's untimely death which entitles him to a place in human hearts and dictionaries; and to a place in your family vault. You wouldn't have allowed him to lie by your side, had he not been awarded medals for his bravery. Would you?

You die and somebody else stands in for you because the show must go on and it does go on thanks to a slave whose rapacious cruelty stalks from one century to another and historians shake their heads as they write about his crimes and tyranny. You're replaced by your inferior and on your deathbed you name your successor because you think that everyone is listening to you, writing down your words as if they were dictated by God in person Who talked to many prophets in days of yore. But you're no prophet and no one listens to you. A slave sits on your throne or simply in your armchair and you can't do anything about it, even if you shout 'No!' from where you stand in the Hereafter, waving your hands and brandishing your fists.

I never join the people who walk through cities and villages in search of omens, harbingers and the messengers of our omnipresent *fatum*. These people work as a group – no one person is allowed to dominate because such tyranny is likely to disturb the equilibrium they need to decipher God's cipher and UFOs' intentions. One member of the group says to another member: 'Look at this black cat.'

'Look at this white cat,' says the other member.

'Don't walk under this staircase,' says another member.

'Don't walk under Jacob's ladder,' says another member.

'What do you think of this cloud?'

'There are hundreds of nuclear missiles aimed at the main cities.'

'What do you think of my new dress?'

'Too short. You'll die next week.'

'Don't write short chapters.'

‘Her hair is much shorter than it used to be. Danger!’

‘I’m going to wear a short black skirt and thigh-length boots.’

‘Ooh, you devil!’

I don’t know whether I should believe the signs which have nothing to do with the works where Barthes enlarges upon objects and words – upon the topography of the world made up of signs, according to him and his language that I used to dislike. I still dislike it and I seldom if ever use the word ‘sign’ in the sense one may borrow from Barthes’ renowned lectures and books where he attempts to turn the world into a collection of signs instead of enjoying things in themselves that are just things – objects, phenomena – and not signs attached to the mind. But there are other signs and I regard them as guides, if not gurus, whose guidance may help me avoid a multitude of dangers and find the right path, alias the middle way leading to the future worthy of my great and tiny expectations. In a way, this future is likely to live up to my standards only if I take into consideration the energy emanating from UFOs or God and His emissaries, for I no longer doubt this energy and its presence in my life that I feel like exposing to the otherworldly, white-hole-like radiation.

Instead of striking up a conversation with Lacan or Freud himself, I’d better talk to my guardian angel who can throw light on the darkness I had to accept and deal with during that memorable night when I drank two bottles of Burgundy. I might have put on some nice soothing music instead, but whenever I have to choose between music and Burgundy, I invariably open a bottle of Montrachet or Musigny and drink it down to the dregs. My guardian angel doesn’t seem to mind this practice of mine, for he can’t underestimate what may be termed ‘wine therapy’ and the ritual to which so many poems and books are dedicated – not only in French, mind you.

‘Do you mind my drinking this bottle of Haut Brion?’

‘Not at all.’

‘Don’t you want to join me?’

‘I’ve got my own wine cellar.’

‘What do you drink? Ambrosia?’

‘Don’t sidetrack your guardian angel into talking about your hobby. We have many things to attend to.’

‘What things? My departure from France? Do you think I should leave this country forever?’

‘You’d better leave it in two months’ time. Why forever? No one forbids you to come to Paris as often as you please. Less than an hour and a half by train.’

‘Why did you break four ribs of mine?’

‘Because you don’t understand my gentle hints. Didn’t that man say, “What’s more, you’re not French”?’

‘Of course he did.’

‘You ought to have gone to Brussels a few hours later and bought this cottage instead of shopping for food.’

‘I was hungry.’

‘You could have eaten in Brussels. Don’t you like Belgian cuisine? Waterzooi, for instance?’

‘What about the power cut? Another hint?’

‘Of course. A *gentle* hint this time.’

‘Why should I leave France? Because of the government?’

‘Death is more important than any government, any taxes.’

‘Would I die if I stayed in France forever?’

‘We had a very hard winter last year and some of the plants died.’

‘What are you talking about? Paradise?’

‘Delicate plants need to be kept in a greenhouse during the winter.’

‘Is Paradise a greenhouse? Why did the plants die? Why don’t you banish death from Paradise?’

‘Death hasn’t eaten the forbidden fruit. Not yet.’

One can talk to one’s guardian angel for hours without getting a single piece of information one can rely upon when thinking about death and life, when fearing that all this is just a moment and nothing else awaits anyone beyond this moment because time *may* die, leaving nothing behind, not even a slice of eternity. I know that all depends on time and its struggle with eternity or with its own death, or deaths, however numerous they might be, which meet at one point, the meeting point, and I can’t tell them apart. I’m bound to die along with my time and any other time: there are no other times, other deaths. In *The Possessed* Dostoevsky tries to convey this truth through a dialogue from which you learn that you can vanquish both time and death, provided you don’t shun publicity linked to suicides, to the way some people finish their lives without realising that their lives do not really belong to them, being God’s presents and proofs of His eternal bounty. And other people talk about these reckless individuals in the wake of the latter’s departures from what may be called ‘our

common life': life is also in a class of its own and can't be multiplied, whatever God may say on the subject in the Bible and elsewhere. There's only *one* life and whenever someone commits suicide, we all die at the same moment as if we were attached and chained to the same Tree of Life which one individual cuts down to satisfy his insatiable curiosity. (Let us keep women out of this dirty business.) 'Is there anything beyond this Tree of Life?' he may ask himself. To answer this difficult question, he kills himself and I, for one, can't go any further because I do not know what he may see beyond the tree to which I'm attached both physically and psychologically.

Once upon a time there was a trial or rather an exchange of letters and emails at the end of which (I have no idea whether it is an end or not) I enjoyed a long period of epistolary silence. I am still overtaken by a crowd of bikers doing over 90 mph, whenever I walk around this district that is far from discreet in those bike-pierced moments. On the contrary – one gets the feeling that a sort of absolute truth comes to us from the rooftops where God shouts them to remind us of our mortality and overall fragility. So bikers and their over-90mph rides carried on as if nothing peaceful had ever taken place on the surface of the Earth and even in her entrails. My former manager and his lawyer lapsed into silence or a series of comas from which I am still not prepared to liberate them unless they agree to pay me the money I lost during the Japanese tour. Not to lose the trial and even the game that precedes every trial, however ludicrous and out of tune with the scientific thinking of the time, I insisted upon the lack of any legal (scientific) document allowing my manager to extract from my wallet and bank account as many dollars as he needs to satisfy his wife's exorbitant requirements.

What kind of document do I have in mind? My former manager might have the same document in *his* mind, but what counts in this game is more related to matter than to mind. Some scientists believe there is about ten times as much matter in the universe as astronomers have observed, but even their matter does not contain the legal document I have been talking about at great length.

My dear manager,

Here is the document you need to work on my capacities and energy appropriately, without giving any thought to financial problems and moral duties. I do promise to pay you the commission you're likely to require after paying me a pittance by means of a few recitals and concerts lost and found in Austria as well

as in some other countries of the world where I live, for all my disasters and despairs. You scratch my back and I'll scratch yours. You find me concerts and I'll send you a lot of money for my pittance. Pity, the pity of it, Iago or Jago, but never mind; or rather never matter. This matter doesn't really matter because money will never make you happy unless your existence is defined in terms of money, of how much you get for your labours or for your mere presence somewhere. Mine, on the other hand, seems to be defined in terms of honey – love, love, love, in other words. 'Hi, honey, I'm home!' as the Americans say. Actually they also say and think, 'Hi, money, I'm home!' Especially if they can boast about a triptych by Francis Bacon or a portrait by Lucian Freud. They just look at their walls and say, 'Hi, money, I'm home!' They look at their swimming pool and say, 'Hi, money, I'm home!' What am I supposed to say? And to whom?

Never mind, never matter. In the long run I've resigned myself to living discreetly, to put it mildly and mercifully. 'Hi, honey' and not 'Hi, hail to you, my land of milk and honey!' Besides, I do have promises to keep, for all my fury and its sound. I won't do anything illegal, disloyal and counterproductive (from your point of view). 'You promise?' you ask. 'I promise,' I answer.

Yours truly, loyally and faithfully

Valery Aleff

All this is so far away that no reader is likely to remember the problems I had with regard to this tour, to Vienna, to my manager and his assistant. Apparently you can read Spinoza's *Ethics* easier these days: the Internet helps you find the pieces scattered all over the text. What kind of pieces am I alluding to? A piece of information here and there; and of course you are tempted to discard it, on the grounds that you suffer from information overload. They put a lot of pieces into you and every piece contains a piece of information; so that, after a while, you feel as heavy as electricity-driven cars. (My charwoman says they are very heavy and, according to her, this is their only imperfection. 'They're perfect, they're perfect,' she keeps on saying as she shows me various models and their engines.) So you often put the *Ethics* down and say, 'Too much, too much. Why should I search high and low for this explanation? I'll never understand this masterpiece, whatever I do, read and feel. Do I really need it? There are only two ethical problems on our human agenda. The first one goes like this, "Transplantation of organs from living donors raises ethical issues." And here's the

second one, “It may be feasible to clone human beings, but is it ethical?” None of these problems is dealt with in Spinoza’s book. Why read it?” And you throw the book out of the window so that it lands up in your garden, on one of its lawns. You cannot mow the lawn if it is wet. But today it is dry on account of the sun that shines so obtrusively and rudely you are tempted to use your grandmother’s Chinese umbrella. So your gardener fetches his lawnmower and sets about making it look spick and span. Then he comes to a standstill – and so does the mower – picks up your book and brings you the *Ethics* as if, according to him, you were unethical and needed a teacher to learn the basics of human conduct. Once again, you are stuck with references, demonstrations, allusions and disillusion. Only with the aid of your computer can you get through the book, and Spinoza’s masterpiece is not the only opus where you encounter these back-and-forth problems.

Kieslowski makes his heroine watch a lump of sugar, instead of turning her into a heroin addict, which many film directors would have done in his shoes: drug addicts are not out of fashion. (Anyway she was not arrested at the airport with a kilo of heroin secreted in her clothing.) Why does he and she do so? He wants us (film and opera *buffa* buffs) to realise she will never accept any proposals born and declared beyond this lump of sugar – her small world. She soaks it in a cup of black coffee and it starts browning as if somebody – a cowboy of sorts – had whipped a real Browning out of its holster. As my wife puts it, ‘If a word resounds in the air or just in this little head of yours, it may and must rub off on the world. The wordstrap theory, you know.’ Well, I am about to write the following sentence, ‘Garry Cupper whipped a Browning out of the left half of his trousers.’ And I am aware that all the lumps of sugar in our district are already brown, and I would flaunt my tan in front of my neighbours, if I was on speaking terms with them; on flaunting terms, rather.

I wish I could follow her example and concentrate on a lump of sugar, for want of anything better. Once again I find myself in the domain of love: ‘Hi, sugar, did you have a good day at school?’ Once again I am an American, but so far I have not taken part in any ritual leading to the birth of a child, be it a he or a she. Meanwhile my daughter is flaunting her tan in a little white dress. She came back from Spain with a deep tan, you know. No, no, no. No daughters, no white dresses, no brown dresses. Only a lump of sugar and a cup of black coffee. Kieslowski said, ‘The sequence lasts only five seconds. We spent the whole afternoon, looking for an appropriate lump of sugar. I knew the process shouldn’t take more

than five seconds.' Let it last my whole life, not just a whole afternoon which I might spend on a careful, meticulous search for a beautiful lump of sugar.

Dear friend,

I'm writing to thank you again for your patience and loyalty.

I hope the date of the release will be respected, although the game of Ping-Pong I've been privy to for three months at least has ended up getting on my nerves and on my health, as you know. I'm getting worse and worse, and considering that I have to play an important concert in Moscow (television and all) I should practise both my health and Mozart's *C Minor Concerto* most assiduously.

Today, I'll send you my meagre contribution to the Russian and German letters: nine or ten books published in both countries. I am fêted by the worthiest bunch of intellectuals at the Ascona Symposium (Eranos), but publishers and concert organisers count their money, as the king does in the nursery rhyme, in his counting house and in this book of mine. Sometimes I wonder if there are *other* houses (other books) in today's world.

When the going gets tough, the tough get going – that's my motto. And I *am* going.

I think it would be a good idea to ask Aoza-san to help us with the list of my Japanese tours. He wrote a book on pianists and so must have whatever is necessary to complete the list that Monique already sent you. If you think it's ethically appropriate, I'll send him an email to this effect. We're very close friends and he even paid me a visit in our Belgian house. I hope that you, my wife and I will be able to carry out this private ritual in the near future.

It's a great pity we cannot use the pictures of the miracles, but if nothing can be done about their rights, let us resort to Klee's drawings which are far more appealing than my face. I think Monique sent you all the details. I hope their rights aren't too expensive. I hope my politically incorrect essays have already been translated into Japanese.

Tos and Hor were kind enough to order a wheelchair for me in Tokyo. And even in Brussels I took advantage of its replica and their kindness. I hope I'll get better pretty soon. Otherwise I'll continue to play and write, but I'll no longer take my two-hour walks around our district. If you do come to Belgium, my wife will take care of us. She could also accompany us to Ghent and Bruges.

Thank you again,

All the best,

Valery

The dear friend I wrote to is made up of three letters: KOZ. (And his Christian or rather Shinto name is RYU.) Many others own the entire alphabet so that, when referring to them, you have to use an additional sheet of paper either on your computer screen or your writing desk. Mr Jmù;lmlkvskjkjh b;jfns:,nnbkjh guy hzoijqaeg::,lmk jiu boifùml, kjhjhgvcsrtydytuhomml;lm,nkjlbgjhjcfcgfhhgj jhkbkjlmlkjmnomibjkhvghcgulikjnk,nlk,nkjlmlnjhb h, for instance. By no means should you omit all their titles, medals and Nobel prizes. Koz is quite satisfied with three letters; so are Tos and Hor. Each of them has a heart of gold, a letter of silver. Koz-san has done a lot for my CDs, forthcoming and backgoing. But for him, I might not have recorded anything for ten years at least. A factor of light.

Dear Andrew,

Thank you very much for the analysis. There's a difference between my previous texts and this one, which is a collection of essays with a few epistolary examples. If you write poetry - and even my essays are meant to be poetic, to some extent - you can't win all the time. But your failures create a necessary space of hesitation, of urkiness, of vagueness - of mystery, if you wish. Joyce was often wide of the mark. Or short of the mark. So was Shakespeare, which irritated Samuel Johnson, but not Auden who thought that, but for a certain amount of boredom, Shakespeare's plays wouldn't be as spacious and cosmic-like as they are.

My love to Gera,

Kindest regards,

You are going somewhere and you cannot deny it because you do not think it is worth your while doing anything except going, going, going. And so you go as long as you do not trip over something, over a branch, over someone's hunch. Yes, I think they say about a number of people, 'This individual walks on corpses,' which means someone destroys you willingly and viciously. Of course someone else is eager to point out that you were destroyed at your birth and so no additional destruction can do you any harm. All right: you no longer pay any attention to whatever wounds your fellow citizens and even to what some citizens of the world can inflict upon yourself. Another wound, yet another wound. You bleed to death, but death does not really harm your sinews and the rest of your substance. So you continue to enjoy both life and its ramifications some of which are linked to cemeteries and your own

coffins. You have a number of them, and you go so far as to number them, really and truly. You die and say to yourselves and others, ‘This time I’ll spend my eternity in the Coffin Number Three.’

VALERY ALEFF

ALEFF PRO NIETZSCHE

My formula for human greatness is *amor fati*: not wanting anything to be different, not forwards, not backwards, not for all eternity. Not just enduring what is necessary, still less concealing it – all idealism is hypocrisy in the face of what is necessary – but loving it.

Nietzsche, *Ecce Homo* (trans. by Duncan Large)

WE ANTIPODES

1

If you complain a lot, on a regular basis, you're bound to live as long as you wish to live and some human beings are determined to live eternally as if living on the surface of the Earth were a tremendous experience – akin to what we might have lived through in Paradise, in days of yore. I'm not sure we have ever lived in Paradise, whatever they say about a tropical paradise and other similar places, and consequently I think that only a fool's paradise is accessible to us; and we take advantage of its being within our reach whenever we can do it with apparent impunity. Perhaps my complaints are rooted in this paradise of ours and the dreams I nourish in my bosom and elsewhere are nothing but a permanent daydream I should get rid of so as not to commit suicide – out of despair.

For years I've been dreaming of this book where my grievances may come into the open and speak at the top of their voices in the hope that someone will hear them sooner or later – hopefully before my death, before my journey to Paradise. I don't think I am as great as Nietzsche, although this comparison does crop up in some nooks and crannies of my brain, within my cranium; and I'm reluctant to chase this comparison away because it may help me survive in the world where only fools feel comfortable – like fish *in* water, as the Russians put it. I am a fish *out* of water, needless to say, and I wonder if I could ever be happy in the water I have at my disposal whenever I wake up and look around me to find out where I am and what should be done before it is too late. The water I'm talking about is this world inside which I aspire to fame so as not to share Nietzsche's fate, for I'm convinced he was driven mad by his contemporaries who failed to pay homage to his genius.

If you air your grievances, you let off steam and any doctor will say that you shouldn't keep this kind of steam inside your brain and body unless you wish to be choked by it, which may facilitate your transference to *real* Paradise. You keep things to yourself and thus commit suicide without knowing it; in other words, you don't do it on purpose and God is unlikely to punish you for this imaginary sin so that nothing prevents you from reaching Paradise in no time at all – as soon as your steam and its constituents choke you irremediably. But if you do let off steam, you may live as long as an old lady whose complaints I heard for more than 50 years spent in the same house, amidst the same furniture, flowers and pictures. You let off steam and your purified, unloaded body turns over a new leaf as it continues to march towards immortality or eternity, flouting the second law of thermodynamics and disregarding the allure of the Garden of Eden.

According to Freud or his exegetes, some of our nocturnal dreams look and sound like their daylight counterparts, for all of them are focused upon our desires and frustrations: the girl we encounter almost every day is so beautiful we'd give anything to sleep with her till doomsday. So we dream about this gorgeous lovemaking at night and during our waking hours, wiping out the frontier that separates nightmares from daily routine. We also dream about Nobel prizes and other awards that may not reach us within real time and space where other people interfere with our self-esteem and self-confidence thanks to which we are acclaimed inside our brain day in day out and also at night, provided our dreams concur with our wishful thinking.

I, for one, do not dream of anything of the sort, if we consider only the dreams I happen to enjoy at night when my consciousness is supposed to be at the mercy of my unconscious where Freud hid his complexes and drives as he strove to poison humanity, adding to our brain yet another dimension of which we had been blissfully unaware. My unconscious supplies me neither with my next door beauties nor with the Nobel prize for literature, which does not mean I never dream about beauties and prizes awarded to others, to my distant colleagues whose works and bodies inhabit some parallel world or another dimension. At least I never come across them and if I do, I run away as if to follow Nietzsche's advice: '—this spiritual and silent haughtiness, this pride of the elect of cognition, of the "initiated", of the almost sacrificed, finds all kinds of disguise necessary to protect itself against contact with officious and pitying hands, and against everything that is not a peer in suffering.'

I admit that I *am* proud and haughty in spite of my low status which allows me no room for manoeuvre: I can't even choose the pieces I must play so as not to die of starvation, otherwise I would already have forgotten I am a pianist, a former student of Emil Gilels and Jacob Zak. Glenn Gould says that concert tours make one waste a lot of time and I don't think I have time on my hands: I am duty bound to re-read all my works and write two or three poems every day. Besides, I'm almost 66 and from this point of view I have no time either; I mean that my future doesn't lie in front of my body as far as the eye can see, although my eyes are no longer short-sighted thanks to the operations I underwent in recent years.

The writers from whom I'm anxious to protect myself are not peers in suffering, given that they're published and acclaimed to the point of keeping other people's books out of shops and the Internet. They walk on red carpets as I toss and turn in bed, trying to get rid of yet another nightmare that reminds me neither of literary awards nor of beautiful ladies who await my colleagues at the end of their carpets or in hotel rooms adorned with ice buckets and

champagne. Neither these ladies nor their lovers are eager to help me; nor do they take pity on me so I don't need to protect myself from their pitying hands and glances. 'Deep suffering makes noble; it separates,' says Nietzsche. Do they suffer? Do they ever think about death? Whenever I watch their smiles on TV or in five-star hotels, I say to them, '*Memento mori.*' They don't even have a smattering of Latin.

2

This morning I received the following email from Japan:

Dear Valery,

Hello!

How are you?

I am preparing for the production of the your pamphlet for make a concert of 2015.

This is 2 programs.

A.

The first half

Chopin: Polonaise

The latter half

Schumann: Symphonic Etudes Op.13

And

B.

J.S Bach and Silverstrov? or All J.S Bach

Please inform me the piece of the polonaise of Chopin. Because A is Maine, would you be able to write a short sentence for Chopin&Schumann?

Best!

Yoshiyuki

Here is my reply:

Dear Yoshiyuki,

Thank you for your email.

As for the programmes you suggest, the first one is illogical because Chopin doesn't go with Schumann. Besides, I don't really want to play the *Etudes symphoniques* again. Usually I play polonaises with waltzes.

We talked about the second programme in Japan. In my opinion, Bach doesn't go with Silvestrov – with the pieces I play. Schubert is preferable of course. I wonder if some day I'll be allowed to choose my programmes myself.

Is it really impossible to play only one solo programme? I'll be playing two concerti and two different programmes. It is too much. Don't forget that I play my programmes by heart.

Kindest regards,

Valery

Some performing artists are haunted by memory lapses and do not play by heart the pieces they perform in public, which makes things easier for them – not only on account of their deficient memory and fragile nerves: both need crutches. These famous pianists and violinists are afraid their memory might let them down at any moment; nor am *I* protected from my memory's shortness and whims. But I resort to music rests only when playing at home; in front of concert goers, however, I always struggle with my nerves and memory which are notorious traitors and therefore *cannot* be relied upon, even if the pieces I perform have kept me company for more than 50 years.

Their memory needs a crutch; so does their 'apparatus', as we used to say at the Moscow Conservatoire where I spent nine years before leaving the Soviet Union forever. I mean their eyes assist their so-called technique as they progress through the pages flipped by a page turner, for it is easier to play a headache-associated passage if you can *see* its configuration. These artists are always on holiday, in other words – even if they play in Berlin, Vienna and London where audiences applaud them for the simple reason that they're famous and therefore *cannot* play badly. Audiences do not mind the disappearance of the ritual to which I devote my energies and life, resolved as I am to create an illusion that it is I who composed the pieces one hears and enjoys during my recitals. Carnegie Hall is *not* cluttered with scores and music rests when *I* play in it, unaided either by page turners or any configuration – the notes one comes across when leafing through Beethoven's sonatas. But the applause I hear can hardly be called 'thunderous': I'm not famous and only famous artists

deserve standing ovations and first-class tickets, comfortable armchairs and beds, vintage wines.

‘Next time I’ll travel first class,’ I say to my manager.

‘Why not?’ he answers. ‘We’ll send you money for business and you’ll pay the rest.’

‘G. K. always travels first class. And he doesn’t pay for it.’

‘But he’s famous,’ says my manager.

‘His managers lose money,’ I say to my manager.

‘How so?’ he says.

‘His concerts are *not* sold out,’ I say.

‘Really? But he’s so famous.’

‘And he plays whatever he wants.’

‘He’s famous.’

‘And his fee —’

‘He’s famous.’

Many years ago I played at the Musée d’Orsay in the company of two artists. I’m not *always* alone on stage because page turners are not the only people who can keep you company during your concerts. One of my companions in misfortune played the cello and I knew that some people spoke of his achievements in glowing terms: ‘His career has been on the up and up since he was engaged by DGP.’ His eyes riveted on the famous artist, the man in charge shook my hand and once again I *saw* the difference between fame and anonymity; and yet the cellist wasn’t really famous in those days – in the early Eighties, if I remember rightly. Nor was I an *anonymous* artist, for all my modesty.

Why write my version of Dostoevsky’s *Unizhennie i Oscorblyonnie*? I don’t know the English title of the book and the Internet isn’t likely to help me out of this predicament because I never use the Internet so as not to betray my solitude, a condition so highly praised by Nietzsche and other pigheaded loners. Whenever you insult, humiliate and offend your fellow creatures, you add a few pages to this book, especially if you take the trouble to add insult to injury. Of course I am on the other side of the fence – in relation to famous artists who have the knack of humiliating their colleagues. And they often add insult to injury – almost unconsciously, en passant. Why should they waste their precious time on nonentities?

One of these colleagues of mine said to me at the beginning of this century, ‘I’m invited to the Salzburg Festival. I wish you could take part in the concert. But I’m not sure the deal will come off – they invite only famous artists.’ After our last concert, he took out his wallet and said, ‘I think I can give you another thousand euros. Aren’t you happy?’ I was *not*. And

yet I am *not* sure I should write my version of *Unizhennïe i Oscorblyonnië*: Why add insult to injury?

As Nietzsche dissects the notion of vengeance, he points out that you shouldn't avenge yourself if the guilty party fails to come up to your idea of what constitutes a dignified and worthy opponent. So if you happen to despise this opponent of yours, you don't even notice him, let alone his insults which are lost on you on account of their utter insignificance or non-existence. Why should you take offence at what the unborn say to you?

I hit upon this idea – the story of my humiliations – in a garden where I walked as I waited for a taxi or a bus: anonymous artists aren't *always* permitted to take a taxi. And if they *are* permitted to use this form of transport, they don't have enough money for it unless a famous artist opts for a display of magnanimity and takes a few banknotes out of his wallet. 'Why should I display my sorrow?' I asked myself. I had time on my hands and a long interior monologue helped me come to terms with this and other times scattered around the world. Interior monologues are often instrumental in bringing about the peace of mind we need when coping with frustrations and keeping at bay today's stars and their bountiful hands.

'Why expose my psychological wounds?' I asked myself. 'I used to say, "There's no psychology," and I was probably right because I never seek medical attention, assuming that psychoanalysts are doctors and not mere charlatans. And I laugh when an army of psychoanalysts rushes towards a spot where some psychological victims sob and scream in front of the cameras. And once I said that only Beckett could insult me because only a genius was allowed to touch my soul. Why should I show them I'm as sensitive as a high-strung boy? Don't I know I am a genius myself? Do I need their recognition? Do I hear their insults? Am I injured when others look at them, when an army of journalists queue in front of their backstage rooms? Of course not – it's beneath my dignity. Shouldn't I bear myself with dignity throughout my trials and tribulations?'

At the time I was in search of a subject matter for my future novel. No wonder I envied Picasso who used to say, 'I don't search, I find.' In other words, I couldn't afford to miss an opportunity that my wounded pride seemed to offer me as it continued to dwell on my discomfitures, on my numerous defeats. I recalled a number of managers who turned me down in spite of my letters and phone calls. They all had too many artists on their lists and therefore had no time for unknown pianists whose claims could be ignored on grounds of age, for instance: you will not make a name for yourself if you're 36. Only young people – and

goners – deserve everybody’s attention and astronomical fees. And I am *not* on the threshold of death, according to my doctors; nor am I a child prodigy, another Mozart or Menuhin.

3

The imitation or domination of such a taste would result in a danger to music which cannot be exaggerated: the complete degeneration of rhythmic feeling, *chaos* in place of rhythm. This danger reaches its climax when such music leans more and more heavily on a wholly naturalistic style of acting and gestures, which is no longer dominated by any law of plasticity and wants *effect*, nothing more. *Espressivo* at any price, and music in the service, the slavery of poses – *that is the end*.

Nietzsche, *Nietzsche contra Wagner* (transl. by Walter Kaufmann)

Thus Nietzsche spoke of Wagner in his last and bitterest work where many complaints come to the fore as if to describe in minute detail the sorry plight of a genius born into a minus world: let us not forget that in French ‘minus’ means ‘moron’ and ‘washout’ – in addition to the mathematical sign. Alas, writers of genius aren’t *always* right and I would single Nietzsche out from any group of remarkable people, if asked to name a philosopher who was *often* wrong. But I wouldn’t be wide of the mark if I said that the above diatribe reflects today’s young performers and their ways to a T, taking into consideration the havoc they play with classical music.

Nietzsche is fond of repetition and I wonder if, at some point, he didn’t decide to prove his doctrine of eternal recurrence – partly borrowed from Pythagoras – by means of this stylistic method. For once I’ll refrain from following in his footsteps: I’ve already done my best to stigmatise the young upstarts who continue to annihilate music. No eternal recurrence, this time.

Let me just repeat a few bits from the above paragraph: *chaos* in place of rhythm and dynamics...a wholly naturalistic style of acting and gestures, dominated by the law of supply and demand...*effect*, nothing more. *Espressivo* at any price, and music in the service, the slavery of poses – *that is the end*.

‘Where Wagner belongs,’ says Nietzsche as he embarks upon his analysis of Wagner’s cultural whereabouts. ‘Where these youngsters belong,’ I might say in my turn before typing the word ‘entertainer’. They’re not musicians, are they? Nor are they true artists. ‘Mass society,’ says Hannah Arendt, ‘wants not culture but entertainment, and the wares offered by the entertainment industry are indeed consumed by society just like any other consumer

goods. The products needed for entertainment serve the life process of society, even though they may not be as necessary for this life as bread and meat. They serve, as the phrase is, to while away time, and the vacant time which is whiled away is not leisure time, strictly speaking – time, that is, in which we are free from all cares and activities necessitated by the life process and therefore free for the world and its culture – it is rather left-over time, which still is biological in nature, left over after labour and sleep have received their due.’

‘There are too many quotations in your work,’ says my unworthy opponent. ‘Don’t you trust your own thoughts?’

‘Quotes enrich and enlarge the space I create through my works,’ I say to him. Why talk to unworthy, undignified opponents?

‘You also quote the letters you receive.’

‘And my own letters,’ I point out.

‘Why?’

‘Doesn’t Rousseau follow the same procedure in *Les Confessions*?’

‘Why ape Rousseau?’

‘Because I worship the past. I was an ape, wasn’t I? So were you, if I remember rightly.’

‘Your books are chaotic.’

‘So is *Eugene Onegin*.’

‘Why ape Pushkin?’

‘Because every dignified, self-respecting Russian is Alexander Sergeevich Pushkin – to the nth degree.’

‘Why are there so many poems in your novels? Why this incongruous mixture of genres?’

‘What about Nietzsche?’

Why am I wasting my time on this book?

Letting off steam – privately, almost silently.

Is it better to play concerts?

Is it still the world where so many poets used to live?

Morons, washouts, nonentities, celebrities

On whose tombs I’d like to dance like Zarathustra,

Like Nijinsky. My rite of spring,

My joy, my night song, dancing song. No hard feelings –

A dolce vita, a vita nuova. My deep eternity.

This poem is a skilful, witty pastiche of Nietzsche's ecstatic and hypocritical verses. 'Joy – deeper yet than agony.' 'All joy wants eternity.' Instead, he ought to have written, 'I don't have very much to feel joyful over at the moment' – every day, till doomsday.

THE POET SPEAKS UP

1

The more a psychologist – a born and inevitable psychologist and unriddler of souls – applies himself to the more exquisite cases and human beings, the greater becomes the danger that he might suffocate of pity. He *needs* hardness and cheerfulness more than anyone else. For the corruption, the destruction, of the higher men is the rule: it is terrible constantly to have such a rule before one's eyes. The manifold torture of the psychologist who has discovered this corruption, who discovers this whole inner haplessness of the higher man, this eternal 'too late' in every sense, first in one case and then *almost* always again through the whole of history – one day this may perhaps bring about his own corruption.

Nietzsche realised he had to be cheerful so as not to go mad in the world – and there's no other world – where the higher man is hapless and exposed to corruption which has nothing to do with the corruption they speak about on TV when they discover yet another series of tax evasions and bribes – among the members of a government. The psychologist in question endeavours to adjust to this life, for he knows he will have no other opportunity to become happy; and while coming to terms with it he enters into the spirit of the game played by famous artists and their admirers. In other words, he adopts 'a wholly naturalistic style of acting and gestures, dominated by the law of supply and demand', which is also current in the domain of literature. You just have a few theatrical ideas which crop up here and there, letting the rest of your work flounder about as if in expectation of a miracle, of some *deus ex machina* or *coup de grâce*.

Recently I met a publisher who is mostly interested in theatre or rather in theatrical gestures – in the ideas which, according to him, can justify the lack of style, of perspective, of space, of talent, of genius. He has no qualms about taking on a book in which a famous violinist gives a lesson to a young pianist because he fears she might be led astray by her unsuitable friends – managers and suchlike – who think only in terms of money and sold-out

concerts. On stage she wears miniskirts and if she occasionally gives in to conservative people's demands and puts on an evening dress, her décolletage leaves nothing to the imagination. The book is essentially an exhortation to musical honesty which presupposes 'your complete disregard for easy success and applause, for anyone else's opinion. You shouldn't forget that I am your only friend and benefactor, and you're unlikely to find a more serious musician in the whole world. By the way, last night I played in San Francisco. I don't mind standing ovations, you know: they are part and parcel of concert life. You may and indeed *should* enjoy your fans' respect – on condition that you fully deserve it.'

'Why did you publish such trash?' I asked the publisher.

'Because I like the idea of the book.'

'Musical honesty?'

'Yes.'

'A very original idea.'

'A useful one.'

'Do you know what Nabokov said about ideas? They're all in last night's gazette.'

'Ideas? He meant facts, I suppose.'

'Ideas, not facts.'

'Really?'

'What counts is texture, isn't it?'

'What texture? What are you talking about?'

I have a lot of unworthy friends who reduce the whole of literature to a few ideas and conflicts, to a few simple answers. What remains of a novel can be found on page 55; and the rest is not literature, contrary to what Verlaine might have thought on the subject. I often say to others, 'I can't believe that someone of your intelligence can read such trash!' And I say to myself, 'Another unworthy opponent, another moron, another washout, another stupid jerk.' Nietzsche was fond of synonyms.

Recently I talked to another friend of mine. (A very interesting and eventful month.) We spoke about Schubert, Hell and a contemporary writer whose works make me open two bottles of vodka – the Russian poison I avail myself of only when in need of drowning my sorrow and disgust. Besides, I'm weary of repeating all day long, 'I can't believe that someone of your intelligence can read such trash! You moron! You moron! You moron! You moron!'

Instead of repeating myself, on that occasion I read out an excerpt from my early novel which, in my opinion, was a suitable demonstration of how one should write, doing justice to

literary texture, to the web one might spin between heterogeneous thoughts, notions and moods. Non-local links, I call it. Space.

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

The biggest enigma is Time. We cannot single it out from the other phenomena of our existence and fix it somewhere for the sake of our telescopes and microscopes. Like God, Time worms itself into every fissure of the universe. Fluid and elusive, Time is everywhere and nowhere. (Some theologians affirm that God is Time.) Time pervades even its own 'substance': the past overlaps the present and the future, the future overlaps the present and the past. Human consciousness is like a newspaper magnate's office. There is a row of clocks and each tells a different time: Paris, Tokyo, London, Los Angeles, Chernobyl...

There ensued the following exchange of ideas:

'I'm afraid I have to disagree with you on several points. I hope you don't mind.'

'I don't. Even friends disagree sometimes.'

'You're right. But you're wrong when you say that God is Time. God is *outside*.'

'You mean, He is *beyond* Time and Space?'

'Precisely.'

'And what about Spinoza?'

'What about him?'

'Doesn't he think that God is nature – everything, in other words?'

'So what?'

'Suppose your wife is given a bunch of roses.'

'So what?'

'What does she usually do with flowers?'

'She cuts them and puts them in a vase.'

'Cut flowers will soon wilt without water. Don't you agree?'

'I do. So what?'

'So your wife pours some water into the vase, doesn't she?'

'She does.'

‘But the flowers are bound to die, whatever you do to prolong their lives.’

‘Yes. Their life expectancy is rather short.’

‘God is these roses, the vase, the water you pour into the vase and also the decay you witness, the process. In short, God is Time as well. Anyway, every dignified novel corroborates the theory of relativity.’

Some time ago, I realised that women understood my novels and poems better than men; and yet I don’t have a lifelong commitment to feminism. I wasn’t put out at being more attuned to the weaker sex’s mentality, for I don’t cherish the notion of unrecognised genius and am prepared to welcome into my club whoever admires my works. ‘Not for a moment will a Russian woman get confused over where I belong,’ writes Nietzsche. And I’m admired by several Russian women; their souls are far more refined than those of men who have no idea what texture of life means and where to look for it. ‘In poetry,’ would answer a Russian woman, a Japanese woman. No wonder that Kierkegaard was mainly worshiped by Danish *women* – in his lifetime, in the days when the adult male population wept over the unhappy lot of Andersen’s mermaid.

Is it really too late?

2

Is it too late for fame, for glory? For so-called recognition? Would I be happy if those people recognised my genius at last? They’re more likely to laugh at me if they read this confession – out of sheer boredom, to while away the time. Throughout his life, Wagner thought he was a genius, even when he was writing *Rienzi*. I’ve never doubted my capacities, my literary gift. Nietzsche gets beyond the very notion of genius – he thinks he is the greatest man in the history of humanity. Am I superior to Dante? Or to Nietzsche, for that matter? Be that as it may, I’ve become myself at last, judging from my style and mental disposition.

I recall a writer who sent me a letter – in those days people didn’t know the first thing about computers. When was it? In the Seventies, if I remember rightly. I don’t think my memory is on intimate terms with time, but it is *always* ill at ease when trying to conquer space. The writer’s name was Bokov and I remember it only because he used to pick up Nabokov’s *Lolita*, whenever he had his picture taken. He would cover the letters ‘N’ and ‘a’ with his fingers; one was under the impression that *Lolita* had been written by him and not by Vladimir Nabokov. Incidentally, his Christian name was Vladimir. Is he still alive? He hasn’t become immortal, as far as I know. Yet he finished his letter thus: ‘Don’t throw it away – in a few years, it will be worth an arm and a leg.’ I’ve never written a letter of this kind. Am I as

ridiculous as Bokov? When I said to Mrs Nabokov whom I met in 1981, 'I've got the first editions of Vladimir Vladimirovich's Russian works,' she said something along the same lines. 'In ten years, they'll be worth a small fortune.' It's not ridiculous, is it?

Should I count on women, on their partial recognition and moral support? We live in an increasingly feminist society in which the adult male population has less and less influence on our daily lives. At Christmastime I wasn't alone, exceptionally, last year. A woman paid me a visit in Versailles. I took advantage of her visit to read out the same excerpt from my novel in the middle of which God is equated with Time. 'Wonderful,' she said. 'Every phrase sounds like an aphorism.' This woman knows what texture means and where to look for it – in my works, in nature. Do I need her moral support, her recognition?

'Truth is a woman,' says Nietzsche, but publishers neither read him nor share his views on women and God. A man who stays at home to look after the children is an exception, even today. If men knew that truth is a woman, they would let their wives travel around the world and proclaim their truths from rooftops. Don't we all care about the future of humanity? I'm afraid we do not, otherwise we wouldn't read bad books that affect our genes and transmit their decay to our offspring. But men and women complain day in day out, 'Rot has got into the furniture,' and never ask the most important question, 'What about our souls?' Rot has already got into their minds, their DNA and genealogical trees; they don't turn a hair. My mistress speaks the truth and nothing but the truth; no one listens to her. And I don't need her *moral* support because I still have no doubts about my ability to do the job.

What I need is a sponsor, as they say nowadays. Money, networking, PR campaigns. A Russian conductor of sorts found such a sponsor in Switzerland. He is neither handsome nor gifted – a second-rater par excellence. 'Why?' is the question I often put to myself and others. Why do you sponsor such nonentities? You morons! You morons! Do you have no ears? Do you have no eyes? Nothing doing. 'We are all advocates of the mediocre,' says Nietzsche. He is right for once. Actually he is *always* right when he speaks of degeneration and degradation, of *ressentiment*.

Mediocrities always take vengeance on supermen (or overmen). Should I also pay tribute to superwomen (or overwomen)? Why not? One of them may fly to my rescue, weather permitting. Would she rob a few banks – for the sake of my worldwide fame and recognition? Of course she would. First she should save a few children, otherwise people will no longer worship her. And her husband. That's right – I'll marry her. Didn't Arthur Miller become even more famous after his affair with Marilyn Monroe? He married her of course –

they didn't really have a *secret* relationship. I mustn't confuse Arthur Miller with John Kennedy. And with Robert Kennedy.

As for myself, I can't help hearing 'They're famous' as soon as I venture outdoors: I haven't turned my TV on for more than six months. It was last Christmas. My mistress can't live without television programmes; even reality TV appeals to her. I begin to wonder if she knows *anything* about Absolute Truth and its ramifications. Anyway she doesn't seem to be a superwoman, otherwise she would already have shot a few police officers and robbed her company of £5 million. Otherwise, otherwise, otherwise. Life goes on and nothing, no one can alter it.

'Dreams, dreams, where's your sweetness?' says Pushkin in *Eugene Onegin*. I also say it rather often because I'm no longer young and only teenagers' hopes materialise in the world where children have pride of place. Once upon a time, I *was* a teenager; I had a lot of dreams and I thought that heaven would lie about me throughout my life. I was mistaken: heaven has never lain about me, although I was a teenager once and my laughter resounded in classrooms and halls – even in the concert halls where I played Bach and Beethoven. Dreams, dreams, where's your *bitterness*? Everywhere. Why don't you ever come true?

GREEN WITH ENVY

1

'I felt a pang of envy at the thought of his success,' I wrote in my diary. Actually, I didn't write anything in my diary or elsewhere: I've never kept a diary. Never mind – I did envy the person I'm writing about. A pianist, my coeval, my colleague, my friend to some extent. First I heard him from behind a door which was closed: only the members of the jury were admitted to the balcony where they shaped our destiny. An entrance exam, the Moscow Conservatoire.

I didn't find his performance exceptional, but I already envied him because many people said he was a genius. At that point time stopped for some time – for years, to be exact. They continued to say he was a pianist of genius for years and years. Whenever he played, a crowd of about 15,000 attended the concert. You shouldn't believe everything I say: I do tend to exaggerate. My present mood does. Be that as it may, I was green with envy.

Once I gave a superb performance, aping Rachmaninoff to the best of my abilities: I thought he was the best pianist ever. A few days later, my rival played Liszt's *Sonata in B Minor* in the hall where I had heard him for the first time. Our mutual friend phoned me to say the performance had been wonderful. 'My performance was also wonderful,' I said.

‘Your performance pales in comparison with his, I can assure you.’

‘For years you’ve been dragging my name through the mire.’

‘I’ve done nothing of the sort. And today I’m just saying his performance was much better than yours.’

Then I won an international competition and he lost one; at least he didn’t get the first prize. I won a second international competition; he failed for the second time. His whole career was doomed to failure right from the start, but he didn’t know it; nor did his admirers. They said competitions didn’t count; what’s more, they were useless and even detrimental to the arts. I had a friend who died 19 years ago. His sister said to him, ‘Why do you run down the best pianist in the world? All right, he lost two international competitions. So what? You may win two international competitions and remain a second-rater.’

In those days, she called me a second-rater, but time had something in store for her, for all of us. Time had to cover the distance between a second-rate pianist and a first-rate one. For once, time wasn’t flying; it walked or crawled. And the first-rate pianist wasn’t within walking distance, let alone crawling distance. To cut a long story short, last year my rival underwent an operation on a tumour in his left lung. He had stopped playing concerts well before the operation.

Why should I cut a long story short? Time was rather long, otherwise my rival wouldn’t have reached the age of 65. At the age of 50 he lost yet another competition. In Moscow there’s a competition the rules of which are generous to a fault: they permit old men and women to appear on stage. In other words, the upper age limit is death.

He played well in the first round and was acclaimed by those fans of his who weren’t dead by that time. Nor had they forgotten him: to them the past was the present. Their idol was still a pianist of genius, a highly promising young musician. Another friend of mine phoned me to say the performance was wonderful. Did he wish to outwit time? They all disregard time; their flats are littered with discarded years. No longer was he either young or promising.

The way he played in the second round was his undoing. After much soul-searching he withdrew from the competition: anyway he wouldn’t have played in the final round. ‘Pianist number one was forced to withdraw from the competition due to injury,’ wrote one of his admirers, a journalist. What injury, may I ask? We aren’t dealing with a tennis match, are we?

Five years ago I met him in Nagoya where he teaches young boys to play the piano. At the hotel I drank a bottle of champagne on the 20th floor, on the so-called business floor

where you can drink and eat to your heart's content. A lot of petits fours, champagne and wine galore. He came to the hotel; my late friend's sister accompanied him. We went to a Japanese restaurant. A sumptuous meal, a lot of sake. I was drunk as a lord. The next day I was supposed to play an all-Beethoven programme. A matinee. 'You won't be able to play if you drink too much,' said my late friend's sister. By way of an answer I stumbled and fell down.

I played well. She said after the recital, 'No amount of alcohol can destroy a maestro.' Time has done its job. It wasn't too late.

2

In 1972, I won the Queen Elisabeth Competition; I never played as badly as I did after winning the first prize in Brussels. For two years at least I played so badly no manager wished to take me on. They still don't take me on; and yet I play better and better.

In 1982, my first novel was published at last and some connoisseurs said I was a genius. How many? One person is enough, as many artists write and say. I don't say anything of the kind, but after this so-called *succès d'estime* I wrote so badly – for five years at least – that I was reluctant to publish anything, not even what I regarded as my masterpieces. What I need is an obstacle course. 'What doesn't destroy me strengthens my spirit and body,' said Nietzsche. He said *something* to this effect.

Famous writers publish *anything* because they can afford it, their books being money-makers. In your teenage years, you should carve a niche for yourself – as a pianist, as a writer – and hundreds of people will flock to concert halls and to shelves cluttered with your books. Too late.

My computer is brimful of my works and I send them to some of my friends as if hoping to elicit a response from them. 'Have you managed to elicit a response from them yet?' I ask myself after a while and shake my head despondently. Why don't they answer? They acknowledge receipt of my emails and vanish into thin air. And if they do turn up somewhere – in the restaurant to which I invite them – they don't speak about my works.

The famous violinist writes a new book and his publisher writes an introductory note. 'G. K. is not only a virtuoso of the bow. He is also a virtuoso of the pen.' I sent my latest book to the same publisher. Six months later I rang him up. 'Haven't read it yet. I'm absolutely snowed under with work at the moment.' Two months later, he rang me up to say he liked the book. 'My assistant will read it too,' he said. The assistant didn't like the book and the publisher vanished into thin air. A virtuoso, an illusionist.

Dostoevsky used to complain about his publisher who had the knack of annoying him right in the middle of yet another gambling bout. ‘Russian readers are waiting for your new novel.’ ‘Why does he pester me?’ wondered Dostoevsky.

I often quote Mussorgsky’s last words: ‘All is over. How unfortunate I am!’ And yet he *was* admired by his friends and even by those who didn’t know him personally. He wrote a few songs and whenever a new song was finished he sent a letter to a colleague, saying, ‘This morning I finished a new song.’ And two hours later his flat was overcrowded with the curious. ‘All is over. How unfortunate I am!’ My last words?

‘The whole town came out to celebrate his return from the United States.’ Another superstar, another jubilee. Whenever I watch such jubilees on TV, I say to myself and to *them*, ‘Basking in your moment of glory? Humanity will forget you in 20 years. But they’ll study my brain in the 24th century. The last laugh, you know.’

Whenever I venture outdoors, I see many blue plaques. Next month I’ll move to Belgium: three months ago, I bought a house near Brussels. I said to myself, ‘My future museum.’ And what about the Moscow skyscraper where I lived for 21 years? There are many blue plaques on its walls.

3

Recently I played a recital in Japan. In the second part there was Liszt’s *Sonata in B Minor* – a real tear jerker, in my opinion. After the recital a critic said he was on the brink of tears, but he didn’t cry for some reason. I think my performance might have elicited a more emotional response on the part of the audience which was rather lukewarm that night, judging from the applause. (Anyway I couldn’t have seen their tears.) I was offended, strange as it may seem. I went to Japan for one concert only and I pulled out all the stops, hoping they might appreciate my concept of the *Sonata*. Actually I don’t play for the sake of the audience’s reaction. I don’t really care whether I make my exit from the stage to rapturous applause or in a sort of envelope created by semi-silence. They applauded of course—half-heartedly. Where was the other half of their heart, I wonder? A friend of mine told me backstage, ‘You should have smiled. Why do you never smile on the stage?’

On my way back, on the plane, I drank a few glasses of champagne in order to fall asleep: I hadn’t slept well the night before. A stewardess poured the champagne into my glass—rather reluctantly, I must say. I couldn’t hear the champagne fizz as she poured it into my glass, but that’s not the point. What counts is *remplissage*, the way they *fill* your glass. After a while she would fill only a half of it. Not once did she say, ‘Would you like me to

pour you some more champagne?’ Then another stewardess turned up and said, ‘You’ve drunk enough. You should cool down. I’ll bring you some water.’ And she brought me some cold Japanese water. What did *I* say? I said, ‘O.K.’ I ought to have said, ‘I’m your customer. I paid more than 3,000 euros for this trip and I’m entitled to drink as much as I want. I always fly business class. Or first class. Your champagne is bad, so are the other wines on your wine list. You must be grateful that I’m willing to turn a blind eye to the fact, otherwise I wouldn’t have drunk anything during the flight. Your water is bad too, by the way. Your company’s bad, you’re bad. No point in trying to find out who’s bad on this flight. So why are you picking on me?’

I said nothing of the kind. I said ‘O.K.’ instead as if I’d been ashamed of myself, of my binge drinking. Why? Why? Why? I asked myself. Attitudes seem to be changing as a result of recent highly publicised cases of sexual harassment, but I didn’t harass anybody, either sexually or otherwise. Anyway the law can now protect people from harassment. I remained within the law throughout the flight. There are laws against drinking in the street; I wasn’t drinking in the street. I was drinking in the aircraft flying from Tokyo to Paris. I was drinking champagne because I sincerely hoped I’d fall asleep more easily with a huge amount of alcohol in my veins, in my bowels. All right, I was mistaken: I wouldn’t have fallen asleep even if I’d drunk three bottles of bad champagne. Must a stewardess be rude to a passenger who can’t fall asleep?

I took offence instead of flying into a rage. I’m not extremely irritable: I don’t fly off the handle at the slightest thing. But this time I ought to have flown off the handle. I didn’t. Another slice of life. I wish our flight could be on what they call ‘reality TV’. There are other programmes watched by the multitude. They feature husbands and wives, friends and girlfriends. A lot of wounds – a wounded pride among them. A gang of loud-mouthed yobs ridiculed a badly wounded soldier for losing three limbs in a bomb blast. The soldier trod on a metal plate bomb while clearing mines in Afghanistan. His mother said, ‘I thought it would be nice to get my son some fresh air. It can get awfully stuffy in the hospital. We were walking around the block when I saw five men sniggering. As we got near, one of them approached us and asked: “Haven’t you forgotten something? Oh yeah – your legs.” I didn’t know what to do and just choked back the tears before pushing my son away. I could hear them laughing.’ An appalling slice of life. Do I belong to the same species? That’s the question I ask myself whenever I come across such a piece of news. Do I belong to the same species? Do I have anything in common with those individuals? Human anatomy; the anatomy of the horse. It’s better to be a horse, as Swift pointed out. It’s better to be a cat.

Why am I not one of my cats? They don't taunt heroes, do they? What's more, such a thing took place in England – in England, of all places.

Another mother's complaint. 'I don't know if my child was abused or not. The sex offender was so popular with parents and children. Friendly, lovely, absolutely lovely. If I see anyone in town that remotely resembles her, I feel sick. I have to walk in the opposite direction. I can't cope with the image of her face. Every image is of her smiling. I want to skin her and roll her in salt. I feel so frustrated that I can't get to her.'

You don't really have to tell a story to amuse the audience and television viewers. The second mother didn't say *how* her child was abused or spared. She just said she wished to skin the offender and roll her in salt. That's how they often talk on television and people listen to them, although no story is being told. 'The worst bit is knowing that I used to pick up my son and daughter from her and she would come out smiling, laughing and having a joke.' Another mother's complaint. Well, let me complain in my turn. I already told the story about how the stewardess abused me. It was a story of psychological harassment. Actually she was rather nice-looking. What's more, she'd carved a niche for herself as a professional stewardess. She knew how to smile, for instance. How are they supposed to react if a customer makes advances to them? A Russian stewardess I met on the Moscow-Tokyo flight took my phone number and slipped it into her décolletage. During the whole flight I had the feeling I'd been invited to a ball. I'd never have given my phone number to the Japanese stewardess, needless to say. Not even when I found her rather nice-looking – at the beginning of the flight. After the lesson she'd given me I found her ugly. I ought to have told her I belonged to another species. I think she felt it instinctively – in the manner of a dog who barks at an extraterrestrial tourist. I wish she'd recoiled in horror and brought me some champagne instead of saying to herself, 'That'll teach him to drink champagne on our flights.'

She didn't humiliate me in front of my colleagues. And the only passenger who might have overheard our conversation was half asleep. Actually there was no conversation to speak of: I just said, 'O.K.,' which didn't amount to a dignified reply. That's why I felt so humiliated, I suppose. I was behaving like a schoolboy caught red-handed. I must have looked guilty too. Fortunately, I didn't tell her, 'Please, don't make me feel guilty.' That would have been even worse than 'O.K.' Of course I could have made it sound like an ironic comment. 'Don't make me feel guilty – I'm not a schoolboy after all. I wish I was a schoolboy, frankly speaking. But I'm an old man – can't you see? And you're not supposed

to give lessons to old people, especially if they're your customers. So you're barking up the wrong tree.'

I refused to eat as she showed me the menu. Was it lunch or dinner? No more meals for me, not on your flight. I didn't say anything to this effect. I just said, 'No.' Was it enough? Just 'No', not even 'No thank you'. Half an hour later I was half asleep. Again she came and asked me if I wanted to have a meal. (Did she say, 'You should always wash your hands before meals'?) Again I said, 'No.' Like Michael Jackson, I'm split into two individuals. Dr Jekyll was yearning for a smile and 'yes'. But Mr Hyde said, 'No.' Dorian Gray was ready to give up the fight, but his portrait was made of sterner stuff and wanted me to carry on. I did. On leaving the plane I heard 'Bye-bye'. My answer? A stern look, nothing else. No 'bye-bye, thank you'. Did I give her a lesson too? 'The importance of good manners should have been drummed into you at an early age.' Was she afraid I might complain to the company about her conduct?

What would she have said, had I flown first class? What would she have done, had I been famous? Wreathed in smiles, she would have brought me another bottle of champagne. Two bottles.

THE SCEPTIC SPEAKS UP

1

'Oh that way madness lies.' Does it? I'm just writing a letter to young pianists and writers. Don't pay attention to morons, to journalists who 'add to kitsch an intellectual dimension,' as Harold Rosenberg put it back in the Fifties. We have been living with mass culture for 60 years. Every bestseller, however ghastly and appalling, is intellectually justified. 'Manufacturers need large sales to justify offering a big variety in export markets,' say publishers and managers. How to survive in the midst of kitsch? You morons! You morons!

Concert tours in Japan – the only country where I play every year. Wasting my time? Perhaps. But what would I do without these concerts? I would write another book. Here is the opening sentence, 'Friendless and jobless, he wondered how he would survive the year ahead.' I'd better write emails instead. I do write emails and send them to Tokyo. And I read the emails I receive from Tokyo.

Dear Valery,

I hope this email finds you well.

Please confirm that you could agree to the concertos with Yomiuri Nippon Symphony Orchestra in 2014 – as I said before, we have already had the official agreement which is mentioned your Mozart piano concertos no.9 and no.27 on the same day for twice. I am afraid that you could not cancel the concerts any more because they have already started giving publicity to your concertos. Actually, some materials for your promotion has been printed out already! Seriously, it is very important to say that our agency and you will be unable to perform with the Yomiuri in the future if you could not make it because it is obvious that reliability would be essential. Therefore, it would be impossible to cancel them. I hope you could understand this situation.

With warmest regards,

Yoshiyuki

My manager has only a smattering of English and whenever he writes emails *himself* I'm hard put to catch his meaning. This time the situation called for prompt action and an intelligible, crystal-clear reply. He must have written the text in Japanese, trusting his intimate friend's knowledge of the language used by Shakespeare to convey madness, dead ends, despair.

Dear Yoshiyuki,

I didn't say I wished to cancel Mozart's concerti. But hopefully both you and the orchestra understand that this programme is rather exceptional. So-called famous artists play only one concerto and get four times more money than I do. Besides, the orchestra ignored my suggestions (Beethoven, Schumann), thinking that an 'ordinary' artist should be thankful for the mere fact of being invited by a great orchestra. And famous artists always play what they feel like playing. Is it fair?

As to my recitals, I like logical, harmonious programmes and cannot accept whatever organizers want to impose on me. Bach is my favourite composer, but I don't play him well. At least I'm not satisfied with my interpretations of his music. For instance, I don't like my CDs featuring his preludes and fugues. So I don't really understand why concert organisers agree to invite me only if I play Bach. Anyway, I think I'm entitled to choose my own programmes. Of course beggars can't be choosers – a nice expression, isn't it? – and so I have no alternative but to accept any caprice for fear of losing concerts. And, unlike famous artists, I can't afford to cancel anything, even if I'm frightfully underpaid.

Of course all this is not your fault and I complain only because you're my manager and friend. And I know that you do your best to find as many concerts as possible. Let us tackle all our problems without getting unduly worried.

Kindest regards,

The Crucified

Of course I typed 'Valery' instead of 'Christ': no one is eager to work with a madman except psychoanalysts and masochists. My manager is neither.

How to work with managers? How to manage them, Yoshiyuki? Don't we rub each other up the wrong way? My former Japanese manager used to invite me to top restaurants. Once I invited him to my house and opened a bottle of Palmer 28. After that he virtually stopped taking care of my career. If you open good bottles in your manager's presence, he thinks you need him badly. 'If it weren't for my efficiency and patience,' he says to himself and others, 'he wouldn't play anywhere, not even in the suburbs of Moscow.' You'd better send him wrathful emails. And what if he gets huffy with you?

You'd better stick to the Middle Way advocated by Aristotle and Buddhists. First you voice your grievances and then type out, 'You're my best friend.' And he sends you the following email:

Dear Valery,

Hello!

Thank you very much for your message with your honest feelings and I understand what you think. Sorry for the late reply because I have read it many times. Anyway, I am pleased that you could accept officially Mozart piano concertos both no.9 'Jeunehomme' and no.27, which will be performed at Suntory Hall and Tokyo Metropolitan Theatre. I know what you think regarding the programme, but could you please consider it positively? I think it would be a great opportunity for your Japanese fans and audiences who are interested in your performance.

Also, I have to mention regarding a current situation of Japanese orchestras - definitely, they do not have enough money to make concerts. That is the serious issue. In addition, recent years in Japan, both Japanese orchestras and concert hall organisers tend to make/plan concerts by themselves. This is because it has a greatly reduced number of classical music audiences in Japan. Therefore, unfortunately, you could see what is happening in the Japanese market though the YNSO and Toppan Hall's case. That is the

point. I completely agree with what you think. In terms of arts market, I would not think this is the best solution.

Nowadays, there are too many pianists. Don't you think? Also, there are too many famous pianists. Don't you think? That is a big problem because orchestras, organisers and manager in rural areas have chances to choose artists by themselves. Also, classical music marketing in the world including Japan (also big name of recording companies) seems to go to a strange direction. I do not understand why they do not admire your music, though A., Y. W., H. G., P., Z., K. and Y. L. are acknowledged as the super star..

I am very worried that you might be handled with kid gloves in Japan – frankly, you are very nice person and I do like you especially the short stories. I have felt you are a genius, but you might be something familiar to me. Thus, I would like to discuss everything heart to heart. Consequently, to be honest with you, let us talk about your concerts in June 2015.

A programme: I understand you would not play Schumann Symphonic Etudes anymore. Is this your final decision?

You might be angry, but how many your recitals I could make is actually depending your A programme. I know you would be happy if I could make many recitals. Of course, I could answer your expectation. Hence, I would like to discuss with you again depending on your proposal programme. Or, would it be impossible to play Appassionata or Hammerklavier Sonata which are in your magnificent short story, TOWERING PASSIONS. I am very curious!!!

B programme: Are you really sure that you would not play Bach pieces at Toppan Hall? If impossible, I am sure that your recital at Toppan Hall would be canceled regrettably. Please kindly let me know what you think and your new alternative programme. I will tell the Toppan regarding your new one.

Anyway, I really would like to talk to you frankly and heart to heart. During the Japan tour, we did share many things as you know. I would love to do it more. As you said, I always do my best for you to make your concerts as many as possible. Of course, I am currently working for the 2014, but at the same time, I have to prepare for the 2015. I love a word, TOO LATE, but it is not a good for planning of your concerts in Japan.

As your agent and friend,

Yoshiyuki

Another pair of pitying hands.

2

‘The Sceptics – the only honourable type among the ever-so multiply ambiguous tribe of the philosophers!’ (*Ecce Homo*) Real knowledge of things is out of the question. Nothing is possible, nothing at all.

3

The French love many bad writers whose prose corresponds to their notion of ‘good style in itself’. All these Juliens and G. G. When the Russians say ‘G’, they mean *govno* – shit. Each of these writers is a complete shit. And their works? A load of shit. ‘Every style is good that really communicates an inner state, that makes no mistake with signs, with the tempo of signs, with gestures – all laws governing the rhetorical period are an art of gesture. Here my instinct is infallible. – Good style *in itself* – pure folly, mere “idealism” like, for instance, the “beautiful *in itself*”, like the “good *in itself*”, like the “thing *in itself*”’...(*Ecce Homo*) Will they ever understand *my* style, my angles of vision and perspectives?

4

When asked about a writer he wasn’t fond of, Borges used to reply, ‘I’m not worthy of him.’ I am worthy of Proust and Musil. I think that today uncommon readers should search for the lost time, its labyrinth and glory, instead of wasting their time on writers without qualities. I’ll go on.

5

They understand Proust and Musil, don’t they? Don’t they worship them? Well, I am Proust. I dare say that I am Musil too. And Nietzsche. Doesn’t he say, ‘I am Prado; I am also father Prado. I dare say that I am Lesseps too.’? Who are *they*? Not Nietzsche, I suppose. Prado was tried for murder in 1888. Lesseps built the Suez Canal. What do they have in common? Nietzsche?

6

Doesn’t he say, ‘One must pay dearly for immortality: one has to die several times while still alive’?

Dear O.,

Thank you for your e-mail.

K. L. wrote me – he intends to make an invitation for Valery that will be valid from 20th October.

As for the itinerary. K. L. told me, that the travel expenses has already included into Valery's fee (as was agreed between Valery and K.). Therefore we have two ways:

Philharmonic could provide the tickets for Valery in route: Brussels-St-Petersburg - Moscow . The way from Moscow to Brussels Valery takes care by himself. Another option: Philharmonic purchases the tickets in route: Brussels-St-Petersburg -Moscow-Brussels and Valery reimburses half of the cost of the travel expenses. Would you be so kind to agree with Valery the more suitable way for him and let me know.

Concerning the hotel accommodation for Valery. Philharmonic provides the accommodation at the Hotel per three nights (we suppose from 30th October - till 2th November). If Valery would like to come one day before (on 29th October) - we could reserve the room at the Hotel. This extra day he will pay for his own expenses.

Very much looking forward to hearing from you.

Best wishes,

E.

O. My so-called secretary. Here is *my* answer:

Dear E.,

Thank you for your email. The Philharmonic always supplies me with tickets and I don't see why I should buy anything for the round trip Brussels-St Petersburg // Moscow-Brussels. The cost of such a ticket, with the exception of the train ticket St. Petersburg-Moscow I'll have to take care of, is exactly the same as that of the return ticket Brussels-St. Petersburg-Brussels. As for the hotel, please reserve a nice room, not like the one I had last time.

Alas, I'm used to being treated with disrespect. Yet any young Chinese pianist is entitled to a first-class ticket and a royal suite. And those teenagers often travel with their mothers and distant cousins.

You shouldn't push the disrespect I have to put up with in Russia to the limit. I hope you'll understand my point of view.

Kindest regards

Valery Aleff

7

Managers and their menagerie. They don't take me on – so much the better. Why waste my time on concerts? Why sit at the piano every day? Six hours, seven hours. Performing artists. Are they Prousts, Musils and Nietzsches? Do they deserve eternity? Hardly. Basking in their moments of glory. Basking in reflected glory. G. G. G. Not A., not P. – G. G. G.

8

Dear Yoshiyuki,

If some day I'm told, 'You're a famous pianist,' I'll commit suicide without the slightest hesitation. What? Valery Aleff, a *mere pianist*? A *mere performer*? A *mere entertainer*? Do you know that Alma Mahler said something along these lines when asked if she was about to marry Bruno Walter? 'Don't insult my taste. A mere entertainer.' Bruno Walter, an *entertainer*? A *real superstar*, a *superman* in comparison with your H. G., A., K., and so on and so forth. G! G! G! Being famous in the world where these Gs are famous can hardly be the goal of a man who wants to be studied, analysed and worshipped in the 25th century. Gs are basking in their moments of glory. Such moments are *not* my cup of tea. Only Faustian moments are – the Moment. *Eternity!*

9

Oh, those Greeks! They knew how to live. What is required for that is to stop courageously at the surface, the fold, the skin, to adore appearance, to believe in forms, tones, words, in the whole Olympus of appearance.' The surface, the fold, the skin. Tendons and nerves. Not intestines. Not to plumb the depths. Oh that way madness lies. Like those Greeks! Like those Japanese! The Middle Way! *In between*. Those Greeks were superficial – *out of profundity*. And is not this precisely what we are again coming back to, we daredevils of the spirit who have climbed the highest and most dangerous peak of present thought and looked around from up there – we who have looked down from there? Are we not, precisely in this respect, Greeks? And Japanese? Adorers of forms, of tones, of words? And therefore – *artists*?

Gidon, letters. Should be published – it might serve my cause. Virtuoso of the quill.

Not paying too much attention to Soviet life. Not discussing it. (Liubimov)

Read the work before. Why didn't feel attuned to it? I always suffered. Now – too much.

Not more than 20 pages. Not worth it.

Gracq as danger. Absolute style, (Ecce Homo).

