VALERY ALEFF

PREDESTINATION

PREDESTINATION I

NOTES ON TIME

PART ONE

Time as a subject matter may have come from the outside, falling from the sky, emerging from the earth. (As if no one had ever written about time and space.) Or it may have emerged from the *sea*, blue with cold. In this case I'll have to put a heavy winter coat on it. Time will spend a lot of time in my room so I'll ask it, 'Are you warm enough or do you want the fire on?' Actually I've no idea if it's better to deal with a warm or a cold time. Of course I could put it in one of my pockets to keep it warm. But *should* I keep it warm? Perhaps I'd better consume it as a cold drink; perhaps I should put it in the fridge to chill. I don't want it to become eternity, though.

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A warm time may start living on its own, leaving me behind, leaving me in the lurch. I need time to stay and help me, for I don't know what to do without it. I could drink a cold time – endlessly, blissfully. What would I do with a hot time? Let's not speak about meals and drinks in this connexion; or even about sex. All this is beside the point. But where's the point? That's where I'd like to while away the hours between day and night – the point where all times meet and salute each other. I'll join them to enjoy their company. Another question: Do I need one time or many times? I'm afraid time has sidetracked me into speaking about other times, other needs. One time is enough, quite enough.

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I'm speaking about a point – the point, to put it bluntly – because I don't want it to become a line or a square. Nor would I tolerate any movement: there's no going back or forward. No memories, no hopes. I'm not looking for the *temps perdu* because I'm loath to lose anything. It's even worse to admit you've lost something. Everything is in my room, in my pockets, in my brain. Contrary to Proust, I don't search for the past which may remain where it is – in the past, somewhere beyond my walls. If I do recall it, I'm under the impression that the years I've lived on this Earth – or on another earth for that matter – are on my bed, on my walls. But they're not hanging on my walls, like photographs; they're not photographs.

When I touch upon the subject of the 'point', I may mean a 'freezing point' – time becoming ice. But the time I speak about in this connexion is the present, not the past. It may be the future, for all I know; at least I wouldn't mind the future becoming ice. A thick sheet of ice has already formed over the future, in my opinion. Soon the entire future may turn into an ice cube. Am I speaking about the future in the present? When I get a build-up of ice in my freezer, I know it's time to defrost it. But I don't defrost it: I adore ice. So I won't defrost the future either. The past, on the other hand, is a river flowing through my house. And last year's water is quite different now.

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I'm watching a porn film. I'll skip many episodes because I like bodies, not what they may do in the heat of the moment. I wonder what happens to the episodes I systematically exclude from my present. Are they in the past, in the future? I won't lend my DVDs to anybody; and I've never watched these episodes in spite of their sex appeal. (Many people watch them day and night.) So they exist beyond my walls, in other times, on other DVDs: the ones I've bought since last winter are not the only copies on the market.

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Neither the past nor the future is on my agenda which is nothing but a blank sheet of paper. Should I write anything on it? No appointments, no disappointments. Every moment is a drop of water coming from nowhere, getting nowhere. Perhaps this drop may be found in the river of the past, but I'm reluctant to look for a drop of water in a river. There's a drop of water on my writing desk; the past and the future are located within this drop shimmering in the moonlight.

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The best man is like water.
Water is good; it benefits all things and does not compete with them.
It dwells in lowly places that all disdain.

Lao Tzu often comes in handy.

I don't mind becoming water, provided I always stay in the same place instead of flowing into the Pacific. I wish I could play the part of the Pacific in my room where there's enough room for several oceans, several balls of burning gas that we call the stars. But I wouldn't like to burn because fire and water are incompatible. Burning with desire is no longer my cup of tea. Actually, I wouldn't mind becoming a cup of tea I might drink whenever I'm thirsty. Is that what they call a 'double personality'? Are the Pacific and a cup of tea incompatible?

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The best man is like water – no doubt about that. One man aspires to become a river in order to follow the course of time without hindrance. Another man is just a drop of water which may be looked at under the microscope. Both benefit all things because they don't compete with them. They leave everybody and everything alone, in peace; and you need peace and quiet to live to the ripe old age of ninety-seven. I don't know whether my house is situated in one of the lowly places that all disdain and shun, but that is of no importance. You may live on a mountain top without meddling in other people's affairs. Actually there are such things as mountain lakes. 'Snow-covered peaks form a back-drop to beautiful mountain lakes,' as I wrote in my diary. I must have travelled a lot in days of yore. Now the traveller is at home. Did I leave a note saying 'Gone out. Back soon' on the day of my departure? Not

the faintest idea. I probably left on the day of my birth; at least I had no wish to stay where I was. Do I regret it? Hardly. The house where I was born underwent a metamorphosis almost sixty years ago: it was first razed to the ground and then replaced by a building I saw only once. And I had no right to live in that building. Anyway it wouldn't have been the same ocean, the same lake.

I might have been a river in my childhood, in my youth. What kind of river? What does it matter? I have no intention of restoring those days, those times. They're gone and I'm gone with them – my former self. Now I've no wish to go anywhere so I can't be gone; I'll stay forever where I am. And I am here; I am here or there. It doesn't matter where I am, provided I don't go anywhere. I don't even want to compete with my former self. There are people who are bent on staying cheerful despite everything. Such a man looks young for his age. And if you compliment him on his looks, he says, 'Those whom the gods love die young.' He thinks that God still loves him despite his numerous sins. At least he is guilty of the sin of neglect. As one of my friends put it, 'I may have committed several sins, but greed wasn't among them.' I used to be greedy for power, for success; I compete no longer. A lake doesn't compete with those who swim in it. They may drown, though.

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Act without action.
Do without ado.
Taste without tasting.

When asked to taste a wine, I look at its colour, rolling it along the inner side of the glass; I swirl it, smell it. I slowly take a sip, roll the wine over my palate as if rinsing the mouth. In other words, I endeavour to find out what flavour it has got. And if I refuse to taste it, my friends say, 'How do you know you don't like it if you won't even taste it?'

'Did I say I didn't like it? I just don't want to taste it.'

'Do you want to drink it?' they ask.

'I'll drink it without enjoying its flavour.'

'You shouldn't drink wine, then,' they reply. 'Why not drink vodka instead?'

'I don't like vodka,' I say.

'Do you like water?' they ask.

'Yes, I like water. I like water very much.'

So I drink water. I don't look at its colour, rolling it along the inner side of the glass: water is colourless. I neither swirl nor smell it. I don't roll it over my palate, but occasionally I may use water to rinse the taste of a wine out of my mouth.

Alas, even now my mood swings between elation and despair. And water is neither elated nor desperate; water is amiable. Water looks like an amiable old man, provided it doesn't move.

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Do I act without action when I write what I'm writing? Whatever one writes, one acts, I suppose. I might erase what I've already written, becoming a virus instead of a lake. A lake would also erase my hard disk if I threw my computer in it. So I'd better remain what I am: my hard disk will perish anyway.

Actually the Chinese used bonfires to destroy their books; they wanted them to join the void from which they had come. Both the books and the Chinese came from the same void. Before Einstein, space was regarded as a formless void, but the Europeans still look at this void from afar. Yet this void is crammed with Chinese books.

What about my other activities? I sleep and wake up to turn over a new leaf. The point is I'd better not turn anything, not even the pages of the book I was reading yesterday. The book is still on my writing desk, but I won't read it any more because there's no point in reading it. I read about particles, about their collisions that modify their positions and speed. I'm also a particle, in a way: I used to collide with many people. As a result of these manoeuvres, our speed and positions were changing all the time. Sometimes I ran or flew in a plane, in a helicopter; sometimes I walked or crawled across the floor of my room. I thought I was crawling to safety; I was mistaken. During my flights I often heard this sentence: 'For your comfort and safety, we recommend you keep your seat belt loosely fastened during the flight.' I felt neither comfortable nor safe. Yet I'm alive, but I no longer feel like crawling; nor do I want to modify my position. I haven't yet found my position on the map I've got in my library.

The particles I read about eventually reach a sort of safe haven where there are no more collisions. As a matter of fact, they may occasionally collide with other particles – some particles always come out of the blue – but nothing can modify their positions and speed. There's no more speed to speak of. They're just hanging somewhere, not on a hook, not on the gallows. Some of them hang from the trees; others hang around some neck or other, like a necklace. Where am I hanging, I wonder? I wouldn't mind hanging around someone's neck – just for the heck of it. But wouldn't I collide with the person in question?

Time has stopped because its particles and waves do not collide any more. Nor do they dance: there are no wedding ceremonies around. They sway lazily in the soft breeze without changing either their speeds or their positions. Is *that* the ultimate dance of time? Time looks like a tree nowadays, as far as I am concerned. Perhaps I'm hanging down from this tree.

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I can't help reading about this and that. I know that this and that are interchangeable. The terms 'drinking problem' and 'alcohol abuse' are often interchangeable. What counts, however, is the fact itself: you're drunk as a lord or as a skunk. Once upon a time, Stravinsky was interviewed on a boat.

When asked about how he felt, he said, ‘I’m not seasick. I’m sea-drunk. I’m in a different league from you.’ Is time a boat on which you can get either seasick or sea-drunk or both?

Whenever you drink alcoholic beverages, you feel time more acutely because you don’t have to do anything. You can devote your body and soul to time which goes by or penetrates your brain like a slow bullet. First you feel its breath on your neck; then you feel it trickling down your back. Eventually you feel it crossing your brain. And then you fall asleep and feel no more.

There’s a story about a man who drank a bottle of champagne whenever he had to answer too many letters. ‘Does champagne help you to answer these letters?’ asked somebody.

‘No. But I no longer care whether I answer them or not.’

What would have happened had he drunk *three* bottles of champagne? Would he have cared about time, about life? Should we forget time altogether?

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How *can* you forget time? You just say to yourself, ‘There’s no time. Today’s today and there was no yesterday. Nor will there be tomorrow or the day after tomorrow. I’m just lying in my bed. You think that time will put me to sleep when the time comes. So you think time must move in order to come in due course and touch my body, making me fall asleep without further ado. And what if I take a sleeping pill?’

I don’t take sleeping pills every day because I’m afraid my memory may become slack. What do I need my memory for? Never mind. When I do take a sleeping pill, I wait until its action puts my body to sleep. Sometimes it acts without action and I spend another sleepless night. But what happens while I wait for it to conquer my body? Does time participate in the process? Does it try to conquer my body as well? Hasn’t it conquered my body already? Am I not a slave to time? At least I'm tired of being treated like a slave. If time could speak, it would tell me, ‘The slaves were kept in bondage until their death.’ Luckily for me, time doesn’t speak. Or does it? Don’t you ever ask the question, ‘What time is it?’ Don’t people answer you on these occasions? Doesn’t time itself answer you? And even if you don’t ask this question, time goes on speaking for itself.

What does it say to itself? ‘This man has taken a sleeping pill. Well and good. I’ll go for a walk and then come back to perform a simple task – his sleep is activated by the lightest pressure. I’d better walk a bit quicker – it’s going to take forever if I go at this pace. In this case, he’ll never fall asleep. What do I care about his sleep? I’ll travel around the world. I like travelling in the autumn when there are fewer tourists who need my benevolence. Some of them sunbathe in the morning when the sun isn’t so hot; others sunbathe in the morning *and* in the afternoon when the sun is hot. All of them need time to sunbathe and swim. Some of them need time to play cards and dance. Some of them make love. Some women say to their husbands and lovers, “Don't rush – take as long as you like.” I’m supposed to chaperone them all the time.’

But time never says to itself, ‘It's quicker to travel across country and avoid the major roads altogether.’ Time never gets stuck in a traffic jam. I wonder if time travels at all. Once upon a time, it spread very rapidly across the universe: seeds, pollen and time are spread by the wind. Seeds and pollen continue to travel; time does not. It must travel inside itself, so to speak. You can say about time, ‘The poor thing is kept in a small cage without room to move.’ From time’s point of view, the universe is just a small cage because its body cannot move in it. But something must move *inside* the body of time, otherwise the universe would already have shuddered to a halt. What is it? A gene, a virus?

Time can be likened to a snake lying absolutely motionless for hours as it digests its meal. It is said that everything happens in the bowels of time. When taken literally, this statement reminds us of the long tube that carries solid waste from the stomach out of the body. We are constantly ejected from time for causing trouble, I suppose. No, we are ejected from time through no fault of our own. It’s done automatically because time is automatic to some extent. Time may be likened to automatic doors which open and close as soon as we get near them. We leave a second and come into another second. We come and go all the time as if we had nothing else to do. I’ll sit here until my dying day, for I have nothing else to do. Sitting is also an action, I’m afraid.

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I recall how I waited for my father during his last operation. He was operated on and I was looking at the door behind which his body was undergoing reconstructive surgery or whatever they call it. They didn’t reconstruct anything, anyway: my father died two months later. I knew he would die in spite of the operation; I was waiting for him all the same. Time closed its doors for a while, letting no one in, no one out.

I don’t recall anything: all this is happening now, in the present. The episode I’m writing about must have unfolded differently. The doors were different, my waiting was different. I might have waited for my father’s death because I knew that the rest of his life would be full of suffering. It would have been some comfort to know he died instantly and didn’t suffer. Anyway, after months of suffering, his death was a mercy. Is that how they talk about sufferers?

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I began to study the piano at the age of six, but I didn’t like music – or the piano, for that matter. I neither liked the upright piano we had at home nor was I fond of any other piano. I waited for the end of my torture – scales, arpeggios – but the doors behind which my coevals disported themselves were hopelessly closed.

Again I must have got it wrong: I certainly adored the piano from the start, otherwise I would have given up my profession a long time ago. I’m still playing the piano and today I’m weary of it. That’s why I say I didn’t like it in my childhood. Well, let’s assume I did *not* like it. So I’ll repeat my

statement: I liked neither music nor the piano. Time is keen on repetitions: they spare it unnecessary efforts. But for numerous repetitions, it would have to come up with new ideas all the time.

Let's put it this way: I wasn't sure about music when I began to study it but it's really grown on me. Sometimes time moves in one direction instead of branching off the main route. It sets itself a series of goals to achieve by the end of the week, by the end of the month. In my case, the goal was achieved by the end of a long period – seven years, eight years. I grew fond of music at the age of fourteen, if I remember rightly. I don't remember anything.

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You must create your own past to live a hundred years instead of a few days. Perhaps I was born this morning. A beautiful sunny morning. Perhaps I should try getting up earlier in the mornings in order to live longer.

I wrote something similar a long time ago. In the Holy Qur'an there are verses where one finds oneself in Paradise, amidst the righteous. 'Every time they are fed with fruits therefrom, they say: "Why, this is what we were fed with before," for they are given things in similitude; and they have therein companions sure (and holy); and they abide therein (forever).' A strange feeling of déjà vu. Recently I listened to my recording which dates back to the early Nineties. I recognised some of my features. I kept saying to myself, 'My piano-playing is spineless, lacking structure and firmness. The Earth revolves about the axis which joins the North and South Poles. The same goes for music: it should revolve about some axis or other. It doesn't matter whether this axis joins some harmonies or motifs. It must join this and that. My playing is disjointed and hard to follow. You hear a phrase, but this phrase leads nowhere. You get stuck in the mud instead of flowing with music. This recording was made almost twenty years ago. There's a great deal of similarity between that middle-aged pianist and myself, my old self. I'm dealing with the same man; I hear the applause that used to punctuate his recitals. As if his fans were saluting him today. They're right: I play better now.

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'Allah disdains not to use the similitude of things, lowest as well as highest. Those who believe know that it is truth from their Lord; but those who reject Faith say: "What means Allah by this similitude?" By it He causes many to stray, and many He leads into the right path; but He causes not to stray, except those who forsake (the path).' I might have forsaken the path without knowing it. Perhaps I've never known the right path. There are many wrong paths and I might have followed them for years and years. And I could feel some people following me with their eyes. The elect or the reprobate? We didn't really flock together, but they followed me with their eyes. And I couldn't help following them with *my* eyes. Just another similitude. Even now someone is looking at me narrowly through half-closed eyes. This man or woman is lying on an operating table.

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At the end of the week I'll fly to Japan where I'm supposed to play some concerts. I'm playing them already; and I won't budge from where I'm sitting now. Time hasn't stopped yet; what's more, I don't want it to stop. I want it to sit down and take a few deep breaths to calm itself down. Calm down, for goodness sake. I'm just going to Japan – nothing to write home about. I've been to Japan many times and all these visits are strewn over my carpets.

But time can't sit still for long without fidgeting. Fidget, fidget little time. Sometimes I get the feeling that time is very little indeed; sometimes I begin counting times as if there were plenty of them on the horizon. They may appear in the shape of several little boats that escort a sailing ship into the harbour. The sailing ship in question is myself of course. In one time I find a small house razed to the ground. (I was five years old.) I write in my diary, 'The entire city was razed to the ground in the bombing raid – not a building was left standing.' Just another example of similitude: a lot of people have lost their childhoods.

In another time there's Helen of Troy. A friend of mine wrote to me recently, 'A Japanese violinist dreams of playing with you. Would you consider giving a concert with her in my castle?' I answered, 'I seldom play chamber music. But if she is beautiful, I'm prepared to reconsider.' He answered, 'She isn't Helen of Troy.'

When man is born, he is tender and weak.
At death, he is stiff and hard.
All things, the grass as well as trees, are tender and supple while alive.
When dead, they are withered and dried.

Lao Tzu again. He is also sitting in one of the time-boxes. Or do times look like balloons? Let Lao Tzu fly in a balloon of time. Incidentally, one of the time-balloons went bang when it landed on a bush. I wonder which time disappeared from the face of the Earth.

I'm tender and weak, stiff and hard. I touch my hand and realise it's as supple as a blade of grass. Does this mean I'm still alive? The human body is about 50% water. I'm running dry. Perhaps I have to be dry cleaned: there's no other way of removing all the moss I've gathered over 63 years. How long have I been motionless?

My eyes are withered and dry – not only because I don't feel like crying. I *should* cry a little bit: rejuvenation is on my agenda. Is that why I see only skeletons around me, on the horizon? Time is also a skeleton: its long illness has reduced it to a skeleton. Actually time is no longer in the land of the living. The discovery of the time skeleton has cast light on why it became extinct. I used carbon dating tests to authenticate the claim that the skeleton was two million years old. Only our distant ancestors knew time intimately. They lived in close communion with nature, with time and space. They didn't know anything about hours and seconds. They swam because they didn't know how to swim. They

didn't know anything; they knew everything. Then time passed away, but a few time-balloons continued to rise gently into the air. Ever since, we have being living in a timeless world which has nothing to do with eternity. It's just a fissure in the rock of time, a crack in the floorboards of eternity. This doesn't mean that there have been no men and women of genius in the history of humankind. From time to time human beings were able to inflate a magic balloon which was to become a time-balloon or an eternity-balloon: in the hands of a genius, time and eternity are interchangeable. Some of those people would prick their balloons with a pin, making them burst with a loud bang; others continued to inflate them. Their balloons were as big as the Earth, as the universe. Yet they were rising gently into the air, crossing the borders of space, of life and death.

Now there are no more balloons either in the air or on the Earth. One individual says to another, 'Just try to concentrate on hitting the ball.' And the other individual answers, 'My golf was terrible today – I just didn't strike the ball well.'

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For the Chinese, water is identical to eternity.

Daily I get emails in connection with my concerts in Japan. Nothing would happen under water: no emails, no females. Only mermaids, occasionally. No pedestrians, no sundials.

Three days ago, a week before the beginning of the tour, I asked my manager to change my schedule. They wanted me to rehearse in a one-horse town, miles from nowhere. I wrote an email to my manager, saying I'd rather stay in Tokyo where restaurants and theatres are better than elsewhere. 'Besides, I've got many friends in Tokyo,' I pointed out. I also said I was sure their decision was in no way influenced by hotel bills. I also said the president of the company was an urbane, kindly and generous man. Here is the reply I got:

Dear Maestro,

Thank you for your e-mail.
I am very glad to hear from you.

The arrangement or booking for the rehearsals were done by
Ms, T. and her manager's side, not by our company.

I have heard that the schedule of rehearsal was decided and agreed
between you and Ms. T.
I mean, I have heard that you agreed with her about the date and place
of the rehearsal long before.

I do not have any intention to ask you to have rehearsals in Fukui. We do not care about it. Even if the rehearsals are taken place in Tokyo, of course it would be OK with our company.

However---I have informed you the schedule of rehearsal on August 3rd by e-mail. (And then, after that, I wrote the schedule several times, not only one time) In the e-mail, it was written clearly not only the date of rehearsal but also the place (city) of the rehearsal. If you had an objection about the place of rehearsal, you could mention it in August. If you mentioned it in August or at least, September, Ms. T. and manager were able to change easily.

If you do not want to stay Fukui, I have to ask you to talk with Ms. T. directly.

If Ms. T. agrees the change, please let me know. I am pleased to change your schedule, of course.

Best regards,

N.
From Tokyo

Ms T. is a violinist with whom I'm supposed to play Beethoven's sonatas. I chose three sonatas spanning fifteen years of Beethoven's life: number one, number five and number ten. The first sonata, the last sonata; and the middle one.

Whenever I read my manager's emails, I get the feeling time stumbles and even falls now and then – at the end of some lines and ideas. Each mistake makes me stop for a while: my manager told me once it would be helpful if I corrected his English. I do it automatically now, although I don't tell him anything.

I sent another email to my manager. 'I know I should have thought about all this earlier. Perhaps it's not too late –' and so on. Here is his answer:

Dear Maestro,

Could you let me know how it is going the change
of your schedule, as soon as possible?
Have you been able to have contact with Ms. Toda
about the issue?

As you may know, it is a high-season of sightseeing,
holding conference and having travel. So, booking for
accommodation and transportation are almost
full booked.
So, I have to say I do not have much time for
waiting for your reply.

I forgot to write one thing in my previous e-mail,
(this would be also understandable for you) , if you
have rehearsals in Fukui, I, or someone from my company,
also will stay in Fukui with you. Needless to say, Mr. Sato will have to pay
the accommodation expense also for me (or one of my colleagues).
So, having rehearsal in Fukui is not for saving money.

And, honestly, for me, if the rehearsal would be taken place
in Tokyo, it would be also helpful for me, of course, because
I can be in my own place.

Please let me point it out again, that having rehearsal in Fukui
is not for saving expenses, and, it was not decided by our company.
If you have some misunderstanding, I have to ask you to reconsider it.

For me or for our company, either way (having rehearsal in Tokyo or Fukui)
is OK.
It depends on the discussion between you and Ms. Toda.

This time, your concerts in Japan will begin in Fukui.
So, I do not think having rehearsal in Fukui is a ridiculous idea. I
think it can be
possible.
And I guess that Ms. T. thought it may be better as a preparation
for the concert, or

it would be more comfortable for you.
For you, it may not be necessary, I mean her care is not necessary to
a maestro like you,
but, even now, I do not think it would be a ridiculous or strange idea.
I ask you not to take badly this idea.

Anyway, as I mentioned, I do not have a plenty of time for re-booking.
Please, let me know how I should do, as soon as possible.

I am looking forward to hearing from you (about the schedule) very soon.

N.
From Tokyo

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I wish I could get more emails like that, which would allow me to spend time effortlessly and with relish. I don't mind people talking, provided their words mean nothing outside their straightforward meanings. For instance, if they pronounce the word 'table', it doesn't mean I have to go to Tokyo and play concerts. Nor does it mean I have to stay at the hotel where they serve breakfast from 6 a.m. to 11 a.m. This may mean there's a table in front of me: a flat surface, usually supported by four legs, used for putting things on. There are many dishes on the table and I don't have to travel in order to relish them and time. People can say whatever they wish on condition that they won't try to push me around. The more rubbish they talk the better.

They can say, 'Steve's gone out to walk the dogs.' Well and good. But I hope Steve won't come to my place: my cat wouldn't appreciate his or rather their visit. Neither would I, as a matter of fact. I'd rather hear something along the lines of: 'My dog lay under the table, gnawing on a bone.' Let the dog lie under the table as long as possible: I'm prepared to supply it with bones.

I wouldn't mind my guest talking about the weather until he or she is blue in the face. 'The weather in the hills can change very quickly, so take suitable clothing.' I wish they would have given me this piece of advice this morning. I went for a walk on the assumption it wouldn't rain: the sky was a perfect blue – not a cloud in sight. I walked for twenty minutes or so and looked up. To cut a long story short, I got caught in torrential rain without either a raincoat or an umbrella. Why didn't they tell me, 'You'll feel cold if you don't wear a coat'? At least they might have dropped a hint: 'The water level in the lake is much higher after heavy rain.' Actually I understand hints better than convincing arguments.

Perhaps it's better to stay at home where no rain will ever threaten my pastime: my roof isn't apt to leak when it rains. Nor does my car leak oil whenever I pull myself together and resolve to go

cross-country skiing. But first I have to drive to a ski resort where a blanket of snow is lying on the ground. Before setting off on my journey, however, I must make sure my car doesn't leak oil.

I don't spend as much time in my car as I used to only five years ago. Of course time moves more naturally in a car than on a plane: landscapes and cityscapes are more attuned to the nature of time than clouds. And the time-balloons I spoke about yesterday? They're exceptions to the rule. They float across the sky in search of another time – a cross between time and eternity.

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The day before yesterday I caught my death of cold. I haven't forgotten the rain my body welcomed light-heartedly: it thought the rain was innocuous. Some drops sound innocuous but are in fact poisonous. After a while the rain stopped and I resumed my stroll in the woods. As soon as I came home I started to sneeze. My nose was tickling and I swallowed a pill which was supposed to perform the duty of aspirin. I was thinking about time in terms of my illness. I asked myself, 'Have I got a sore throat and a runny nose?' And I answered, 'No.' Yet my nose was blocked because I kept sneezing. 'Tomorrow I'll get over it,' I thought. 'I've neither a sore throat nor a runny nose. If I had a sore throat, my illness might last two weeks. I would cough all night long because runny noses are a prelude to hacking coughs. At least *my* runny nose usually gives way to a hacking cough. Often they live under the same roof for a month or two.'

When I'm ill, I talk to myself as long as I can to exorcise my illness. Time may become a professional exorcist on condition that you fill it to the brim with your talk, with your nonsense. This time, time had to exorcise itself: I wanted it to grow shorter in the course of my illness. 'As a result, my illness will grow shorter as well,' I thought. Nonsense, nonsense, nonsense. And here is another specimen of nonsense:

If you are asked the reasons of changes, please answer as
followings;
A new important project has occurred on you suddenly, and you do
not
want to miss it. And the project required you to attend the meeting
and discussion. So, you have to be in Tokyo.

Best,

N.
From Tokyo

Only three or four people are in the know. Except for them, no one knows anything about my schedule or indeed about my Japanese tour. To whom am I supposed to talk about this non-existent project?

'OK,' I'll say to journalists, 'My latest project is a film based on the life of a nineteenth-century music hall star. I came up with this idea a few days ago. I realised I had to stay in Tokyo in order to meet some influential people. I'm sure my speech will lead to a heated discussion. And this discussion will raise many important issues. The sponsors I've got in touch with are bound to say, "We'd like some time to consider before we make a decision." They'll also ask me, "Have you had any experience of managing large projects?" If I'd gone to Fukui they wouldn't have taken me seriously.'

It's better to have a discussion with time. Why is it so patient? Why doesn't it say, 'I can't bear it when someone starts ramming their views down your throat'?

'Why are you so tolerant and enduring?'

'I'm sorry but my patience is wearing thin.'

'For four years I taught at the Brussels Conservatoire. I was a good teacher, but I didn't have much patience with the slower pupils.'

'My patience is beginning to run out.'

'Dealing with the human race requires a great deal of patience.'

'You're beginning to try my patience. Yet I have the patience of a saint.'

'Why don't you leave us alone?'

'I'm not allowed to leave you alone.'

Time is a tall man with steel spectacles and a stiff, rather pompous manner.

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And what if time is a woman? What kind of woman? A Frenchwoman, a charwoman? A tall brunette, a sexy blonde waitress? Does time have a mass of blonde curls? Does time dye its hair? Does it have its hair cut? Time is on the move – no doubt about that. Supposing time doesn't budge; it's rooted to the spot. But its hair continues to grow so it must have its hair cut from time to time. The same goes for its nails. I had a dream last night. Time sat in the dentist's waiting room, nervously chewing its nails.

Time is either a charwoman or an unruly child – as far as my house goes. Today it's a charwoman: I spent all morning cleaning and tidying. If I want to carry on living here, I'm going to have to change my ways and learn to be a bit tidier. In other words, I should no longer permit myself to be an unruly child. All of a sudden the world turns into a collection of toys and I start playing with them. And no one says, 'Put that down carefully and don't fiddle with it please – it's not a toy.' Sometimes I drop time and it breaks into pieces. And yet I'm aware that time should be taken apart and reassembled piece by piece. That's what Proust does in his masterpiece. Instead I break the past and never pick up its fragments.

I pick up the fragments of the present and fit them together. The present is either a jigsaw puzzle or a crossword one; or both. I'm leaving for Japan tomorrow morning. On the one hand I feel nostalgia for Japanese restaurants, but on the other I hate leaving my bed, my writing desk and my walls. Now I pick up the pieces of the present and cuddle them; now I shovel this rubble onto some truck or other.

I should accept whatever comes and goes. I should pick up whatever pieces happen to be at my disposal: a piece of music, a piece of cake, a piece of chocolate, a piece of string, a piece of wood, a piece of paper, a piece of cheese, a piece of meat. Even a piece of grit in my eye is welcome. I should eat whatever I can eat without shovelling the pieces into my mouth. For instance, I shouldn't have another helping of ice cream out of pure greed. I put my hand on my writing desk and feel something: a piece of paper, my cat lying on a brochure. I write a poem on a piece of paper and I stroke my cat. I can hear the distant sound of fireworks exploding. The sound isn't beautiful, but I don't shut my windows. The same goes for an ugly piece of music: I don't switch the TV off. Why should I tamper with my life? So many people succumb to this temptation and wreck the gifts the Almighty showers on them. I can see at once their lives have been tampered with.

Snow has been falling steadily all day. I won't shovel it away from the garage door. No Japan this year.

During the night all the snow melted into the river.

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I'm reading a newspaper article about a man who created his past instead of restoring it. He isn't unique: many people rewrite their own history to get a huge amount of money. They manage to obliterate the past so successfully that professionals look at their photographs, examine their passports and open their own safes, hoodwinked as they are into believing they're dealing with the victims of the Nazi occupation. 'My academic career was cut short by the Nazi regime,' writes a woman. 'I spent two years in an attic,' says a man, showing the photograph of an attic in whose corner a boy is sitting crouched. The passports of these newborn victims have been forged: they don't mind growing ten years older overnight. Many of them will spend a lot of time in prison, which means that both the past and the future have been recreated.

But shouldn't they be given money in spite of this large-scale swindle? (They swindled their benefactors out of 30 million dollars.) The crimes committed by the Nazis overstep the boundaries of what might be allowed in the cruellest world. Why not overstep the boundaries of our retribution? In a way I'm also a victim of the Nazis, although neither I nor the members of my family suffered during their invasion of the Soviet Union. Had my parents stayed in Leningrad instead of moving to Moscow, they might have died of starvation. And I would have died without seeing the light of day and the darkest hour. Yet I'm a victim of the Nazi regime; and I'm not alone for once. This space-time is boundless.

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The plane was waiting for me as I came to the airport around 9 p.m. It wouldn't have waited for me had I come two hours later, but that hardly counts now: I'm already in Tokyo. I didn't see myself from a distance as I flew over two continents, but this doesn't really matter: the speed of light wasn't on our agenda. I'm not even sure such planes travel at twice the speed of sound. The flight ended by disintegrating into lots of moments and a few snoring passengers. The speed of sound allowed me to listen to them without hindrance.

Was I getting younger in comparison with the people staying on the surface of the Earth? Do I really need the speed of light to grow younger? At least I wouldn't grow older if I flew at the speed of light – at breakneck speed, in other words.

I'm at the hotel, waiting for sleep to come. But sleep doesn't come and I can't fly away without waiting for it. Perhaps I've already flown away – as far as an endless sleepless night. It's not too far, judging from my bitter experience. It's just in this hotel room of mine. Either you fly at the speed of light or you don't move at all – no middle way this time.

I'm waiting for a newspaper they're bound to bring before I go down to a café where they serve breakfast from 6 a.m. to 11 a.m. If I have my breakfast at 6 a.m., I'll be reminded of my late dinners at home. And then I'll fall asleep automatically.

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The Chinese sang hymns praising idleness. If you do nothing, you can do anything on the spur of the moment. But if you've got no moments at your disposal, you're a prisoner of whatever you do at the moment. And this moment won't let you go. 'You haven't outstayed your welcome yet,' it might say to you. A moment is more akin to eternity than an hour, let alone a year. You don't even have to long for it to stop: it has already come to a standstill. And there's no point in saying to it, 'I'll do it in my own time – just stop hassling me!' What does 'my own time' mean? What kind of time are you talking about? Do you really own any portion of it? Isn't that the other way round? Doesn't time own everyone and everything? You may own a house. You may get a real kick out of owning your own car. I wonder if time gets a kick out of owning the universe.

I can't say I enjoy my idleness. The devil finds work for idle hands, as they say. But the devil hasn't found any work for *my* idle hands, I'm sorry to say. They're really idle, these hands of mine. They press buttons from time to time, turning the light on and off. The same goes for the television – the centrepiece of my hotel room. While my hands fiddle with films, I do my best not to remember my past. It's better to remember Russian stories.

I remember a Jewish story I used to like very much. I still like it, I suppose, otherwise I wouldn't be tempted to tell it. A young Russian man comes to a rabbi and says, 'Sarah and I are going to be married.'

'Congratulations,' says the rabbi.

‘The problem is I don’t know how to behave during the wedding ceremony and especially during the wedding reception. You see, I’m not Jewish myself, and I’d hate to offend your people by infringing your rules. What are your rules, your customs?’

‘You can do whatever you like,’ answers the rabbi. ‘But you shouldn’t dance.’

‘I’m not much of a dancer, you know,’ says the Russian. ‘And what about our first night? Can I lie with her, on her?’

‘Of course,’ answers the rabbi.

‘Can she lie on me for a change?’

‘Of course,’ answers the rabbi.

‘Are we allowed to sit up and make love?’

‘Of course,’ answers the rabbi.

‘Are we allowed to stand up?’

‘No,’ answers the rabbi.

‘Why?’

‘You may begin to dance.’

I’m not much of a dancer. To tell the truth, I can’t dance at all. Yet my legs are not idle: I walk 10 kilometres every day, weather permitting. But I can’t have an extensive walk in my hotel room. Of course, I could move up and down at a snail’s pace, thereby spending more time on the move.

I’ll concentrate on my walk instead of taking a walk down memory lane.

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My idle hands picked up the newspaper I had been waiting for. (*The Asahi Shimbun, International Herald Tribune*.) The Chinese advise us not to scratch beneath the surface: it’s better to remain on the surface. We ought to imitate those birds that skim across the tops of the waves. Instead, we dive headfirst into the sea.

‘Germany rebukes America. America’s leadership took a major hit at the Group of 20 meeting in Seoul, with Chancellor Angela Merkel leading the charge, writes Steven Hill.’ Well, I’ll read about it on page 8. I love my new pen: it just glides across the paper. Taking my cue from my pen, I’ll just glide across the newspapers I’m holding in front of my eyes. ‘Ouch! – America being called “the lowest common denominator”.’

You may call America what you wish. You may call it names – for all the difference it will make. 12 is a common denominator of 1/3 and 1/4. What else could you say? The lowest common denominator, the highest common denominator – what’s the difference between them? Like a blackbird, one denominator is perched on my gate. The other has just crawled through an opening in the fence. Is there any significant difference in quality between these two items? Yesterday I flew to Japan. For 30 hours I’ve been staying in my hotel room situated on the 17th floor. An hour ago I was

practising in an underground studio. And I'm still a walking disaster; and a walking encyclopaedia. Or a sitting writer, a lying pianist.

The Governor of New York delivered a rousing speech to the national convention. And then he gave the after-dinner speech. His first speech was received with cheers and a standing ovation; his second speech was received with cheers. But neither I nor anyone else remembers this governor, let alone his speech. And no one remembers that his speech caused outrage among the gay community: even the members of this community bear him no grudge.

'What Merkel was saying is that the era of U.S.-style consumption-driven economics is over. The world needs to figure out how advanced economies can provide for their people without having roaring growth rates driven by asset bubbles, and how to develop in a way that is ecologically sustainable.' I've no idea what 'bubbles' means in this context. Whenever I hold a glass of champagne, I like watching as, one by one, the bubbles pop. (And yet I don't think it's the bubbles that make champagne so nice.) I also like bubbles in my bath, especially if they're produced by bath salts. Following the advice of Chinese sages, I seek neither figurative nor any other sense when reading a newspaper. Actually, neither Merkel nor the author of the article claims to discuss very deep and profound philosophical issues. They just talk about bubbles as if they were drinking champagne or lounging around in a Japanese bath. I wonder if there's a gigantic Japanese bath in this hotel.

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'If consumer-driven growth was the order of the day in the post-World War II era, in the new era of Pax Germania it will be steady-state economic growth – not too fast, but not too slow – and producing value-added products that the rest of the world wants to buy.' OK, I'll buy your products, following a fashion or the crowd: it doesn't matter what you follow on condition that you remain where you are. Or I won't buy your products, which amounts to the same thing. At least your economy won't suffer on my behalf. I'm sure my behaviour will amount to heresy for most members of the Merkel party, but my knowledge of her party is so superficial I'll never be able to distinguish its members from other human beings. They all look alike and buy whatever is within easy reach of their wallets. If their wallets or rather their contents don't allow their owners to buy this or that, they buy whatever they yearn for on credit. And they say to each other, 'We can get a year's interest-free credit on a Mercedes.'

The Americans will go on disregarding ecological (and commercial) disasters because, in their opinion, there's nothing more dreadful than emptiness: an empty house, an empty garden, an empty garage. In a worst-case scenario there might be no garages, no gardens and no houses at all – just the void of which the Chinese sing the praises. The Americans don't know that one can find everything in the void: villas, Bentleys, swimming pools.

What would *I* find in the void apart from myself? Isn't that enough? My former mistress told me once, 'I enjoy your company but your conversation can get a bit deep at times.' Well, I can find

everything in the depth of my body, of my soul. How deep am I? At least as deep as the deepest ocean. Apparently, there are very few fish at depths below 3,000 metres. Inside myself I can find a lot of fish below 7,000 metres. How do they survive down there? I feed bread to them.

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In the same newspaper I found an article entitled *Of African Princes and Russian Poets*.

> *In Russia, it is common knowledge that Pushkin was descended from an African who was raised to high rank by Tsar Peter the Great. Pushkin's African ancestry was evident in his appearance, and the poet was proud of the heritage, using Gannibal as the model for an unfinished novel known in English as 'The Negro of Peter the Great'.*
> *But it is only in recent years that Gannibal, and Pushkin, have become sources of pride for Cameroon. The main reason for that is the research done by an African historian who pored over Russian, French and African sources to conclude that Gannibal most likely began life as the son of a chief in the ancient sultanate of Logone-Birni.*

That's the past I regard as worthy of notice. It's both an impersonal and personal past where you can find your roots without having to cling to them. Cling on tight, otherwise you'll lose yourself! How could you lose yourself? You're likely to lose your sunglasses, your money, your leg and even your life. But as long as you're alive you won't lose *yourself*. You often lose your consciousness, but there's something beyond all these losses. Even beyond your unconscious there appear little green shoots – your tree of life that's always in the making. But, for goodness' sake, don't live in your *own* past. No memory lanes! This moment is all that counts – the moment I'm living through, be it short or long. And all my ancestors are standing inside this moment as if I had told them, 'Don't stand out there in the cold, come in here and get warm.' They don't have to huddle round the fire to keep warm: they just feel at home.

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I had dinner with my future Japanese manager. He is the current manager of my former rival about whom I thought a few days ago. Whenever people speak of lung cancer they describe some drug and then say, 'This new drug could be an important step in the fight against lung cancer.' They speak in the same terms about liver cancer and bowel cancer; they enumerate the benefits of the insurance system. After a while they say, 'He died, she died.' Why do they speak about drugs instead of lapsing into silence? A safety precaution? A sophisticated version of self-protection? Safety precautions are observed as a matter of course.

My rival's legs are paralysed. This afternoon I wrote about my idle legs without knowing I meant his paralysis. He has spent more than one year in a wheelchair. 'He can't press the pedal any

more,' said his manager. No more piano playing. Neither the present nor the past exist as tangibly as the present. At the moment he is an invalid and this moment won't let him go. When they speak of eternal recurrence, they often mean one moment. This afternoon I saw a documentary on falcons. One of them seemed to hang in the air for a moment before diving onto its prey. I was tempted to halt the image, leaving the falcon in the air for a while. I wasn't motivated by pity; I just liked the falcon hanging in the air. The same goes for the moment under discussion: it hangs in the air. Oddly enough, this immobility doesn't prevent the moment from destroying its prey.

My former rival. My brother. I've forgotten the past, but I know this man more or less intimately. I know he is my brother. I can't help him. And I'll have no time to pay him a visit, although Nagoya isn't too far from Tokyo and I don't really have a tight schedule. Brothers don't necessarily live together; sometimes they don't see each other for many years.

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I can't help recalling my flight which, though located in the past, continues to haunt my future: in a week I'll return to Paris, flying Austrian Airlines.

I was told there would be a chef on board. Well, he wasn't one of the top European chefs. He was just a bad cook who kept fussing with his hair. The wines served during the flight weren't cold enough so the structure had come loose. I wished to say to the chef, 'The structure of this wine needs replacing – look, it has completely disintegrated.' I asked for another wine only to find it had no structure either. This second failure ruined the crew's chances of winning any reward, however insignificant. I thought that time would benefit neither the wines nor the members of the crew: they were already pretty old with the exception of the cook. But no one will need his good looks if he goes on cooking so badly.

The plane's engine failed and the passengers were forced to bail out. The flight disintegrated into a series of nightmares. I had no idea whether we were flying by day or by night: the windows were opaque. Some animals sleep in the day and hunt at night, but I'm not of their number. Anyway I didn't know whether I had to hunt or to sleep. I said to myself, 'I'd rather fall asleep before we land in Tokyo. I'm not much of a hunter anyway. Nor am I a great fan of blood sports. Why do people still go hunting? Is it the thrill of the chase?' In another newspaper I read about a Russian double agent who flew to the United States. A Russian top official said, 'We'll hunt him down. Actually we already know where he is and what he does. And we'll do *our* job.'

Last summer I saw my future Japanese manager in Salzburg. He asked me about my way of touring the world. 'You always travel first class, I presume.'

'Business class,' I said.

'Really? How come? Do you feel comfortable?'

'I don't.'

'So why don't you travel first class?'

‘Tolstoy usually travelled third class,’ I said.

‘But there’s no third class on planes.’

‘There were no planes in Tolstoy’s days,’ I said.

I resolved to fly first class whenever I had concerts in Japan. So I went to my travel agency and my agent began his search for a suitable company. I could have flown via Dubai, but I was reluctant to spend 22 hours on planes and at airports. For a while we talked about Cathy Pacific and again time was the major stumbling block to the fulfilment of my desire – 18 hours in the air and at Hong Kong airport. At the time I thought time depended on my whereabouts.

Very few companies can boast that their planes have a luxurious space for the passengers who are in a class of their own. Austrian Airlines seems to have abandoned this ambition; its president is a naturally shy man who never boasts about his achievements. So, in the long run, achievements have disappeared and only the chefs cooking your meal on board may look cocky at times.

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I lost my wallet this morning. Last night I had dinner with my future manager and, for some obscure reason, I put my wallet in my pocket instead of locking it in the safe provided by the hotel. I knew I was invited and so my wallet was of no use: in Japan I’ve never been asked to show my passport except at hotels and airports. And I had no intention of flying anywhere last night. So I might have left my wallet in my room: the safe I mentioned above offered adequate protection for it. Of course there are fewer thieves in Japan than elsewhere, but you always have to be on your guard against thieves – even in a country where there are no thieves. And you always have to be on your guard against pickpockets. I knew there were no thieves in Japan, but I had no idea whether the Japanese counterbalanced this shortage by an abundance of pickpockets.

Be that as it may, I scrambled into a taxi without giving any thought to my wallet which might have slipped out of my pocket at any moment. Then I got out and went into the restaurant, accompanied by my future manager. I might have lost my wallet in the restaurant too: I often lose it in bathrooms. And in this particular case there was no difference between a restaurant and a bathroom.

That’s how my train of thought proceeded on its way towards the following conclusion: I lost my wallet. I spent a quarter of an hour looking for it in my hotel room. A lift took me to the second floor where the concierge seemed to be waiting for me. At least he was looking at me instead of fiddling with his papers. I told him I had lost my wallet either in one of the two taxis I had taken or in the restaurant where I had enjoyed sashimi and sushi. ‘Actually I might have lost it in the hotel – in the lift I take, in the lobby.’

‘We haven’t found it,’ said the concierge.

‘Hopefully one of the taxi drivers found it,’ I said. ‘Or the owner of the restaurant.’

‘Have you got a receipt?’ asked the concierge.

‘I don’t think my friend asked for a receipt,’ I answered.

‘Let’s wait and see,’ the concierge rounded off. He noted down my room number and I went to the café where a sumptuous buffet was waiting for me with anxiety. Everyone and everything seemed to be waiting for me this morning with the exception of my wallet. Perhaps it was also waiting for my eyes and my right hand. But I couldn’t be accused of disloyalty because I had no idea where it was lying.

I thought about my wallet as I chewed a few slices of smoked fish and a mushroom omelette. What a complete waste of time! I could have thought about Chinese philosophers or my own poetry. I could have composed a poem during my meal, writing it down in my notebook: I always carry my notebook and one of my pens in the pockets of my trousers. Just in case. And I haven’t lost them yet. ‘I’d rather lose them,’ I thought. Another idle thought. Why should I lose anything in addition to my wallet?

Of course it’s better to concentrate on your food and not on poetry – in a café, in a restaurant and even at home. Anyway I shouldn’t have thought about my wallet: I’ve wasted enough time already. In the course of my life, in the course of my life, in the course of my life.

I concluded my reflexion by saying to myself, ‘My wallet is in my hotel room. I can’t have lost it. I always feel it in my pocket. And whenever I don’t feel it, I begin patting my pocket. I didn’t pat my pocket last night so the wallet was inside it. Or I removed it before pulling off my trousers. My wallet must be in my room because it can’t be anywhere else.’

I would have resumed my search anyway so my reflexion was superfluous. I’ll never take advantage of that quarter an hour; even Proust is unable to help me. On the other hand, I don’t wish to raise this stretch of time from the dead. I’d hate to think again about my lost wallet; all the more so because I eventually found it. Even if I was offered eternity made up of such thoughts, I would refuse it.

I returned to my room and resumed my search. I was thinking about my passport and my credit cards; and about 250,000 yen. I hadn’t forgotten the inborn honesty of the Japanese but, frankly speaking, I didn’t count on it. Instead, I continued to count the banknotes I had put in my wallet before leaving France. And time continued to count the seconds and minutes I was wasting on this deplorable event.

‘It’s Sunday today so I can’t report the theft,’ I thought. ‘I’ve already run up a massive hotel bill. How am I supposed to pay? I should phone the consulate first thing tomorrow morning, otherwise I’ll get stuck in Japan forever. I don’t mind, actually. In Tokyo there are eight three-star restaurants – more than in Paris.’

Without putting an end to my stream of consciousness, I picked up four cushions and threw them on the floor. The blanket was to undergo the same treatment a few seconds later. I tried to push the writing desk – the desk on which my computer and a transformer were lying in wait for me. For all my efforts, it didn’t budge an inch. Two armchairs proved to be less intractable, but I was greeted by yet another stretch of the floor.

And then I put my hand under the bed. I must have put my wallet on the blanket. During the night it slipped and fell on the floor. Did I unconsciously kick it as I got up and went to the bathroom? Usually wallets don't hide under beds.

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Common folk see differences and are clear-cut;
I alone make no distinctions.
I seem drifting as the sea;
Like the wind blowing about, seemingly without destination.

This morning I saw the difference between the writing desk and two armchairs which adorn my hotel room. The latter obeyed my commands; the former resented being pushed around. So I couldn't push it, which didn't sadden me at all: I knew my wallet wasn't under it. I can sit on the armchairs, using the writing desk for other purposes. Actually it's a dual-purpose object: I use it as a bookshelf and as a secretaire. That's where I type out this work of mine. Of course I might sit down on it, but I wouldn't feel comfortable. Besides, I would have to clear it first, which is no easy task. The writing desk is long enough to convert into a bed, but I won't do that because the bed I've got in my room is comfortable enough. I'm not against superfluous things, but there are so many of them in the realm of my space-time that I have to make choices. Even if I were immortal I couldn't devote my time to *all* of them.

I see the difference between day and night. I don't only see it – I feel it. In Japan I work at night-time and sleep during the daytime. My cat likes to sleep in the daytime and go out at night. For all our affinities, however, I'm not my cat yet.

But there's no difference between one time and another. I lie in my bed; I walk along the beach collecting small crabs in a bucket. What's the difference? Small crabs are different from the blanket that keeps me warm, but the time during which these things take place is the same. I get the feeling there are two times because I feel them differently: they're psychologically different, so to speak. Yet there's only one time that saw my birth and awaits my death. I'm not sure it's waiting for my death: its attitude is one of bored indifference. Whether I die or not is none of its business because it doesn't give two hoots what I actually do at night or in the daytime. St Augustine devotes many pages to what might be called our personal time, but his book omits any mention of time *as such*. I can walk to my bathroom, dallying with the idea of starting my own business. So I walk slower than usual and reach the bathroom in two minutes instead of five seconds. My trip to the bathroom may last an hour or so, if I pick up a book or a newspaper on my way: after all, I must learn how to start my own business and become a multimillionaire. To tell the truth, I occasionally dallied with the idea of starting my own business, but I never actually did anything about it. So why slow down and delay the delights of my ablutions?

The Way of Heaven has no favourites.
It is always with the good man.

According to this Chinese proverb, there's a difference between a good man and a bad one. So the Way of Heaven isn't beyond good and evil: it's somewhere in the midst of them. 'The summit of the mountain appeared midst the clouds,' as a Chinese poet put it. Let's suppose that the mountain is the Way of Heaven and the clouds are men. There are white clouds and black ones. There are storm clouds and thunderclouds. But there are also innocent-looking clouds which don't prevent the sun from coming out now and then. Then a volcano spews a giant cloud of ash, dust and gases into the air. The volcano is also the Way of Heaven, the same one or another one. And you make hay while the sun shines – it's just your way.

My boat has drifted westwards in the prevailing winds; westwards, eastwards or southwards. I'm almost sure I'm not in the north; I just have a north-facing window. I'm often asked, 'What guided your choice of destination or was it arbitrary?'

'Where am I?' I ask in my turn.

'You must have arrived at your destination, otherwise you wouldn't be where you are.'

'Where *am* I?' I often repeat my questions because people pretend not to understand anything.

'You're here, right in front of us,' they say.

'And where are *you*? If I may be so bold, you still haven't mentioned why you're here.'

'So you know we're here, and you're here too,' they say.

Our talk drifts aimlessly from one subject to another or rather from one word to another. There's no point in talking like that. But there are no points anywhere so we continue to talk here and there, in the streets and in dining rooms. And the wind is beginning to pick up.

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I didn't get a newspaper this morning; nor did I get one yesterday. Consequently I have no accurate measure of time. I have no reliable measure of the damage done to the world. In a mirror hanging in front of my writing desk I can see the damage done to my face: the sparkle in my blue eyes is partly gone. What portion of the sparkle have I lost over the last forty hours? I haven't the foggiest idea. Do I really need this sparkle? Would I lose my sight if it let me down? I've got a concert tonight. What if they say, 'He gave a disappointingly lacklustre performance?' Does my piano playing depend on the sparkle that has faded since my arrival in Japan?

If left to their own devices, my thoughts and my inner poetry might grow too obtrusive, not to say presumptuous. Last week I chanced upon the following piece of information: 'Scotland has never defeated New Zealand in rugby in a series dating from 1905. On Saturday in Edinburgh, it will try to reverse the curse.' So I start measuring this rugby-born duel against my own life. The last time Scotland defeated New Zealand was almost half a century before my birth. This piece of information

enables me to recall that I wasn't born yesterday. I wish I could be born yesterday, which would obliterate my memory and also my past: no one would be in a position to remind me of my youth, of my former escapades.

But if I let myself go and immerse myself in my thoughts, I may come to the conclusion that only my humble self is a walking or a lying disaster. In other words, I'm the only human being who was cursed on the day of his birth. All of a sudden, however, I realise there are other curses in the world. For instance, Scotland has been cursed for more than a century; and the curse involves not only the players but also their supporters.

Moreover, I learn that this curse may be reversed, otherwise the author of the article would have written, 'Scotland has been cursed forever.' How many curses can be reversed? Not all of them – I'm sure of that. How many irreversible curses are there in the world? And what about *my* curse? And then I burst into laughter as I say to myself, 'There's no such thing as a curse – it's Beckett who coined this word in the late Forties.'

They lose and win – it's just a game. In my childhood I often played a game of cops and robbers. I was a cop and a robber. I was sent to prison for seven years; I was awarded a medal for bravery. Where's this medal? And where are my prisons, my universities? Were the robbers cursed? Were the cops blessed? What did I steal? I can't say I was so poor I had to steal to eat. Once I broke into a safe and stole everything in it. What *did* I steal?

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In *The Wall Street Journal* one can read about celebrities. One can read about them everywhere, but not necessarily in *The Wall Street Journal*. I only ever read it in Japan or on planes. You can't judge a book by its cover, as they say. Well, here is an excerpt from an article I chanced upon on a plane from Fukui to Tokyo: 'Talent matters, to be sure, but the stars who earn the most, according to Ms Currid-Halkett, are not always the ones who obviously possess the most talent. They tend instead to be individuals who simply have a knack for getting people to pay attention to them. And big audiences translate into big business.'

In her book *Starstruck: The Business of Celebrity* Ms Currid-Halkett offers a few examples. Apparently Jennifer Ariston has never been nominated for an Oscar. Does this mean she is utterly devoid of talent? And what about the actors and actresses who *are* nominated for an Oscar? And what about a man or a woman who gets it in the long run? Could we say about this man or this woman, 'His talent for acting was evident at an early age'? Or 'She has a God-given talent as a film actress'? Anyway Jennifer Ariston gets endless attention from celebrity magazines and she brings in audiences simply because they like her. Judging from her photograph printed in the same issue of *The Wall Street Journal*, she isn't beautiful at all. But you can't judge an actress by her photographs.

Damien Hirst came to fame for suspending a dead shark somewhere. Why didn't I do that in the early Eighties, stealing a march on Damien Hirst? (He suspended his shark in the Nineties.) I might

have asked a fisherman to catch and kill a shark. I might have asked a weightlifter to suspend the shark somewhere. I would have given them 200 dollars. How much did Damien Hirst get for his shark? I might have got much more, had I suspended my shark in the early Eighties. 'Your timing is perfect,' they would have told me. 'So let's have a round of applause, please, for a very lovely and talented young artist whose timing is even more perfect than that of Damien Hirst.' 'Hirst is as much or more known for his lifestyle as for his art,' as Julian Stallabrass put it. Is the shark in question a part of his art or lifestyle? If he had been eaten by a shark, we might have said, 'An adventurous lifestyle.' We might have added, 'He didn't have a very healthy lifestyle.' And we might have acclaimed the shark's masterpiece. We might even have acclaimed the shark as the greatest artist of his or her generation.

I enjoyed reading this article because I say over and over again that no one needs talent nowadays, let alone men or women of genius. You do a lot of networking and celebrity magazines end up taking notice of you. As a result, hundreds of people flock to your concerts. And crowds of people flock to see and buy your books in bookshops, at book fairs. And then some president or other says to his assistants, 'We need someone at the event who'll be a big draw and attract the paying public.' For once, they invite you and not David Beckham. Crowds of people pay and buy and pay again. You generate enormous revenues and support whole industries. So nobody questions your aptitudes.

All those who agree please hold up their hands. I see at least two hands in the air: mine and that of Ms Currid-Halkett. Other hands will join ours in due course. In due course. Voices, voices, voices. Is that what time is about?

'What did you say? In due *what*?'

'Our thanks are due to everyone.'

'A golf course?'

'No, in the course of time.'

'Within a short space of time.'

'It all happened in the space of ten minutes.'

'What?'

'It's not over yet.'

'Are you talking about space or time or both?'

'The grass was wet with early morning dew.'

In due course. Stupid questions, stupid answers, misunderstandings. Voices, voices, voices. That's what time sounds like. It's not a piece of music, for music thrives on harmony and strives for eternity. Somehow time is associated in my mind with human voices. A landscape doesn't speak to me about time, even if I hear a lot as I look at it. The sound of a babbling brook speaks about Schubert, but Schubert's music is often situated outside time and space. So the brook disappears and I'm left with human time which speaks about degeneration and decrepitude. Keats' nightingale is eternal, but no human has ever overstepped the bounds of his or her own life.

Language is no longer a problem we are eager to study, and yet some words stick out as if to remind us of their personal aptitudes and abilities. ‘Our thanks are *due* to everyone.’ ‘The grass was wet with early morning *dew*.’ What stretch of time lies between these two words that sound alike? We realise that time hasn’t stopped yet: a few sounds have been repeated. And these are not the sounds of music. How long do we need to link these two sentences *psychologically*? A few people are having breakfast on the grass. One of them recalls a banquet at the end of which some president or other thanked someone. For what? For moral support, for money. When did it happen? Due, dew, overdue.

The murmur of the waves on the beach lulled me to sleep and I lost time once again. The waves are still murmuring somewhere: they’re not likely to die. One wave replaces another; yet it is one wave I always hear. Only one wave lulls me to sleep. But people come, strip their clothes off and I no longer hear the waves.

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I came back to Tokyo. Ana Intercontinental, Ana Intercontinental. Almost 30 hours had elapsed between two visits to the hotel where I usually stay during my Japanese tours. I can’t help recalling my former visits to the capital of Japan and some other hotels: the Capitol Tokuy Hotel, for instance. When did I stay there last?

We came back to my present hotel around 2 p.m. To my surprise I realised I couldn’t check in until 3 p.m. My agent uttered a few words to the effect that we would meet on Wednesday and disappeared beyond a revolving door. The door continued to revolve and yet no one was going through it. Just another image of time which reminds one of clocks.

What was I supposed to do? I might sit down in the lobby and lull myself to sleep with a lullaby. I began to repeat some words which sounded like a lullaby, in my opinion; nothing doing. There’s no denying that something was going on around me: meetings, business talks. A wealthy woman was seeking revenge on her heartless seducer. I might have seen this seducer somewhere – in a film, during a folk festival. I bought *The Japan Times* and read an article on Tycho Brahe’s death.

Have you heard the news about this Dutch astronomer? Apparently he didn’t succumb to kidney failure, but was poisoned in a royal plot over a love affair. All this sounds like a piece of news. And yet the astronomer died in the 16th century, after discovering a supernova in the Cassiopeia constellation. He discovered the supernova in 1572. When did he die? They say he was buried in 1601. He must have died in the 17th century.

‘Pinning their hopes on cutting-edge technologies, a Czech-Danish team Monday exhumed the nobleman’s body.’ After subjecting his remains to tests they’ll confirm or deny whether kidney failure should remain the ‘official’ cause of death. The test will last four days. ‘We’re going to investigate the whole life of Tycho Brahe,’ said Jens Vellev. (He heads the research team.) Four days, a whole life. For five centuries Tycho Brahe might have had a different lifestyle borrowed from another nobleman. According to the official version, Brahe’s bladder burst during a banquet at court: etiquette forbade

him from leaving the table before the emperor. The emperor's bladder wasn't about to burst so he had no intention of leaving the table in the middle or even at the end of the banquet. There must have been many noblemen around the king on that occasion. At least two of them needed to empty their bladders. One of them might have died: bladders aren't forbidden to burst.

A love affair, a royal court, a royal plot. The royal court remains but the bladder is replaced by a poison. Do poisons affect bladders as well? It doesn't matter. Brahe pioneered the geo-heliocentric model in which the moon and sun both revolve around the earth while the other planets orbit the sun. His model was replaced by Copernicus' discovery; yet I'd rather see the Earth in the centre of the universe – on account of time. No other planet counts time because human beings live only on the Earth. Other planets might be inhabited, but no one knows how their inhabitants live their lives. Perhaps they don't need time at all. They might have destroyed time a long time ago, for all I know.

I was unable to destroy it: I had another half an hour to cope with before I could enjoy the quiet of my room. Actually, at the end of my time-torture, I was allotted the same room: 1711. Another repetition, another measure of time.

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Confucius said, 'If we do not yet know about life, how can we know about death?' I know *something* about life, but that's not enough. I see a lot of hands that rise and fall, and nothing depends on them, not even a minute, a second. At first we get the feeling that something was achieved a few minutes ago: the committee voted on the proposal and accepted it unanimously. Someone said, 'Now that we've heard all the arguments for and against the proposal, shall we vote on it?' Someone else said, 'Yes.' So the vote took place. So what? No one really understood the proposal. Everything remains as it is and time goes by as if there had been nothing to write home about.

Of course there are consequences now and then. I always make snap decisions and never think about their consequences, but they do crop up here and there. So I take them into consideration. I say to myself, 'Don't make any decisions before you've considered the matter.' So I make no decisions. I forget I already made decisions some days ago. I can't forget about their consequences, though: they're right in front of me. But I think it's just a trick of the light. Do I know *anything* about life?

Or is it death I know about? 'Say, "If the Last Home, with Allah, be for you specially and not for anyone else, then seek ye for death, if ye are sincere."' I'm doing my best to be sincere. I'm going cap in hand to Allah to beg forgiveness for what I've done. 'I don't know what I've done, but You know life much better than I do. I might have sinned without knowing it. For instance, I might be guilty of the sin of neglect. I've often neglected my appearance – not only at home do I tend to wear big sloppy jumpers and jeans. And I've been neglecting my friends recently. I don't know if they're my friends or enemies, but I've been neglecting them – no doubt about it. I'm seeking death because I'm sincere. Only sinners are greedy for life, as You say in the Holy Qur'an.'

Another hour has elapsed, bringing me closer to death. If I count on hours, I may spend a lot of time on Earth. One should trust years and decades.

I'm not sincere: I don't wish to die, whatever I say. Perhaps I should concentrate on The Great Vacuity which is an ersatz death. 'The Great Vacuity is clear. Being clear, it cannot be obstructed. Not being obstructed, it is therefore spirit. The opposite of clearness is turbidity. Turbidity leads to obstruction. And obstruction leads to physical form' (Chang Tsai).

I'll remove all the books and papers from my makeshift writing desk. (I'm still at the hotel in Tokyo.) I'll also remove my computer, the transformer, the TV set and two bottles of mineral water. The writing desk will be empty – the small vacuity, in other words. One step at a time. So what's the next step? How do I move the situation forward? The Great Vacuity is far away so my next objective should be situated somewhere in between The Great Vacuity and the small vacuity. I need to identify the best ways of attaining my objectives. It's not clear and I know turbidity leads to obstruction. That's what they call 'obstructionist tactics', I suppose.

Perhaps I should begin by creating a sort of vacuity in my heart or in my head. How am I supposed to achieve this objective? Once I was stopped on the Swiss border. Two policemen asked me to empty my pockets, all of them. Then I was ordered to take off my jacket. Were they curious to know what I had hidden in its lining? None of them said, 'I'm arresting you on suspicion of illegally possessing drugs,' which meant they hadn't found anything suspicious either in my pockets or inside my jacket. They saw at once I didn't look very athletic so I couldn't be given a stiff punishment for using drugs: I didn't have to run very fast. Once in a while I do run in order to catch a train or a plane, but I don't need to smash the world record; nor do I need to become an Olympic gold medallist.

Why didn't they empty my heart while they were at it? They might have emptied my heart and my head, creating The Great Vacuity inside my body. And why didn't they mention my stomach lining? I know that desperate measures are needed to deal with the growing drug problem, but I've got *my* problems and no one's willing to give me a helping hand.

I could empty my hotel room but I wouldn't be able to keep the hotel staff at bay. Every day I find a slip of paper under my door asking me to say when a young woman may clean my room. They don't say 'a young woman', but I saw several cleaners in the corridor leading to the lift and they were young and female. So, sooner or later, one of them would enter my room, even if I resolved not to open it: each of them carries a huge bunch of keys. She would enter my room, spoiling my emptiness.

My room isn't empty yet. So I have to push the furniture to the door and, after opening the door, transfer all the things my room is cluttered with into the corridor. And what about the floor? Wouldn't it mar my Great Vacuity? But I can't remove the floor, can I? Where would I put it? In the corridor, in the lobby? I could remove the floor of my room without removing the ceiling of the room situated on the 16th floor. (I'm staying on the 17th floor.) I have no wish to fall and find myself in another room cluttered with furniture. After all, I can't empty the entire hotel.

It's easier to empty my heart, I suppose: for several years I haven't been overcome with emotions. Of course I feel like I've been cooped up in this hotel room for days, but it's not a strong feeling and I'll get rid of it as soon as I leave the room. Perhaps I wouldn't have this feeling if I didn't think about life in terms of time. I can't say I've spent a lot of time cleaning this room: the young women take care of that in my absence. I sleep until 1 p.m. so as not to waste the time to which I've been accustomed for many years. It's not exactly Greenwich Mean Time: I'm living in Versailles. But my time is much closer to it than to any Japanese time. So I cling to my time for fear of getting really bad jet lag.

I don't feel anything. I don't feel anything. Is that enough? The heart is the seat of emotions so I've got rid of emotions to create a sort of heartlessness which can be seen as a prelude to The Great Vacuity. As a pianist and even as a writer I communicate a whole range of emotions, but they don't come from my heart. They come from my art: I am professional and mature enough to fake emotions. There's no direct link between them and my heart. What about indirect links?

All right, I've emptied my heart. 'Don't be so heartless!' I hear from time to time.

'I'm not heartless,' I answer. 'I couldn't live without my heart. It's just empty, that's all.'

'You wouldn't be able to live with an empty heart,' they say.

'Wouldn't I?'

'You can go to a concert hall and play on an empty stomach,' they say.

'I'd play badly.'

'You wouldn't die during the recital. But if you play on an empty heart –'

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'And obstruction leads to physical form.' What physical form? That of a young woman who cleans my room? There are other physical forms in my room where I watch Japanese porn movies. I don't think about the women I used to love, even if I'm bound not to get a wink of sleep. I think about The Great Vacuity, but I don't concentrate on it. So I fill my head with thoughts instead of emptying it.

'When clearness reaches its limit, there is spirit. When spirit concentrates, it penetrates like the breeze going through the holes (of musical instruments), producing tones and carrying them to great distances.' Where's the limit of clearness, I wonder? If I find its beginning, I may find its end as well. If I switch on the table lamp, I see the beginning of clearness. And its end is on the opposite wall. Not quite: the other walls are also affected by it. The light produced by this lamp spreads over my room, leaving only two or three zones intact – the dark zones of my room, the dark ladies of my life. Let them remain dark forever.

I'm neither a flautist nor a clarinettist so I've no idea how the breeze goes through their instruments to produces tones and carry them. I don't know what carries the sounds *I* produce when playing the piano – probably waves. Not those enormous waves that swamp boats. There are other waves of course and I hear about them all the time. I can even *feel* them sometimes: radio waves,

electromagnetic waves. Waves of light and sound are transmitted in every direction, even in my direction. No wonder I can't achieve The Great Vacuity.

How am I supposed to chase these waves away? All right, I won't switch my TV set on; I won't listen to the recordings I've got at home. But there are other sounds of course. And sound waves travel at over 1,000 feet per second. Even if you ask your neighbours and the local residents not to use their TV sets and CD players, you'll hear distant sounds trespassing on your Great Vacuity. No point in using earplugs – it's The *Great* Vacuity I have in mind, not my *inner* vacuity. An unforeseen difficulty has arisen, I'm sorry to say. Do I install The Great Vacuity in my mind if I say, 'It is The Great Vacuity I have in mind'? Or do I just let another superfluous idea take root in my being?

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Tolstoy died one hundred years ago. I'm looking for the article devoted to his eternal life. *The Asahi Shimbun*. Toyota, Honda unveils electric cars destined for the U.S. market. They're not destined for the European market; yet I chanced upon this article as if my life had depended on it. No, it's not a matter of life and death; or life *or* death. 'The electric vehicles will hit the road in the United States in 2012 when tighter environmental regulations take effect in California, the most populous state in the world's second-largest auto market.' And what's the world's first-largest market? Japan? China? Russia? Anyway I won't hit the road, especially if the road in question is part of an auto market. I'm looking for Tolstoy, for his roads, for his departures and arrivals.

The Secret of Leo Tolstoy's Green Stick. A nice title. This stick holds the key to universal happiness. Many people are happy already. They're happy clappy or just happy. Or they just clap – when their plane lands, for instance. They don't clap after a crash landing in a field, which would be explicable and even logical. They clap when a plane lands in New York or San Francisco. You can land a plane on water in an emergency. If you do so, you might expect your passengers to applaud your achievement. But you hear nothing: they're paralysed with fear. Or they swim the English Channel.

Be that as it may, lots of people are happy. Some band plays a familiar tune which has everyone clapping along. The audience claps in time to the music. Nothing to do with The Great Vacuum. No point in looking for Tolstoy's green stick.

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'Victor Erofeyev is a Russian writer and television host. Translated from the Russian by the *International Herald Tribune*.' This man wrote about the centenary of Tolstoy's death. He himself is not dead yet so he can write about other people's deaths; he can write whatever he wants to write. No one forbids him to write. What's more, his books and articles are published in Japan and in the United States. And in Europe perhaps. 'In 1901, the Russian Orthodox Church excommunicated the writer; on the eve of this hundredth anniversary of his death, the church declined appeals to reconsider.' It's

Tolstoy who is the object of my inquiry today. I've no idea what happened yesterday. I might have been interested in Dostoevsky, for all I know. Incidentally, Erofeyev says about *their* relationship:

> *André Gide in his essay on Dostoevsky wrote that Tolstoy obscured the greatness of Dostoevsky. But with time, the prevalent view among intellectuals came to be that Dostoevsky's mountain was higher than Tolstoy's. Yes, Dostoevsky has clear goals and defined action. The curtain opens and we watch how a godless existence leads inexorably to sin and evil. Crime becomes punishment.*
>
> *Tolstoy's Anna Karenina, by contrast, throws the author under a train along with herself. What is this? Her punishment? High tragedy? The fate of fallen women? A delirious stream of consciousness? There are no answers. For that, in Tolstoy's logic, you go to the police, not to the author.*

Go wherever you wish, but I must tell you it's not *my* logic. Nor was it Tolstoy's logic. Her punishment, high tragedy, low tragedy, a sin, fate, delirium, a nightmare, something we know nothing of. I fumble in my pockets for some change. (I keep Japanese coins in my pockets, not in my wallet.) What change? What do I want to change? They say to me, 'The weather in the hills can change very quickly, so take suitable clothing.' All right, I'll take suitable clothing to cope with the weather in the hills. But what about *myself*? What if *I* change during my walk or trip?

A delirious stream of consciousness. What else do I have? What else do I do? I suddenly grasp someone's arm and look at someone's face. The man whose arm I grasp does something else. He grasps his gun with both hands and takes aim. My punishment? High tragedy?

I refuse to talk about the past, saying it would only reopen old wounds. They're open and closed; there are no wounds. That's Tolstoy for you: no crimes, no punishments. A delirious stream of life. You open and close many doors; there are no doors. You marry a woman, a man. You go to live abroad after the break-up of your marriage. You're not Anna Karenina, yet you go abroad. I'm also abroad – in Japan, of all places. Am I married or not? I've been single for so long now I don't think I'll ever marry. Yet I say to a waiter, 'For my wife.' A beautiful young woman is sitting at the same table. So the waiter puts down a plate in front of her. Seared langoustines, braised eggplant, red beetroot, ice cream with passion fruit. Slices of cured ham.

And Dostoevsky says, 'Please state whether you are single, cohabiting, married, separated, divorced or widowed.' Why doesn't he say instead, 'Beef filet, squid carpaccio and oscietre caviar; onion confit and violin sauce'?

'But with time, the prevalent view among intellectuals came to be that Dostoevsky's mountain was higher than Tolstoy's.' Well, my time was different, this time. In my youth I adored Dostoevsky to the point of excluding other writers from my pantheon. My father preferred Tolstoy, however: some children have the knack of invalidating old sayings. (On the basis of this dissimilitude, some children

are likely to conclude that their fathers are not their fathers.) In his youth, too, my father preferred Tolstoy: his literary time was running along a straight line. My time deviated at some point, but I would be hard-pressed to situate this point on the map of time. Which map? Which time? There are so many of them one gets lost as if deprived of maps altogether. And there are maps that make you lose your way.

Which time am I dealing with now? Obviously this time concerns my taste in writers. I've never really cared much for flash new cars – old vintage cars are more to my taste. The same goes for writers, wines and so on. Tolstoy and Dostoevsky lived and wrote in the 19th century. Dostoevsky died before Tolstoy, but his untimely death doesn't entitle him to special treatment.

So I wonder what happened to my literary time. In my youth I didn't like apricots; I still don't like them. My food-time must run along a straight line too. If there was only one straight line in the domain of time, I would be tempted to think that for a while my food-time was running side by side with my father's literary time. Obviously these times are all mixed up together in my brain. There are many times, many straight lines, and my father's time is far away now.

My literary time isn't very close either: I don't read as many books as I used to only a few years ago. Suppose my literary time were a coach filled with books – a sort of library on wheels. A policeman says to the driver, 'There are very few books in your coach now. Why don't you drive a motorcar instead?' So today there's a car with a dozen books in it as if I were setting off on a journey to a desert island: ten books, ten CDs, ten DVDs and so on. My flat isn't a desert island, for all I know; at least I can't see either the Pacific or the Atlantic. Perhaps my desert island is huge and my house is situated right in the centre of it. How long have I been living on this desert island? I meet some people during my walks in the woods, but they might be Man Friday's descendants. How many descendants would he have got today? Next time I'll count either the years buried between us or the pedestrians I run into during my walks in the streets of Versailles.

Why should I read books? I've read a lot of them already. According to some Indian philosophers, words are eternal so they're not likely to fade away with the course of time. Even if you happen to forget them, being too busy with other words, they'll cling to your brain, to your heart, to your entire body. We had a lot of snow last week, but I braved the snow and went for a two-hour walk every day. As usual I had to go down some steps leading to my favourite path: the snow hadn't obliterated it *completely*. I clung to the handrail as I walked down the slippery steps. People know almost everything about the dangers of rock-climbing, but even those who never climb anywhere say that descents are far more dangerous than ascents. So I clung to the handrail as best I could and I was even tempted to come to a standstill and remain on the staircase forever: it's better to *live* on a staircase than to *die* on it. The words I've read or heard in the course of my life must remain motionless on some staircase or other, clinging to the handrails. They go neither down nor up; they don't disappear, contrary to all our expectations. (Staircases aren't made for motionless figures: they're supposed to bring us somewhere, either up or down.) But my words must know that the steps

they're standing on are slippery, given the state my memory has been in for some time. My words are loath to die or continue their endless walk. They know they're mine and they don't mind being mine. I agree with them and I firmly believe that words are eternal, although not all Indian philosophers hold this view.

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An archaeologist I know has taken part in several excavations of Roman settlements across Europe. Now she is looking for our distant ancestors who are even more distant than Julius Caesar. Those men – they can hardly be called men or women – lived in caves and painted their interiors because they had no wallpaper at their disposal. They couldn't bear the bare walls of their flats and so would become painters and even sculptors – she found a few statuettes dating back to the 24th century BC. She told me she didn't understand the meaning of all this art. 'Why did they paint horses?' she asked me as if I were a colleague of hers.

'Because they wished to paint horses,' I answered.

'What kind of message did they intend to get across?'

'Cavemen had no messages in mind,' I said.

'But didn't they want to communicate with their fellow creatures?'

'Perhaps they had no idea there were other creatures on Earth except themselves and horses.'

People think only in terms of communication today. Their computers are on round the clock, sending questions and answers, warnings and greetings. No longer do your neighbours and visitors sellotape mysterious messages to your front door: they use the Internet. But probably they still paint something on their walls – just for the heck of it. They've got horses in their stables, which doesn't prevent them from playing with their toy horses on wheels. We have a lot in common with both our distant ancestors and our personal past; we are always in one of our childhoods, not necessarily in our second childhood. We are always on a staircase, looking back, unwilling to go either to Hell or to Paradise. Somehow we assumed a long time ago that Paradise was situated behind heavy clouds, in the neighbourhood of the sun. But, unlike early Christians, we are unwilling to talk to St Peter before exploring our childhoods, their treasures, to the utmost.

Our ancestors would enter these legendary caves to paint horses and other animals on their walls. They didn't stay there in order to admire their masterpieces and get a good night's sleep: my archaeologist found no remains of any kind in the caves she visited and scrutinised. They attached no value to their works of art because they didn't know they were works of art that might be sold at astronomical prices.

As to the messages and meanings my archaeologist was so keen to discover, our ancestors didn't care about them, about whatever was outside such and such a horse. They painted horses on the walls of their flats or rather inside the holes they got into on a whim. (We shouldn't forget that such holes provided some shelter from both the rain and the sun.) These horses are immortal and probably

live in a sort of artistic paradise where there are no archaeologists, no tourists, no cavemen and cavewomen eager to tamper with the masterpieces of their fellow creatures.

My archaeologist is looking for stories which might explain the visions we find in the caves, but every horse is the story of an élan, of a whim, of a mood. What else is there in the world? Love stories? They don't last and usually end on a pessimistic note instead of proclaiming an impressive 25-3 victory over death. You squeeze into a cave or just stay at home: there's a pile of papers on your writing desk. You also have a pile of mending to do, but this isn't creative work and you prefer to leave a few vestiges of your brain and your heart in the world you'll leave behind sooner or later. You scribble a note to your successors on a sheet of paper or on your wallpaper. In the 25th century an archaeologist will wonder, 'What are all these scribbles doing on the wallpaper? Did the painter try to depict his hallucinations, a testimony to the spirit world? Was he a shaman? Didn't his contemporaries believe in the spirit world? What kind of story is this?'

What I'm writing isn't a story; nor is it a testimony to the spirit world. I don't know whether I believe in spirits or not; I just realise they're all around me as if I was living with them and not with my fellow creatures. Actually I say to myself that my so-called fellow creatures are spirits and ghosts with whom I've always been on friendly terms. Why should I rub shoulders with those who jar my eyes or the silence I listen to? Out of silence there arise my scribbles, my poems, the sonatas I play on the piano, and only ghosts understand my whims and hymns. So I create my works for spirits and ghosts, not for future generations which are as spurious as the future itself.

I recall a piece I played some 30 years ago. I shouldn't recall it because I'll never play it again, and another superfluous piece of information may shorten my life: living in a cramped house isn't good for one's health. Nabokov says the only way to get rid of a slice of life is to write about it. So here is my medicine:

> *Modern composers belong to the same history of music, although their links with the past are often obscured by their unorthodox approaches to tonality, musical structure and timbres. Berlioz continued and somewhat expanded Beethoven's style; Kagel, in his ironic film about Beethoven, also expanded the latter's mentality, pushing it to extremes. In the introduction to the* Makrokosmos*, George Crumb dwells upon his affinities with Romantic composers, Schumann and Chopin in particular. He also mentions Mozart, Mahler, Pascal, Rilke, Bartok and Debussy.*
>
> *These influences are mutual somehow. Crumb was influenced by Rilke; in his turn, he may influence our understanding of Rilke's poems. After watching Kagel's film, we cannot hear Beethoven's symphonies in the same way. In a sense, Kagel changed, re-wrote Beethoven's symphonies.*

> *It is thus extremely important to perform the ancient and modern music side by side, in the same concert, bringing out all these links – the whole network of musical interrelations. Schumann's* Etudes symphoniques *add a new dimension to* Makrokosmos *and vice versa.*

The ghosts I speak about are all around me so I can't help living in the present, although Beethoven might have died a long time ago. The same goes for my own life that I embroider upon without altering it significantly or even insignificantly. I saw Kagel's film for the first time only a few days ago; I was slightly disappointed, but I didn't disavow the days when I had spoken highly about it. Anyway I can throw away the DVD I purchased in Munich at any minute, putting an end to my infatuation with Kagel and music theatre in general. I won't do it: there's nothing new under the sun and I'm reluctant to introduce a dissonance into the harmony of my present. Let me walk along the same circular path, coming to the same root over which I have to jump in order to go on with my ritual. This root is one of the distractions of my life.

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On one of those walls archaeologists found a man standing by an animal that was about to die. The man did his utmost to ape the posture of the dying creature so as to inherit its power or that of God who made use of death to assert His or Her authority over humans. At the end of the ritual the man burst into song:

> *Oh God, Thy power is everywhere.*
> *I used to think this animal was more powerful*
> *Than any human. But now I see his death*
> *And feel the birth of Thy power in my body*
> *And spirit. It's the spirit world I've been*
> *Seeking so obstinately. Now I've found it at last,*
> *Thanks to this animal. But for Thy bounty, however,*
> *Nothing would have happened either here*
> *Or anywhere else – nothing whatsoever.*
> *In accepting this gift, I would like to thank*
> *The Almighty, animals, nature, the sun*
> *And, lastly, the moon and its crescent.*

Cavemen and cavewomen must have sung something along these lines, for their ways of thinking were quite similar to ours. According to hypnotists who day after day extort confessions from their guinea pigs, our brain is a faithful copy of what our ancestors had inside their skulls. At least the guinea pigs draw the same geometrical figures as they fall into a deep trance under the influence of hypnotists.

Once again time turns out to be superfluous, redundant and even ridiculous to some extent. ‘The findings of this expedition are demonstrative of the need for further research’, say archaeologists. And they continue to talk about evolution in spite of the geometrical figures they enlarge upon in their reports – together with hypnotists. I’m sure I’d recognise my native cave if I was eager to undertake a long journey into the unknown, into the spirit world. But I’m pretty sure I’m living in this world today, for all my immobility and agoraphobia.

In my leisure time I draw no geometrical figures, to tell the truth. Do I need to draw anything in order to abolish time which looks like the dying animal painted on the wall? Why don’t scientists say that our ancestors depicted not an animal but time whose mystery they must have unlocked well before turning into artists? They might have visualised time in the shape of an animal: they saw mainly animals around them. They also saw trees, but they were aware of the movement that time had stamped on every aspect of human life. And trees didn’t reflect this movement as faithfully as a river: they swung in the wind at best, creaking and groaning as if to complain about their plight. This behaviour might have reminded our ancestors of pendulums, had they been acquainted with grandfather clocks. Anyway, an antelope was a far better model for time which could run and stop in its tracks, depending on your activity and mood. Perhaps our ancestors hoped that time would die some day, allowing them to become immortal. They literally murdered time by painting the antelope’s agony, its crossed legs and droopy head. They might have sung something along these lines:

Death to the tyrant! You’re about to die,
Judging by your legs. You’ve never crossed
Your legs before, have you? If you don’t
Die in a moment, I’ll kill you, cross my heart.
I’m fed up with cleaning up after you. How many
Relatives of mine have you killed already?
Thirty years after my mother’s death I’m still
Haunted by images of death and destruction.
But I’m grateful to you for having allowed me
To paint your agony, to kill you artistically.
You’re sentenced to death and you won’t be
Granted a last-minute reprieve, cross my heart!
I recall your previous death. Your eyes
Fluttered open for a moment and then you
Breathed your last. How many times
Have you died so far? Metempsychosis.
In this incarnation you’re an antelope.
What next? Am I already immortal?

You're still dying on the wall.
Should I destroy my painting?
I want my descendants admire me
In the 21st century, in 2013.
You'll agonise for many millennia.
You're the incarnation of everything I hate.
This is your last incarnation, cross my heart!

I'm watching a BBC documentary entitled *Ape Man* – a tautological title. A man has a few arrows sprouting from his back. Another painting, another death. Apparently the man is a shaman who feels a sharp pain in his stomach and kidneys, for God has given him power. I also feel a sharp pain in my belly, but I don't think I've been given anything except the pain and the body where I can feel it. I don't need any power, do I? I wish neither to charm my fellow creatures nor to heal the sick – the daunting task performed by shamans. I may say to a Russian friend of mine, 'If you think you can carry on drinking so much without damaging your health, then you're mistaken.' And I may refuse to keep him company whenever he indulges in yet another drinking bout. That's all I can do and I need no additional power to perform this humanitarian task. Nor do I need the pain I suffer from, but I'm powerless to prevent its attacks.

A hypnotist carries out another experiment; his guinea pig pays a visit to the spirit world. The hypnotist asks the guinea pig how she feels at the end of her journey. 'I felt unaccountably happy during my stay in their land,' she answers.

'Did you meet a lot of interesting people?'

'Spirits are very talkative and I enjoyed talking to them.'

'Your health is generally good, but you do have a few minor problems,' says the hypnotist.

'My health has improved dramatically since I started on this new diet,' says the guinea pig.

'What are you talking about?' asks the hypnotist.

'Fresh fruit and vegetables.'

'Are you also on a salt-free diet?'

'Yes, I am.'

'Do you think your journeys to the spirit world are good for your health?'

'Yes, I do.'

'Do you think such journeys would have a beneficial effect on others?'

'I don't know anything about my fellow creatures.'

'Don't you come from a large family?'

'I've got five brothers and four sisters.'

'Do you think such journeys would have a beneficial effect on *them*?'

'Perhaps.'

‘Why don’t you ask them to join you?’

‘If you’d got on with your work instead of wasting time chatting, you’d be finished by now,’ says the guinea pig.

***

Another New Year. In Russia they wish you ‘a New Happiness,’ but I top this wish with an even better one of my own: ‘I wish you an *Old* Happiness – there’s nothing like it.’ Anyway, there’s no such thing as a New Happiness, for there’s nothing new under the sun. People come up with a new saying and then forget what it means. They may occasionally use it, whenever an opportunity arises; but they fail to apply it on a regular basis, every day, everywhere. Suppose a man or a woman says, ‘I've never heard anything so ridiculous.’

‘I beg to differ – you’ve always heard this nonsense,’ you answer. ‘And what I say is also nonsense and nothing but a waste of time.’

No one can deny that every New Year is old to some extent: it comes to us every year, whatever we may think about such comings and goings. Of course no one forbids you to talk to it on the eve of its coming. ‘Please don’t come. I don't want to put you to any trouble on my account. If other people need your presence, you may go to them. There are people who clasp their hands and glancing upward seem to implore divine assistance. And only with your help can they count on God – at least in this vale of tears. But I’m quite satisfied with my old arrangements. What prompted you to set off on a journey to our land? Did you think your health would improve dramatically during your stay in our midst? Were you envious of your predecessors’ triumphs? I wonder if time has ever scored a success on Earth. We might have been far better off had God stunted the progress of our species, but even apes weren’t on cloud nine, judging from the documentary I’ve got. The same goes for you, I’m afraid. In terms of history you’re still an ape or a caveman, a cavewoman. Why not stay on a tree, in a cave? You could paint something on a rock, using it as a membrane between the spirit world and the real one. Actually you’ll live in the spirit world forever, provided you stay where you are – in the wings of Creation. You already exist because people talk about you and pin their hopes on your presence. Maybe you’re an amoeba that must have been a model for Buddhists, for their nirvana. No burning desires, no suffering.’

This is what Oscar Wilde writes about suffering and time:

> *All this took place in the early part of November of the year before last. A great river of life flows between you and a date so distant. Hardly, if at all, can you see across so wide a waste. But to me it seems to have occurred, I will not say yesterday, but today. Suffering is one long moment. We cannot divide it by seasons. We can only record its moods, and chronicle their return. With us time itself does not progress. It revolves. It seems to circle round one centre of pain. The paralysing immobility of a life, every circumstance of which is regulated after an*

unchangeable pattern, so that we eat and drink and walk and lie down and pray, or kneel at least for prayer, according to the inflexible laws of an iron formula: this immobile quality, that makes each dreadful day in the very minutest detail like its brother, seems to communicate itself to those external forces the very essence of whose existence is ceaseless change. Of seed-time or harvest, of the reapers bending over the corn, or the grape-gatherers threading through the vines, of the grass in the orchard made white with broken blossoms, or strewn with fallen fruit, we know nothing, and can know nothing. For us there is only one season, the season of Sorrow.

Oscar Wilde was writing a long letter to his friend. He might have gone on writing it for many years because only modifications can make us stop doing something: they induce us to reconsider, to embark on a new project. Of course he was aware that his letter would have no effect on his friend's sunny disposition, but writers don't express their feelings for the sake of those who may or may not take notice of them. Every day looks and sounds like its predecessor, like its distant ancestors. Even if you vow never to write anything again, the day you're living through won't break the habit of aping last Tuesday, last Friday and so on and so forth.

So I go on writing because life doesn't offer me anything else; and even if it does I stick to my guns on this issue, declaring that monotony is second nature to me now. I don't know whether I suffer or avail myself of every opportunity to experience joy. I may be doing both, for all I know. When asked about his likes and dislikes in the domain of food, Wittgenstein replied, 'I'll eat anything, provided it's always the same food I get.'

You're not always aware of your suffering unless you feel a sharp pain in your stomach. Some may say about me, 'If he's suffering, he certainly shows no outward sign of it.' Perhaps there's no inward sign of it either: this afternoon I feel no pain either in my body or in my soul. There might be a hidden suffering I'm not aware of – lurking in the shadows, so to speak. Well, let it come into the open and I'll talk about it in minute detail: complaining is also second nature to me now. I wonder how many second natures I've got at my disposal.

***

I'm watching a Russian channel to which, until recently, I paid no attention. A girl speaks to a boy about how the Russians used to love poetry in the Sixties, in the Seventies. A lot of poetry readings were arranged in huge halls – in the Polytechnic Institute, for instance. Over two thousand poetry lovers attended those readings. 'A thing of the past,' said the girl.

'I think you're being far too pessimistic,' said the boy.

'You're always looking on the bright side,' said the girl.

'Do you think nobody loves poetry any more?' said the boy.

'I love it,' said the girl.

'I love it too,' said the boy.

‘Yes, well we’re two of a kind,’ said the girl.

She leant forward to kiss him but he evaded her by pretending to sneeze: he was in love with another girl. That girl was in her third year of economics at Moscow University; she thought that writing and reading poetry was a complete waste of time. ‘Don’t you feel anything in your chest when you read a magnificent poem?’ said the boy to the fledging economist.

‘What am I supposed to feel?’

‘Can’t you feel your heart pounding as you go from one quatrain to another? Aren’t you overcome with emotion? Don’t you feel like bursting into tears?’

‘I feel like shutting the book. I’ve no time for this nonsense. Don’t forget I’m already working for my father and my elder brother. Don’t forget this is a commercial enterprise – we’re here to make money.’

***

On New Year’s Eve I listened to the recordings I had known for many years – or just for one year, taking into consideration what I think about the monotony of my life. No longer do I write in my diary, ‘The routine is the same every day, with nothing to relieve the monotony.’ This way of life isn’t as dangerous as motorway driving which causes many accidents on account of its monotony. You can repeat this word as often as you please without running the risk of falling sick or dying prematurely. Monotony, monotony, monotony, monotony. I repeat this word out loud for hours on end, even when I’m not on my own. A friend of mine told me yesterday, ‘I hear you’ve been unwell recently.’

‘Not at all, I can assure you.’

He shook his head in disbelief and left me alone.

So I listen to the same recordings with no fear for my health. *Les Contes d’Hoffmann*, among other things. At the end of the opera the poet holds a puppet in his arms instead of a real woman. The spirit world, no less! Is there anything else to avail oneself of? Time is either a puppet or a puppeteer.

You hold a real puppet and your thoughts no longer
Lead you astray. When you pull the strings,
The puppet’s arms and legs move. You hear, ‘No strings attached.’
There are strings everywhere. You wound them into balls.
You kick these balls so powerfully they fly over your garden.
Lucy, diamonds and a butterfly net are in the sky.

I listened to The Beatles too, needless to say. In my youth I listened to their songs without understanding what they were singing about. Now I read their lyrics and realise that words are just words, and these words are probably eternal and essential to our relationship with the gods and nature;

but *their* words mean Lucy's in the sky. And other people are also in the sky and they slowly rotate as their bodies circle the earth. Is it the spirit world or the body world?

Obladi oblada life goes on, bra
Lala how the life goes on
Obladi Oblada life goes on bra
Lala how the life goes on.

This is an obladi-oblada world that reminds the Russians of a five-letter word *blyad'* (whore). The world is probably a six-letter word, but it doesn't matter, as the people who aren't too keen on economics have known for many years. Suppose the world is just the letter A. Okay. I'm prepared to live with it, to hug this teddy-bear-like letter tightly to my chest. I'll speak to this letter daily, hourly; I'll christen it Lucy or Lola. Another puppet. Obladi oblada life goes on bra.

***

I'm watching a programme on three villages where three hundred people live and prosper – a sort of tribe that doesn't seem to have disappeared off the face of the Earth. Some of those people are Christian converts, but all of them follow the precepts of their own religion which forbids them to marry foreigners and even strangers.

A stranger walks through one of the villages, falls in love with a native woman, writes a poem and knocks on the front door of her hut. 'I wrote you a poem as an expression of my love,' he says, handing her the poem.

'Thank you very much,' she says as she takes the poem and reads it out loud.

'Will you marry me?' he says.

'You may love someone without necessarily wanting to marry them,' she answers.

'Don't you want our grandchildren to say to their children, "Our grandparents had a long and happy marriage"?'

'Do you know the precepts of our religion?'

'I'll learn them by heart. I'll recite them every day in the original.'

Again he asks her to marry him, but she turns him down: even as a small child, she could be stubborn. He bows to her and resumes his walk around the village where marriages with outsiders are frowned upon.

An orthodox priest comes to the village. He is an outsider but he has no intention of marrying a local girl; the villagers welcome him heartily. He asks them whether a lot of people have died since his last visit to their godforsaken land. They make a laudable effort and recall a few names: they mostly live in the present, not in the past. Only their traditions survive the tortures of time; their relatives and

neighbours are much more fragile and largely depend on their bodies against which their spirits are often powerless.

‘I think my child died several years ago,’ says a villager. ‘I’ve got only one child now, but I might have given birth to a dozen of them. I don’t know where they are, frankly speaking. They might have got lost in the taiga or beyond the North Pole.’

‘I’m sure I used to have a mother, otherwise I wouldn’t have been born,’ says another villager. ‘I’m on my own now.’

‘You must have had a father as well,’ says the priest.

‘I suppose so,’ answers the villager.

‘What about his name?’ says the priest.

‘“Father”, I suppose.’

‘You’re confusing fathers,’ says the priest. ‘Our Father, who art in heaven, is your father of course. But you must have had another father – a personal father, so to speak.’

‘Perhaps,’ says the villager.

‘Was he properly buried?’

‘Our cemetery is overcrowded,’ says the villager.

‘A funeral service should be held,’ says the priest.

‘Is it expensive? Charge the bill to my account, please.’

‘Have you ever heard about infant baptism?’ The priest stares blearily at the first villager.

‘Are you alluding to my daughter?’ says the villager.

‘Yes, I do. I’ll pour some water on her head.’

‘What for?’

‘Don’t you want her to live in Paradise?’

‘Strangers say our land’s a Paradise on earth. Besides, she swims two miles every morning.’

The villagers assemble in the church where the priest awaits them with the Bible. He knows that those who attempt to convert the heathen are often put to death, but he has the courage to stand up for his beliefs. Some consider him a coward for failing to join up in the war and he has a burning desire to clear his name. About 150 citizens of the godforsaken country are converted from their local religion to Christianity. A journalist questions some of the converts.

‘Why have you forsaken your ancestors’ faith?’

‘I think God will help me if I talk to him.’

‘Don’t *your* gods help you?’

‘They do. I just felt like adding another god to my list.’

‘Don’t you know that your new father is the only God available to humans?’

‘There are no shortages in a capitalist society.’

***

When pondering over the Christian faith, Kierkegaard is eager to dispose of history because one is supposed to feel the Cross and Christ's suffering today, as if the disaster had taken place this morning. The Christian faith needs no proofs, harking back only to the event itself which, according to some scientists, is completely without foundation. But Christians seek this foundation in their hearts and so discard hypotheses, facts and whatever interferes with their inner universe whose centrepiece happens to be the Cross. To them history is just an appendix and may be overlooked for the sake of the ultimate goal – the founding of the City of God. Some of them believe that the city in question was founded at the birth of Christ; others point to the Cross and speak about the Resurrection. According to them, the elect already reside in the City of God, ignoring history and technical hitches altogether. They may join a health club but refuse point blank to join the army.

If you live in the City of God, you may occasionally cast a glance at history in order to criticise it or laugh its ineptitudes off. So many crimes have been perpetrated after the advent of Christianity and it's not an easy task to shrug them off, saying that in the City of God no one remembers them: no tombs, no monuments can be seen within the city walls. Grizzled veterans in uniform don't gather at war monuments. No journalist writes, 'The monument stands as a chilling reminder of man's inhumanity to man.' Those who discard our history are both blessed and cursed and I'm not of their number, although I do my best to live today, at 1.34 p.m.

What does the City of God look like, I wonder? Dante's Paradise is the City of God or rather a huge skyscraper where only the elect are allowed to live. Some of them have penthouses, others are content to socialise with a very small circle of people residing on the ground floor. Nevertheless they all live in the Skyscraper of God – in the City of God, in other words. The heavens described by Enoch are of a different kind: they're not homogeneous and differ so radically one might think he journeys through Hell. For instance, in the second heaven he's shown 'darkness, greater than earthly darkness, and there I saw prisoners hanging, watched, awaiting the great and boundless judgement, and these angels were dark-looking, more than earthly darkness, and incessantly making weeping through all hours.' According to Enoch, Paradise is 'between corruptibility and incorruptibility'. One might take the following excerpt for a description of Paradise: 'And here there is no unfruitful tree, and every place is blessed. And there are three hundred angels very bright, who keep the garden, and with incessant sweet singing and never-silent voices serve the Lord throughout all days and hours.' This action or non-action is set in the third heaven so one expects a crescendo of bliss instead of which we land up in a place where there are 'all manner of torture': murky fire, a fiery river, frost and ice, thirst and shivering. Actually, I'm not sure I'd be able to bear the angels' never-silent voices: even when a great singer projects his or her voice for several hours, rehearsing at home or somewhere else, I take to my heels. And if *Parsifal* was sung in Bayreuth by one person only, I would leave after the second act. And if Bruckner's *Te Deum* resounded 24 hours a day, I might set fire to the concert hall.

In the fourth heaven there are 'all the rays of the light of sun and moon'. I wonder why we see *some* rays of the light of sun and moon in our world. Do we all have one foot in the grave or in the

fourth heaven? Or do we have one foot in the grave and one arm in the fourth heaven? And what about other heavens and other members of our bodies?

In The Revelation of St John the Divine we find many precious stones: 'And the foundations of the wall of the city *were* garnished with all manner of precious stones. The first foundation *was* jasper; the second, sapphire; the third, a chalcedony; the fourth, an emerald, the fifth, sardonyx, the sixth, sardius, the seventh, chrysolyte, the eighth, beril; the ninth, a topaz; the tenth, a chrysoprasus; the eleventh, a jacinth; the twelfth, an amethyst.' Matthew Henry's commentary doesn't match the splendour of the gigantic jewellery box: 'These foundations are set forth by twelve sorts of precious stones, denoting the variety and excellence of the doctrines of the gospel, or of the graces of the Holy Spirit, or the personal excellence of the Lord Jesus Christ.' Neither does he unlock the imagination when he says, 'These gates were all of pearls. Christ is the Pearl of great price, and he is our way to God.' Swedenborg turns out to be more bountiful:

> *There are two general colours which are pellucent in precious stones, red and white, the other colours, as green, yellow, blue, and many others, are compounds of these with black; and red signifies the good of love, and white signifies the truth of wisdom. Red signifies the good of love, because it has its origin in the fire of the sun, and the fire of the Sun of the spiritual world in its essence is the Lord's Divine Love, consequently the good of love; and white signifies the truth of wisdom, because it has its origin in the light which proceeds from the fire of that Sun, and that proceeding light in its essence is Divine Wisdom, consequently the truth of wisdom; and black has its origin in their shade, which is ignorance.*

The fire of the sun may be easily confused with its light so one is tempted to say, 'There's no fire without light' and vice versa. In this case the truth of wisdom seems to be identical to the good of love, which is rather doubtful, considering a bad reputation that love and its ingredients have in the Kingdom of Wisdom. What may be pedantically defined as 'secular love' is an impediment to spiritual progress unless one comes across 'platonic love' deprived of bodily temptations and defilements. Dante's love for Beatrice was certainly platonic and also religious: his wisdom thrived on it to the point of enabling him to write the *Commedia* – an unparalleled exploit in the history of literature.

In Canto XIV of the *Paradiso*, Dante finds himself in the sphere of the sun, but he doesn't really notice it, being wholly engrossed in the light coming from a glorified body – the sun in its own right. It's St Thomas who plays the part of the sun on this occasion. Dante wants to know if the glorified body, after the resurrection, will retain its lustre eternally. If so, he doubts that the eyes could endure to look on its brilliance. St Thomas goes on at great length about this variety of light: 'Just as a glorified body is not passible to a passion of nature but only to a passion of the soul, so in virtue of its property of glory it acts only by the action of the soul. Now intense clarity does not disturb the sight, in so far as it acts by the action of the soul, for thus it rather gives delight, but it disturbs it in so far as it acts by

the action of nature by heating and destroying the organ of sight, and by scattering the spirits asunder. Hence, though the clarity of a glorified body surpasses the clarity of the sun, it does not by its nature disturb the sight but soothes it.'

I wonder why Swedenborg didn't replace the sun by a number of glorified bodies or just by St Thomas Aquinas. The rays emitted by such bodies are more intense than whatever the sun can do in the Kingdom of Light. Both love and wisdom benefit from the power of their new source, reaching their zeniths in no time at all. And yet they destroy no organ of sight and keep the spirits together. One can soothe one's thoughts, nerves and muscles by bathing in this spiritual light on a beach or just on a divan. One can even speak about fire in connection with the glorified body: nobody would be reminded of Giordano Bruno. The glorified body neither destroys other bodies nor commits suicide through a self-inflicted torture. The fire of the glorified body is the Lord's Divine Love.

***

Many people believe that the City of God is a huge hotel complex – a honeycomb of rooms and courtyards. Those who stay at the hotel enjoy its luxury but do not know whether it is their eternal abode. They don't even know whether they live in the Kingdom of Eternity or in the Kingdom of Time. Apparently the hotel's staff is very much of the opinion that the notion of eternity, if understood literally, would lull the clients into a false sense of security. In other words, they might sleep all the time instead of talking to each other, dancing, singing hymns and so on. They should think that Paradise is elsewhere and has to be conquered, in a way. So they communicate a whole range of emotions as they discuss the news with angels disguised as employees and security guards. Whenever they look out of their windows, the Earth comes into view, but they mistake it for the moon: they're not used to seeing the Earth from outer space. For some reason there are no astronauts among them. According to a theory propounded by the receptionist, all astronauts spend their eternity in rockets flying to Venus, Jupiter and distant stars.

There are many shops at the hotel, which enables its clients to enliven their daily routine. Jewels are constantly on display near the centrepiece of the complex: the Fountain of Youth. Last month two thieves broke the shop window and carried off jewellery worth millions of euros – just another show designed to extend the clients' awareness of the dangers of time.

In the bar you're likely to overhear something along these lines: 'Do you think we're still in the clutches of time or has eternity already welcomed our bodies and souls?'

'The same problems keep coming up day after day.'

'So you think there are days and nights at the hotel? I thought they might be switching the lights on and off to make us believe we're still on Earth.'

'Where do you think we are? On Jupiter?'

'Isn't it rather a sort of space odyssey?'

'I miss my family and even my nanny, her witty repartee.'

‘I bet they’re still in the land of the living.’

‘We don’t seem to grow older.’

‘I don’t remember how I was yesterday.’

‘There was no yesterday.’

‘What about this morning?’

‘I used to shave twice a day. Now I don’t shave at all.’

‘It’s such a drag having to shave every day.’

‘When did you last brush your teeth?’

‘Do you ever brush your hair?’

***

Do I have to go back in order to enlarge upon apes or other ancestors of ours? How did they turn into humans? By eating bone marrow instead of vegetables and fruit. Are vegetarians apes or humans? Their ancestors must have eaten a lot of marrow, otherwise they would live on trees, in the midst of birds. Why didn’t birds turn into humans? Penguins and ostriches are *flightless* birds, but I’m mostly interested in the creatures flying overhead and singing better than Caruso and Maria Callas. Would we like precious stones if birds and not apes were our ancestors?

Apparently meditation upon sapphire ‘carries the soul to heavenly contemplation’. But birds are already in heaven which they contemplate all day long without a second thought. They do not meditate upon the region through which they fly, automatically flapping their wings. Nor do they really contemplate it; if they did, they would be none the wiser. The 11th-century Bishop Marbodius describes sapphires in the following words: ‘Sapphires possess a beauty like that of the heavenly throne; they denote the hearts of the simple, of those moved by a sure hope and of those whose lives shine with their good deeds and virtuousness.’ Isn’t it an accurate description of birds, of their lives? I don’t think, however, that they’re moved by a sure hope: they just flap their wings and fly upwards, downwards or to the south. I’m told sapphires stave off poverty, protect against the anger of the great, against treason and against miscarriage of justice, increase valour, joy and vitality, drive away ill humour and strengthen the muscles. Are birds in need of increasing their joy and vitality? Do they look for protection against the anger of the great, against hunters and cats? How would sapphires protect them? Should they use their beaks to pick up sapphires instead of food?

Placed on the belly of a woman in childbirth, a jasper relieves her pangs. Are birds in pain when they lay their eggs?

We know that our heavenly Father feeds not only birds but also plants. As for humans, they have to shift for themselves and that is what actually happened at the dawn of our history: we switched from vegetables to meat. ‘This raises the question of our future,’ an ape said to another ape. ‘Shall we always remain apes or become humans?’

‘How could we become human beings?’ asked yet another ape.

‘Our brains are too small. We can’t think properly. We do all these things without thinking and we get ourselves into such a mess.’

‘You think too much – that’s your problem,’ said another ape.

The first ape paused and thought for a moment. ‘It might be better for you to remain an ape. Ignorance is bliss, as they say.’

‘Who are *they*?’ asked another ape.

‘Humans must speak like that.’

‘Some apes say that speaking about humans helps you think, but I find it only distracts me,’ said another ape.

Ignorance or knowledge, apes or humans. Some scientists affirm that apes had no choice but to accept their human destiny, their potential metamorphosis: they couldn’t have done otherwise. At the time when the decision had to be taken, they didn’t have enough thoughts to make such a decision. And when the number of thoughts increased dramatically, due to the meat they chewed and swallowed all day long, it was too late: they had reached the point of no return. Some of them did their best to retrace their steps on the road leading from one stage of evolution to another. They said there were too many thoughts in their heads and the greater part of these thoughts didn’t help them to live. They called them ‘idle thoughts’ and said they were linked to their senses which wreaked havoc in their souls. ‘Fire, snakes and lightning are less inimical to us than our own senses, so much more dangerous,’ they said. ‘They assail us all the time. Even the most vicious enemies can attack only some people at some times, and not at others, but everybody is always and everywhere weighed down by his or her senses. And people don’t go to Hell because some enemy has knocked them down and cast them into it. It’s because they’ve been knocked down by their unsteady senses that they’re helplessly dragged there.’

This rather begs the question of how they lived before turning into humans. Did they have no problem with their senses, with their senses’ interference in the lives of apes? ‘Our senses didn’t really obtrude on our privacy,’ they answered. ‘By about 9 o’clock we would feel faint from hunger. Actually we often suffered from hunger pangs. We still suffer from hunger pangs and from the sex drive. But we’ve got other desires too, and we can’t cope with them successfully. Our knowledge of the universe helps us only in one respect: we’re aware that later on in life the sex drive tends to diminish.’

Thoughts rampage through the brain, leaving chaos in their wake. From the brain they go to the body, awakening some passion or other or many passions at once, at the same moment. Apes pick up fruit and make love to each other. They have no idea whether they’re rich or poor, healthy or fatally injured, happy or miserable. You can’t say about an ape, ‘She’s a miserable old trout who complains about everything.’ You can’t even say: ‘This ape always has such a miserable expression on his face.’ What *can* you say about an ape? You can speak about their jumps, their adroitness and gracefulness.

What can you say about a *human*? ‘The children have jumped on the couch so much they’ve ruined the springs.’

A multitude of thoughts never amounts to what Buddhists call ‘mindfulness’.

> *The man who has imposed strict mindfulness on all he does, and remains as watchful as a gatekeeper at a city-gate, is safe from injury by the passions, just as a well-guarded town is safe from its foes. No defilement can arise in him whose mindfulness is directed on all that concerns his body. On all occasions he guards his thought, as a nurse guards a child. Without the armour of mindfulness a man is an easy target for the defilements, just as on a battlefield someone who has lost his armour is easily shot by his enemies. A mind which is not protected by mindfulness is as helpless as a sightless man walking over uneven ground without a guide. Loss of mindfulness is the reason why people engage in useless pursuits, do not care for their own true interests, and remain unalarmed in the presence of things which actually menace their welfare.*

Buddhists first restrain their ambitions and then get rid of them altogether. But some of them jump in at the deep end, trying to downgrade (or upgrade) their nature so as to become apes once more. They believe that apes don’t engage in useless pursuits, confining their actions to what is essential for their survival. Occasionally they may get alarmed when confronted with a hunter or the director of a zoo, but on the whole they behave much wiser than any human with the exception of saints. But how can one revert to this blissful state when a tree was a piece of furniture? In those days, time wasn’t encumbered by long and idle thinking. Time can be as empty as a beggar’s purse, assuming that such a purse is really empty. An ape doesn’t say, ‘I’d better put this morning in the rubbish bin’: it’s already in the rubbish bin or in a no-ape’s land.

You may visualise time in the shape of the human body and kill it without further ado. But the dead time pesters you as if it were alive and kicking – just because it is in your room or in your thoughts. So you pick up its corpse and dump it in an area of wasteland just outside the city. Or you dump it at sea, hoping it may drown and dissolve in water. Or you may visualise time in the shape of a meteor, for you’re aware that many meteors disintegrate during their passage through the atmosphere. But time doesn’t disintegrate, contrary to your expectations; nor does it drown, being as unsinkable as the Titanic.

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Confucius speaks about four types of man. The highest is reserved for the saints who possess knowledge from birth and therefore have no need of schooling. Confucius, for one, never saw a saint, but he is sure they must have adorned the surface of the globe in antiquity. After the saints there come those who usually acquire knowledge by learning; if they do so assiduously they become ‘superior men’. The third category embraces all third-rate representatives of the human species who find it hard

to learn; however, they don't let this fact discourage them. At the bottom of the heap you find morons who are unable to learn anything and make no effort whatsoever. Apes belong to the first and third category, in my opinion. With a few exceptions, the people I encounter in concert halls are somewhere in between the third category and the bottom: they might learn *something*, but make no effort. They think that a ticket they bought is a cast-iron guarantee: the concert will surpass everyone's expectations. So they don't expect anything, relying on box-office hits, publicity and other people's applause.

At the dawn of our history the last category of man must have chosen legs to the detriment of the brain which thus didn't grow to a huge size. Scientists were surprised to find that our rite of passage had focused on our legs growing longer and longer. Life often relies on instincts and velocity in preference to reflexion and wisdom whose light may remain confined to the sun and its rays. You don't think in terms of the glorified body when pursued by a dinosaur or any other now extinct monster. Actually you don't think at all, so your brain can even grow smaller and lighter, making things easier for you. The lighter your body, the faster you run. Your heart may be reduced in size as well: you don't feel love when escaping the tyrannical rule of the jungle. Even if you saw a glorified body on the horizon, you would continue to run because only your after-life depends on its influence. Can a glorified body save you from the fury of a dinosaur? And what about the Lord's Divine Love?

Epicurus and Spinoza think that God doesn't meddle in other people's affairs; in other words, He doesn't care about humans. So we should run all the more passionately since jogging is good for our health. Even if there are no dinosaurs in sight, we should run for the sake of our wellbeing. The standard of care at our universal hospital is far from excellent so we must take care of ourselves. God helps those who help themselves, as they say. But they're probably ignorant of the fact that God doesn't help us at all. They remain blissfully ignorant of the troubles that lie ahead: they neither run nor seek refuge from persecution. How *do* they help themselves? They invest the money in the property market, but they do not run. If a bomb is about to fall on your head you don't invest in the property market. Nor do you say to your friends, 'By investing small amounts regularly, you can smoothe out the effects of sudden rises and falls in the stock market.' You just run for your life or you run against the clock that brings you closer and closer to death.

One man looks at his legs; another man puts his hands on his head to find out if his brain has grown bigger over the last 20 hours. 'What do you need your brain for?' asks the first man. 'Do you wish to communicate with dinosaurs?'

'I wish to communicate with my fellow creatures.'

'Can't you communicate with them through your body? A workout in the gym will exercise all the major muscle groups. You'll meet a lot of bodies if you sweat it out in the gym for a couple of hours every day. It's easy to communicate this way – nobody will ever misunderstand you. Just pat him or her on the back affectionately and say, "How are you today?"'

'I'm interested in eternal questions.'

‘You can find the answer to almost any question in cyberspace.’

‘You can’t find answers to such questions anywhere except in your head.’

‘What do you need these answers for? Can you eat them? No. Can you buy a car with them? No. Can you build a country house with them? No.’

‘I have a legal obligation to ensure my child receives a proper education. I’ll teach him how to think properly. But first I must fill my head with appropriate thoughts. There are many of them in the universe and I should make sure there’s enough room for this wisdom. Before I went off to university my father gave me a few words of wisdom and I still recall them. Without these words I wouldn’t have become what I am.’

‘What *are* you? A sage, a seer? You look pale and sickly. Your diet’s unhealthy. Do you want your child to die? Do you think he’ll become immortal if you give him a few words of wisdom?’

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A few words of wisdom. You say that time is a river – a hackneyed metaphor, to be sure – but you explain that an extravagant mass of words doesn’t necessarily shed enough light on the matter because it strikes your imagination instead of making you think. A river is an obvious symbol of time and consequently needs no further explanation unless you’re willing to supply it. You may say that this river flows through several counties before flowing into the Pacific which is an apposite symbol of eternity. And changing the course of this river would cause serious damage to your life: it’s better to let it follow its course unconstrained. A quotation from Lao Tsu would be in order. As a matter of fact, many short rivers flow into the Pacific, for there are several times in your existence: personal time, impersonal time, anti-personal time and so on. You may also draw a diagram showing how the blood (or time) flows through the heart.

And then your disciple comes to an airport and waits for a flight from Italy, Tajikistan or Germany: his mother or father is on the plane. A terrorist strides into the arrival hall where your disciple is standing on tiptoe and sets off an enormous explosion, leaving bodies strewn all over the floor. Some bystanders scramble to get the wounded out on baggage carts. Where’s time now? It no longer flows like a river; it screams and runs to escape the flames. Wearing a lorry suit dotted with blood, a driver talks to a journalist: ‘The people behind me on my left and right were blown apart, softening the blow. That’s how I managed to save myself.’ There’s a man with half of his body torn away.

I saw a documentary on the only Russian channel available in my house where I’ve got no special equipment to lavish thousands of Russian words and images on my nostalgia. A man was speaking about the wartime food shortages and other deprivations: he had stayed in Leningrad during the German blockade. ‘A child died,’ he said. ‘His mother had no strength left to bury him. So he was lying on the floor in expectation of some burial. Then his mother heard a noise associated in her mind with rats, with their comings and goings. Every day she had to go out because there was no other way

of getting the ration of food she was allowed. And every time she took her son with her because she was afraid the rats might disfigure his corpse. You see, she was too weak to catch a rat, which would have enabled her to survive. And the rats were too weak to flee her flat.'

The man told another story about the blockade and the deprivations they had all suffered. 'A woman had two children – a boy and a girl. The boy died and the girl was starving to death. The woman took an axe and chopped her son's arm off. Next day she chopped the other arm off. She saved her daughter. Was it a crime or an exploit?'

He also told a story about a dog; his mistress was also about to die of hunger. For all the pangs she suffered from, she couldn't bring herself to eat the dog. One day, when her torment was at fever pitch, she took him to her neighbours; and yet she knew they would eat him on the spot. Before leaving their flat, she turned round to look at her dog for the last time. He didn't budge; he didn't follow his mistress. Neither did time budge at that moment.

Why do we always compare time to rivers
And birds? Sometimes it's just a stain of blood
On a carpet. Not a figure, mind you;
Not even a vicious circle. It's true it may be cut into
Circles, squares and triangles, but that doesn't
Mean anything. Oh for a time which would indulge my every whim!
It poured down all evening and most of the night as well.

I know I've got several times at my disposal, although I can't use them at the same time. I drink a glass of wine and stare at the wall opposite as if something were written on it – a prophetic figure, for instance. Nothing is written on it except time that gradually turns into a wall; so I realise I've been looking at it for quite a while. There's no wall ahead of me except time and its prophecies. What does it prophesy? A war, as usual; a suicide attack. Investigators are working to determine the power and type of explosive used in the attack. Is it a different time from the one looking like a wall? The wall remains and the prophecies engraved on it don't disappear; and yet they've already come true. These doom and gloom prophecies are doing little to help the investigators: the explosive in question can't be found on the wall. Does that mean that another war and another suicide attack are on the agenda? Does that mean that history always repeats itself in spite of the warnings we are given every day? There are walls everywhere and we knock our heads against them.

These two times aren't identical: one shouldn't think the second time continues the first. The second doesn't prolong the horror of the first, which is motionless, symbolical and almost mystical. The second is carrying out research on history. It follows the instructions engraved on the wall, but they're not followed to the letter, allowing us some room for manoeuvre.

A car passed in the street, its horn blaring. This car is a time in its own right; so is its horn. I recall a woman with whom I was having an affair back in the Sixties. In her bright yellow coat, she was easily identifiable in the crowd. She owned several times and I was determined to reduce their number and make them coincide with the times I had at my disposal. I didn't succeed, I'm sorry to say, but it was worth trying to merge our two selves into one.

I'm unable to stem the course of events but I'll never follow the crowd, whatever is in store for me. I'll push my way to the front of the crowd to get a better look. I may see something out of the ordinary: *another* time, *another* place, some *other* trees. Even in the midst of the crowd I may chance upon a friendly configuration of times, of nerves, of waves. In Tokyo I never go to Narita Airport by coach, but whenever I see one in front of my hotel I smile while reading its name: Friendly Limousine. I might already have achieved my objectives had I taken advantage of this service, if only once.

PART TWO

They always speak about life and death, trying to find out how they're connected or disconnected, joined or out of joint. They don't *always* speak about them – on the contrary, they pretend they don't exist. They mean, death doesn't exist, whereas life is everywhere, even in Hell. Okay, they don't know *they* have no existence whatsoever with the exception of their hidden fears which might occasionally reveal their human nature. Fear and love are two key powers that steer us towards something – towards another house, for instance. I think the Hereafter may be just another house where I'll wallow in a bath for years. Or is it a landscape? Well, in this case I'll sprawl across the landscape without a second thought because I'll have only one thought at my disposal. How nice it is to have only one thought which excludes not only doubts but also the torment of decision-making. Within one thought all decisions are made automatically so you just sit down and relax your tried muscles.

You go from one house to another or from one room to another: no point in thinking big on this occasion. Is it metempsychosis or something else? I don't care about words; I think in terms of houses or rooms or lives or worlds. I have no idea how many worlds there are inside or outside Creation, but two worlds would be enough for me. I'm allowed to stay in world Number One on the condition that I forget my previous lives, my previous worlds. I still remember a few rooms where I slept several years ago, trying to fall asleep and have sweet dreams which are often as bitter as bitter lemon or bitter chocolate. What about Number Two?

Time is nothing but a succession of houses, rooms, chambers and worlds. Death is just another chamber of horrors, to put it mildly. Well, I went to Egypt last year and of course I paid a visit to the Pyramid of Cheops. I had seen a lot of sights before this visit and I was prepared for a miracle; but nothing happened. Make sure you bend your knees when you're visiting this pyramid. I bent everything and climbed the stairs which led me to nothing or to another world. There were no mural paintings in that world, but I realised it was more beautiful than any painting. It was a world of space, a world of another world – something that speaks to you about time much better than time itself. There are no paintings in our so-called life; we just go from one pyramid to another, from one tomb to another.

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You say the world is one or two.
Let's count out loud from one to ten. What
Do we hear? A multitude of worlds.
What can we do with them?

Shall we live in them? What for? One
World is enough. Enough is enough, as they say.

What do they say? Do they speak about
Worlds or identities or personas?

I'm alone, as you know; so is everyone.
Where's your breakfast? Someone must have
Brought your breakfast to your room.
You're lying in bed. You'll never get up and the worlds
Will come and go as they do in books. Where are
Your books? On a tray. You can eat them.

There are only two chords in human existence: the C Major chord and the Tristan chord. 'The **Tristan chord** is a chord made up of the notes F, B, D♯ and G♯. More generally, it can be any chord that consists of these same intervals: augmented fourth, augmented sixth, and augmented ninth above a root. It is so named as it is heard in the opening phrase of Richard Wagner's opera *Tristan und Isolde* as part of the leitmotif relating to Tristan.' What relates to Tristan apart from this chord, I wonder? Does he own only one chord? He probably owns one *world* where I may be found by some extramundane explorer. Tristan goes from life to death; what's more, he is eager to die. I also go from life to death, as everybody does. The next thought is obvious: I'm not eager to die, in spite of my recent depression.

I said to myself, 'Every day I sink further and further into depression.' How deep is it? Not the foggiest idea. Have I been hospitalised for depression? No. And I keep saying to myself, 'Don't let feelings of depression swamp you.' Withdrawal is a classic symptom of depression so I must have withdrawn into my house or at least into my room, but I've no idea where I was during those days.

Let's go back to the chords, to the heart of the matter. The C Major chord is always there as if nothing could happen without it. You always hear it unless it's the C Minor chord you hear and experience. Anyway these chords can be relied upon. If the foundations of your life aren't stable, collapse is possible. If you want to live, you choose the C Major chord; if you want to die, you fling yourself into your work and play the C Minor chord until you realise you can't play it any more. Having knowledge is one thing but being able to act is another kettle of fish; so I'm still alive. I hear both the C Major chord and the Tristan chord.

What does that mean? I'm lying motionless on the ground, as if dead; at the same time, I've moved on to higher things over the last two years. Higher, lower – it's easy to poke fun at this measurement. I don't measure anything, but things might measure me to some extent. This machine measures my heart rate. And someone says, 'Measure out 250 grams of his soul and sift it into a large mixing bowl.' What's in this bowl? Other people's souls or hearts or bodies? Why do we have to be in the same bowl? After all, it's not a bowl of cherries.

I adored cherry jam in my childhood; it was homemade and I would even take part in the process of its creation. There are so many creations around and you don't know to which creation you belong and what you're supposed to do with the creation to which you do belong. All these questions are superfluous, but they continue to pop up as long as you live and I'm afraid you'll live forever. Time's endless, so is eternity. There's no escape from jams and bowls and other people. Philosophers speak about the Other to whom you turn for help and who may turn you down. I speak about myself, but I must take into consideration the fact that I may be living in a bowl where a lot of people congregate around the entrance to a theatre, hoping to catch a glimpse of the stars of the show. I'm not a star and I don't even know where this theatre is situated, but my bowl is probably here and I accept it as my dwelling place.

Magic cultures viewed the world as a cavern – not Plato's cavern, mind you. This cavern or cave or theatre sent out a powerful beam of light which couldn't be misconstrued: it was the light of God. The cavern wasn't infinite so you couldn't see the universe for which Giordano Bruno perished a long time ago: there was only one world, one space and one time. Your birth is here, your death is there; everything is clear. I've always been looking for a quiet submissive wife who would obey my every word. I become this submissive wife when I visualise the universe in the shape of a room or a cave from which there's no escape. I wait for God's decision; I'm the soul of the world where many souls socialise with their colleagues. Do I finally agree to follow the crowd, for all my inborn individualism? Can individualism be inborn? Perhaps, at an early stage of my life, I saw something I disliked intensely and that put me right off those individuals who can be traditionally found in the crowd. There are other individuals who distance themselves from the multitude and whatever may remind them of the crowd. But they don't belong to magic culture every member of which is obliged to feel at one with the other members, with the entire universe. That's how the whole system works and no one is allowed to shirk his or her responsibilities on pain of death.

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Which chord resounds in my life? Am I a partisan of the C Major chord or the Tristan chord? Which chord is in my genes? Actually, to some extent, I'm allowed to decide which chord suits my way of life and my way of reasoning better. The C Major chord predisposes one to immobility so one keeps on saying, 'I'm feeling tired and lethargic.' Yet people might say about this person, 'He's a man of remarkable buoyancy, but he doesn't like to travel.' And somebody else might chime in, 'A stay-at-home father.' In short, this person lives within one harmony which leads nowhere. It might lead to God, but one doesn't know the itinerary of this chord until one's death, for this chord has no itinerary to speak of. This chord hangs in thick folds like curtains and you can't even draw these curtains. This heavy chord hangs around your neck so you can't turn your head and therefore always look in the same direction – for instance, at the curtains you can't draw. It might also hang up in the air, looking like the sun on account of its brightness.

The C Major chord and the Tristan chord are poles apart in personality. Like a child, the latter can't sit still for long without fidgeting. It will never tell you, 'I'm so cold I can't move my fingers.' It always moves its fingers, its toes, and its upper lip quivers as if about to utter a few words without which no one can live appropriately. It is always eager to embark on new adventures, but it doesn't jump as some other chords do when in the mood for travelling. It creeps through doors and windows; it glides gracefully into a palace in a long flowing gown. It is on the move and behaves in such a way you get the feeling it is leading you somewhere. The C Major chord bathes in the sea of light; the Tristan chord may lead to light or to darkness. It hesitates slightly before answering your questions and it never really answers them, for all its efforts. In comparison with the C Major chord, it sounds like a pregnant pause. It engages you in conversation; there follows a pregnant pause in which both know what the other is thinking but neither knows what to say. You're both silent, in other words, in other sounds. There are other sounds which seem to stem from this chord so that even when it is silent you can hear *something* – a variant of the Tristan chord, its offspring and heir. It never leaves you alone, providing you remain faithful to it. You're always in love; you're always on the move. The C Major people are more or less motionless: they sit on divans, stand in parks so one might take them for statues. Some of them never leave their monasteries and pray in their cells round the clock. Others are locked in padded cells and forced to wear straitjackets. The Tristan people drive through red lights, along narrow, bumpy roads; they've got no brakes on their bicycles. Even if they stay at home for a while, sitting on a divan or in an armchair, they continue to move somehow. For instance, for hours they may watch a spider creeping up one of their walls.

> *The **pneumatics** ('spiritual', from Greek πνεῦμα, spirit) were, in Gnosticism, the highest order of humans, the other two orders being psychics and hylics. The pneumatic saw himself as escaping the doom of the material world via the secret knowledge. Outsiders could only know these secrets by joining a Gnostic group. To be a Gnostic is to believe in three planes of existence: the pure unknown (demiurge), the material world of coitus and comfort, and the pure spiritual realm of ascension or escape.*

I'd like to escape the doom of the material world, but I've no idea where to go in order to accomplish such a feat. Wherever you may find yourself, there's the material world and even in the clouds there are planes that belong to it, especially if you travel first class: as soon as you take your seat you realise what material wealth means. Of course, if you're a saint or a mystic, you can fly on your own and visit the stars where you're likely to be given a warm welcome; but I'm neither a saint nor a mystic. So I'm part of the material world and whatever I do enhances my attachment to it. In the company of the Earth I go round the sun and, though I don't think I travel first class, I do realise what material wealth means, all the more so since I've already opened the bottle of claret I'll drink at lunch. And whenever I wish to get out, I hear an extramundane voice, 'Make sure your seatbelt is securely fastened.'

Sometimes the voice puts a question I'm not in a position to answer, for instance, 'Are the children safely fastened into their seats?' I've no children and so I wonder if the voice doesn't speak to the members of the community which may be defined as 'magic'. Aren't we all children of God or Light or Pneuma Who may talk to us now and then to remind us that we live in a sort of suitcase? So He or She tells us, 'Could you help me fasten this strap around my suitcase?'

That's how Unity is created: you're either on a plane from which there's no escape or in a suitcase with a strap fastened around it. In the second case you can't even commit suicide. (There are some tiny holes which enable you to breathe normally.) I wonder to whom the voice I hear speaks. ('Could you help me fasten this strap around my suitcase?') To angels, to demons, to the humans who don't belong to the magic world?

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I believe in three planes of existence, in five planes of existence: the more of them are available, the better. There's probably *my* plane of existence which has remained unknown so far because, a long time ago, I got stuck in my three bedrooms, in the Trinity, in Chekhov's *Three Sisters*. Gnostic groups must also have got stuck in this triangular world which is so poor one can't really enjoy it to the utmost. The Tristan chord is manifold and offers as many as a score of planes as it leads one from one plane to another through its chromatic scale and congenital yearning. Either you choose a score of planes or content yourself with the C Major chord – the only plane ensuring both light and happiness. One single plane may satisfy all your desires on the condition that you stick to it and drop all other yearnings.

You can't fly through the sky on three planes at once; nor can you sit on two armchairs – not even in first class. Do I need all other lives hanging from the sky like fruit or sprouting up everywhere? Of course I'm not supposed to live all these lives simultaneously. The same voice says to you, 'Do sit down and make yourself comfortable.' You comply with the voice's wish and make yourself comfortable on a sofa. A few minutes later the voice says again, 'Do sit down and make yourself comfortable.' You see another sofa and realise it's pointless to sit down twice on the same sofa, especially since there's another sofa in the room where you're sitting. So you get up, head for the other sofa and sit down on it. After a while you hear the voice again: 'Do sit down and make yourself comfortable.' Yet another sofa comes out of nowhere. Three hours later you feel exhausted, although all the sofas as well as the soft feather pillows are comfortable. Is that why Buddhists aspire to escape from the infinite series of incarnations?

Let's choose one plane, one life – that of the pure unknown, for example. We banish the Tristan chord from our time and devote ourselves to unknown quantities, unknown qualities, unknown numbers and so on. You say, 'I don't know anything about this.'

'Welcome to the club,' says the voice.

'Are you the Demiurge?' you ask.

‘You’re about to be expelled from the club for bad behaviour,’ says the voice.

‘I understand. I shouldn’t ask too many questions in the pure unknown, otherwise this realm will become the pure known.’

‘You can ask as many questions as you wish. I’ll answer only some of them.’

‘May I talk to you without asking any questions? After all, I’m a member of the club.’

‘You’re allowed to talk to me.’

‘I’d be delighted to stay in your realm forever.’

‘You must have a guarantor in order to get a visa to enter the country.’

‘But didn’t you say, “Welcome to the club?”’

‘What I said is unknown to others. They say your visa still hasn’t come through.’

‘So you *know* what they say, do you? Aren’t you a citizen of the pure unknown? Are you allowed to know each other? All right. I need to extend my visa. I’ve applied for an extension to my visa.’

‘They grant you an *entry* visa so you’re allowed to stay in the entrance hall. But you won’t take part in our annual ball.’

‘Why do you change your mind all the time?’

‘What else am I supposed to do in the palace from which you can’t escape? If you ride a bicycle or a car, you can look at cityscapes and landscapes. You neither think about the latest government scheme nor change your mind on the spur of the moment – just for the fun of it. Time flies when you’re having fun, otherwise time sits on a sofa and has a cup of tea. You can also have a cup of tea. But neither of you will ever fly because all the windows in the palace are shut.’

‘What about the front door?’

‘It lets you in. You change your mind, but it’s too late. You keep changing your mind. You speak about visas, saying to yourself, “I won’t apply for an extension to my visa.” But you’ve already been granted Demiurgian citizenship.’

‘Why don’t you congratulate me?’

‘You won’t even be able to make fun of a fat bespectacled man. You see, time is of slim build with short, dark hair. Time is a woman, contrary to popular opinion. She is the mistress of this palace. And you’ll see only her, no one else, nothing else. Most of the furniture is so ugly you wouldn’t give it house-room.’

I’ve never properly understood who is the Demiurge and what part he plays in the Creation or in his own realm about which we know nothing or next to nothing. No wonder – it’s the pure unknown which at times turns into the impure known. What I do know is rather impure or inexact; nevertheless even this scant knowledge allows me to talk about the Demiurge and his qualities. He isn’t a woman, in my opinion: there’s already one woman in the same realm and this woman, the Sophia, is quite superior to the Demiurge. He often asks her, ‘What do you take me for?’ And she answers, ‘You think you’re the Almighty, but you’re mistaken. Your conceit knows no bounds. You believe you’re alone

and unknown. You declare you're the unique and highest God. There's no scientific evidence to support such presumptions.'

The Demiurge is enlightened by the Sophia, but I'm not sure he comes round to her point of view. He is a creator of the material world and what is called material wealth. He thinks material wealth is the highest good and so he is none other than the highest god. The Sophia talks to him about wisdom, but he turns a deaf ear to whatever she says. Even when she speaks about material wealth he doesn't listen to her because, as he wrongly believes, she doesn't know the first thing about material wealth. 'Don't you realise there's a realm above you?' she asks.

'There's nothing above me,' he answers. 'Whenever I look up, I see nothing except myself.'

'Do you know anything about the upper Ogdoad?' she asks.

'What? Hotdog?'

'The upper Ogdoad is the original eight Aeons in the Pleroma.'

'Leoma? Palermo? Palomar?'

When the Demiurge wanted to imitate the boundless, eternal, infinite and timeless nature of the upper Ogdoad, but could not express their immutable eternity, being as he was a fruit of defect, he embodied their eternity in times, epochs, and great numbers of years, under the delusion that by the quantity of times he could represent their infinity. Thus truth escaped him and he followed the lie. Therefore his work shall pass away when the times are fulfilled.

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What is Pleroma? I look up and see the ceiling which stares at me in astonishment: it knows it is not Pleroma and not even pneuma. Penman, pleura, panama, enema? Pneuma is apparently the 'soul', whatever that means. There are so many souls in the world that one should first outline the soul one intends to speak about and then start speaking about it. Which soul is pneuma? Or is it the only soul to which all other souls fly in the hope of holding it tightly with both arms, displaying infinite love and boundless joy?

The individual often has several souls (two, three, five and upwards) with different functions, all consisting of more or less subtle matter. Generally only one soul goes up to heaven after death; the others remain with the body or reincarnate in animal shape. The Demiurge increased the number of souls under the delusion that through the quantity of souls he could represent the infinity of one and only soul – Pneuma. Many souls are just animals we see around us – in our houses, in the streets. They caper around and we look at them instead of studying our only soul, our only hour, our only minute. Many people think we live only one minute – the last one. Why not study it round the clock? In the next chapter I'll study this minute and how it grows. What else have I done up to now? The Minute is expected to grow by 2% next year. It has grown three centimetres *this* year. Is it a man or a woman? God created time in the shape of man or woman or both.

God said, ‘Be fruitful and multiply!’ and time became a multiplication table. What’s the difference between God and the Demiurge? On the first day God created 24 hours. On the second day God created 24 hours. On the 20th day God created 24 hours instead of creating just one second.

What’s the difference between one second and one year?
Is there any significant difference in quality
Between these two items? Quality isn’t quantity and vice versa.
What’s what? Within one second there’s no difference
Between one second and one century. It’s two degrees outside,
But with the wind-chill factor, it feels like minus six.
What’s the difference between two and six? Between one
Second and a hundred years? The wind-chill factor.

This winter is particularly cold in comparison with what I felt two or three years ago. Have I lived two hundred years in the meantime? It’s very cold so I put a jumper on, two jumpers on. The Demiurge increases the number of jumpers, but the quality of warmth isn’t up to my standards and I continue to shiver with cold. I’m wrapped up in coats and scarves – the man of the future. But the future is outside the magic cavern where my souls and I are huddling together for warmth. And I’ve never cared very much about my appearance, about how many coats I wear to protect myself from the Queen of Snow who is another demiurge, another image of time.

The road I can see from my window is open now, but it is often blocked by snow in the winter. Why don’t I go out and fraternise with those who seem so far away from magic cultures and my ideas?

Confucius was conscious of a great alternative one must face in one’s life and even after it: to retire from politics and show business or to live in the world and endeavour to shape it. You’re invited to a charity dinner attended by a host of showbiz personalities, but you say, ‘Thank you. I’m determined to retire from show business.’

‘Stars of the entertainment world will turn out to celebrate your 40th year in show business,’ they say to you.

‘It’s high time I moved away from all that. I’ll just look out of the window and write poetry.’

Today and tomorrow look alike. What do you or I see
In their eyes, their thoughts? ‘Spare a thought for all those
Without shelter on a cold night like this,’ they say.

The river froze to a depth of over a metre. The river of life,
The river of time? They suffer from a loss of identity.

When the lake freezes over, I can go skating on it.

In my childhood I went to skating rings several times. Even now I hold onto the railings I see around me to keep my balance whenever I recall these episodes of my life. So it's better not to recall them, living in the present within whose boundaries no one forbids me to put on a pair of ice skates and skim along the road to the end of time. 'You're a pianist. What if you break your arm?'

Let me break my arm, my thoughts, my life. When asked, 'Have you got anything breakable in your bag?' I answer, 'My bag's breakable too.'

***

Confucius said, 'A man cannot live with the birds and beasts. If I do not live with men, with whom shall I live? He who is concerned only with the purity of his own life ruins the great human relations.' What shall *I* say? I live with my cat and I'm not sure I thereby ruin the great human relations. In the first place, I'm not sure they're great despite all the unions one hears about nowadays. 'The two countries are holding a summit to discuss economic and monetary union.' 'The signing of the treaty marked a major milestone on the road to European union.'

When I'm in the country, I go to a bookshop in Montrichard and buy English and American newspapers: there are many English-speaking people in the area, which explains this fondness for the language of Shakespeare, as they say. In *The International Herald Tribune* I chanced upon an article on WikiLeaks about which I had heard from one of my friends. I recalled seeing a few images, mostly related to how the head of WikiLeaks, Julian Assange, was arrested, jailed and bailed out in London. I didn't think about Confucius at first, but now I do recall the great human relations he was so fond of. The article was written by Bill Keller, the executive editor of *The New York Times*. On the same pages I found an article which I wasn't tempted to read: *Spain strikes agreement with unions on pensions*. It is still entitled *Spain strikes agreement with unions on pensions*, but I haven't changed my mind: I still don't want to read it. Of course time knows its job and so continues to warp people, turning them into turncoats, and so on and so forth. But I'll resist time's advances and leave this article alone. However, I may single out the word 'unions' in order to enrich my collection of the great human relations.

'By the end of the year,' writes Bill Keller, 'the story of this wholesale security breach had outgrown the story of the actual contents of the secret documents and generated much breathless speculation that something – journalism, diplomacy, life as we know it – had profoundly changed forever.' That's what *I* call the great human relations: you publish an article and the world changes its mind. People have changed their diets a lot over the past few years, but their thoughts are slow on the uptake. Now they seem nervous and visibly shaken. People are different from supermarket trolleys: these never move in the direction you push them in. In which direction did WikiLeaks push them?

Some of the material was of narrow local interest; some of it had global implications. Some provided authoritative versions of events not previously fully understood. Some consisted of rumour and flimsy speculation...

It was important to know that much of the communication between Washington and its outposts is given even more restrictive classification – top secret or higher – and was thus missing from this trove.

We found no reports, for example, on how Osama bin Laden eluded American forces in the mountains of Tora Bora. (In fact, we found nothing but second- and third-hand rumours about Mr bin Laden.) If such cables exists, they were presumably classified top secret or higher.

Are we dealing with the pure unknown or the impure unknown? Could I talk to the Demiurge on the subject? 'You talk about freedom of speech. Of course if a paparazzo obtrudes upon the privacy of a movie star, she can sue his paper for damages. But on a large scale Unity calls for transparency.'

'Your disclosures put lives at risk – either directly, by identifying confidential informants, or indirectly, by complicating our ability to build alliances against terror. The new law will outlaw the dissemination of classified information. Even minor infringements of the law will be severely punished. Criminals will be punished by being made to stand out in the cold. They'll be punished with a $250 million fine.'

Two articles. 'The first, which was published in 2005 and won a Pulitzer Prize, revealed that the National Security Agency was eavesdropping on domestic phone conversations and e-mail without the legal courtesy of a warrant. The other, published in 2006, described a vast Treasury Department programme to screen international banking records.'

Of course eavesdropping is a device that works wonders in the domain of literature – everyone knows that. But for eavesdropping, many literary lives would have been spared, letting the victims haunt and pester us, as is their wont. Had they been alive, we might have taken over responsibility for their future adventures. Now we know they're dead and yet we endeavour to re-write their destinies and amorous scrimmages.

I'm sure a lot of people were murdered because of the eavesdropping George W. Bush had found necessary to introduce as a protection against terrorists attacks. Were the victims good or bad? Did they belong to the Evil Empire or just to the material world of coitus and comfort? They might have belonged to the pure spiritual realm of ascension or escape – at least from *their* point of view.

In the Soviet Union we used to go to bathrooms or the woods in order to chat about politics and other matters which do not count in my life any longer. Now I can spend hours on the phone, chatting to my Russian friends. I neither go to the bathroom and open all the taps nor disconnect the phone. A butterfly can unleash atmospheric passions on another continent, on another heavenly body, but whatever I say sinks into oblivion as soon as I finish saying it. Of course I could talk for hours and

hours, preventing the world's memory from forgetting my voice and my thoughts. The streets of Versailles would reverberate with the sound of my voice.

In the Soviet Union we never used the telephone for serious talks, for philosophical reflections. 'What have you done today?'

'This afternoon I caught a butterfly. Do you remember the flowers in my garden? Well, these flowers are brightly coloured in order to attract butterflies. Unfortunately some butterflies blend in with their surroundings so it's hard to see them. But I do see them everywhere. A butterfly alighted gently on one of the flowers. I saw and caught it. I had to prevent this butterfly from causing serious damage to the distant regions of our motherland.'

Today, even in Russia I speak freely on the phone, saying for instance, 'Putin's a stupid jerk. My sister warned me not to trust him. The Chinese Communist Party branded him "a traitor to socialism". The members of your government should be hanged as traitors. No point in studying their faces carefully, trying to work out who's lying. They're always lying, all of them. They're born liars and swindlers. They're all charged with conspiracy to defraud the Bank of England of £1,000,000,000,000.'

Nobody listens to my invectives, but I don't regret the times when I could say 'Hello' to the KGB agent appointed to eavesdrop on my confessions. The times have changed; time remains the same whatever happens because he or she is a slowcoach. I don't know what sex time is; I'm pretty certain, however, that time's a child. Sometimes I'm tempted to say to him, 'Come on, slowcoach, we haven't got all day you know!' But time knows we have got all day and that's why he or she is a slowcoach. Time takes his or her time, so to speak. The more time he or she takes, the heavier he or she becomes. This is growing too heavy so let's return to 'it'. I really don't mean to cause any offence – I'm just worried about my writing style.

***

The Soviet Union was portrayed in Western papers as the embodiment of evil. But American presidents didn't subscribe to the belief that human kindness would overcome evil and eliminate it, root and branch. The arms race was the only solution they could find to the problem of evil and good, unable as they were to position themselves beyond evil and good. No wonder – they were neither Spinoza nor Nietzsche. Spinoza and Nietzsche, on the other hand, weren't American presidents. So some people believe they're spreading the good word and others just believe in God.

> *The value of these documents – and I believe they have immense value – is not that they expose some deep, unsuspected perfidy in high places or that they upend your whole view of the world. For those who pay close attention to foreign policy, these documents provide texture, nuance and drama. They deepen and correct your understanding of how things unfold; they raise or lower your estimation of world leaders.*

I'm smiling as I read these documents, for I can't help mocking those who speak at great length about freedom, forgetting that the subject lies beyond the word 'freedom' that you repeat over and over again. The more you repeat it the farther it gets and you end up hearing the sound of the word, which may satisfy a lot of people. You can suspect that whatever you see on TV has a deeper perspective, and the throne around which representatives of the Law are used to standing has a background, another set of government officials. They don't even take the trouble to smile; they're busy writing notes, giving orders which eventually land up in Julian Assange's headquarters.

'Know that this Universe, in its entirety, is nothing else but one individual being,' writes Maimonides; 'that is to say, the outermost heavenly sphere, together with all included therein, is as regards individuality beyond all question a single being like Said and Omar.' What's behind the throne is also in front of it and on my writing desk situated at the centre of the world – even when I don't write anything. Unity, Unity, Unity.

The lack of a vacuum is an obvious feature of today's world: I look out of the window and see only the crowd. Suppose you've got a coat with a hood. You can detach the hood if you prefer the coat without it, but the hood is still part of the coat, however often you detach it, not willing to cover your head on a sunny day. Some individuals disengage themselves from the game played by the crowd and withdraw into their houses, country houses and offices. Some of them stand on roofs, others drive their cars. But the music has a soothing vibe, as believe those who don't know Schubert's late works. Even those ascetic individuals might think at times that the music of the world – whatever it is – has a soothing effect. So they leave their roofs or cars or even country houses to meet other people and even go on a walkabout in Manhattan.

Whenever I stay for a while by the sea, I listen to the sound of the waves crashing against the shore – especially at night. My thoughts are influenced by the music of the waves, which may prove to be soothing, provided it doesn't exceed a certain number of decibels. I feel at one with the waves without thinking about Virginia Woolf, of whom I've never been afraid. (Literary asides are often tedious.) But then I realise it's not enough; the waves and their music succeed only in whetting my appetite. I can't be totally on the same wavelength with the waves. I need the human body, the waves born out of wedlock, so to speak: they're neither sea waves nor radio waves. These human waves are closer to my heart and even to my spinal cord, vibrating under their influence.

Waves of light and sound are transmitted in every direction and we feel all of them, though not at once. (Or do we feel all of them at the same time?) The same goes for human waves: I'm often struck by the sameness of phenomena. What do we have in common with sound and light? Of course, we can utter words and sing arias; enthusiasm is radiating from me at this very moment. But we can't travel faster than light, otherwise we would already have visited the Milky Way.

I'm watching the Russian news again. Apparently you can book a seat on a space rocket that is scheduled to fly to the moon in 2015. The ticket costs 150 million dollars and some seats are still

empty. The presenter asks a specialist if there's anything to see in the space. 'Haven't we seen everything already, on the Earth?'

'Virtual reality enables us to see even more than whatever is available in the universe,' answers the specialist. 'But some people have an adventurous turn of mind. They're terrible fidgets and so leave their houses at the earliest opportunity to go somewhere, preferably to the moon. They've been to North America, Latin America, Africa and Australia. They've been to the North Pole. Now they want to fly to the moon.'

'Do they have to train hard for the flight?' asks the presenter.

'Their travel agents must make sure they're not afraid of heights.'

For all this, in many ways we are identical with light or at least with one of its rays. Does the sun illuminate humanity and nothing else? Other planets don't seem to profit enormously from being exposed to its influence. For instance, the planet Jupiter radiates twice as much heat from inside as it receives from the sun; so it doesn't need the sun, if I'm not mistaken. If the Earth were like Jupiter in this respect, we wouldn't need the sun at all.

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Time isn't a car with a steering wheel and two or three pedals. Or it is my car which I already described in one of my books? I spoke about only one episode in its life, but the present is the past and vice versa: yesterday I had the same problem with my car whose memory is more tenacious than I presumed.

'Well, here we go again,' I said to myself as I pushed the brake pedal and got no answer to my appeal. All this had already taken place – two months previously. (I don't suffer from memory loss: I had no accident that day.) Two months ago I was driving to a restaurant located on the opposite side of Versailles; suddenly I realised my car was a disobedient, unruly middle-aged man or woman. (My car is 10 years old.) It had no intention of stopping even if there were other cars in front of it, let alone the lights. I took it to the nearest Audi garage and left it there on December 1, hoping I would get it back before Christmas. The stretch of time responsible for December 2010 proved to be a bad garage mechanic so that my hopes were mercilessly dashed. What's more, when I finally did get my car and used the brake pedal so as not to bump into a lorry, I realised it hadn't been repaired properly. But I decided not to return to the garage: in this domain I have to rely only on my feelings and not on any practical or theoretical knowledge. What would I have said to the staff? 'I might be mistaken, but it seems to me that the brake pedal doesn't function as smoothly as it did before – last November, for instance.'

'No wonder – it's the end of December now. The weather's different too.'

'Does it have to change all the time? The break pedal, I mean?'

'Don't *you* change all the time? Last month you must have been another man.'

'I must have looked a little bit younger.'

‘And what about your memory, your intellectual capacities?’

‘Do you think my car’s growing old?’

‘We rejuvenated it. You must get used to its youth. What about your own youth, about Faustian yearnings? After all that hard work you deserve a holiday. You can win a holiday for two in the south of France just by answering three simple questions. Watch TV and you’ll answer the questions. Don’t forget that old people will never understand teenagers.’

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The second breakdown. I locked the car, returned to my flat and called my garage and also my insurance company, asking them to assist my car with a breakdown truck. For a while my car identified with time: I was precluded from slowing it down, let alone stopping it. (My car is neither male nor female, so I call it ‘it’.) Had I been determined to do my shopping at all costs, I might have experienced time more vividly – more physically, to put it mildly.

Of course, in the long run, my car would have slowed down unassisted, but I had neither time nor the desire to wait for its ‘retardation’. Time never slows down, even if the road it takes on a whim is icy. Or does time have no whims?

There are many times that take different roads and move with different speeds. One time travels at twice the speed of sound; another one brags about how much space it can cover in no time at all. This time is light and, as everybody knows, the speed of light is 300 million metres per second. Why not 500 million metres per second? Why not 100 billion metres per second? If time *were* a car, I would ditch it 1,000,000,billion kilometres away from my room.

It does not move at one time quicker, at another slower. Once upon a time, time said to itself, ‘I enjoy my work, but I’d like to have another string to my bow in case I lose my job.’ So it branched off from the main road, leaving behind its doppelgänger. It repeated this manoeuvre many, many times so that now we are dealing with thousands of times without knowing it. They all move at different speeds and in different places. But if you say to one of the times, ‘Slack off as you approach the corner’, it won’t listen to you. It may retort, ‘There are no corners on *my* road’ and that’s it – end of story.

At least in one respect my car stands for time, considering how much time I waited for it as the garage mechanics tried to repair the brake pedal two months ago. I waited for almost a month and waiting is the worst variety of time, as everyone knows. I didn’t get money for waiting, unlike those who work at queue-agencies in Russia. Apparently, in Russia people spend a lot of time in queues despite the metamorphosis of the regime. They no longer queue for bread and butter; they crowd into those buildings where administrative problems are supposed to be solved once and for all. Some of them, willing to pay for time, are replaced by students or by old people who are unable to make ends meet. At night, when it may get cold in Russia, time is more expensive than at midday.

I got used to moving from one Gnostic plane to another in buses, metro and trains. Time unfolds differently in a bus where a lot of people gather as if to hear and see a pop star: schoolboys,

schoolgirls, old women. (Some old women do attend pop concerts.) Old men, on the other hand, seem to have died already; or they take their grandchildren out for walks. In a car you can hardly hear the Tristan chord, although you're also moving and sometimes in the same direction: no yearning, no anguish, no desire to get away from everything down to life. In a bus, you feel like escaping from the world by two or three roads at once, especially if you travel at rush hour.

'I think you're standing on my foot.'

'I'm sorry. I didn't realise.'

'You're no lightweight.'

'I'm awfully sorry.'

'Watch where you're putting your hands.'

'I'm dreadfully sorry.'

'I should think so.'

'Was this man molesting you, Madam?'

An angel won't say to you, 'I'll meet you by the up escalator on the 100th floor.' You need to find some other means of transportation. Is it your will or the absence of any desire except the one which can bring you closer to God? Is it the Tristan chord, a musical means of transportation? Where on earth will it take you if you give yourself over to it? It might take you to the horizon, to the night about which Tristan speaks in Wagner's opera. In other words, you'll remain on Earth and heaven will stay where it is – in heaven.

I can't grow a pair of wings to ascend towards heaven and meet a number of enlightened souls bathing in the light of God. In the afternoon, the sun bathes Versailles in shades of pink and gold. I don't live in the centre of the city, but from the house where I do live I can see all these shades, all these nuances without let or hindrance. They don't lead me anywhere, not even to Australia where a lot of Isoldas might be awaiting my arrival. So I need another sun, another bunch of rays in which one learns Absolute Truth and nothing else. What else do you need if you know Absolute Truth? Some relative truths, some poor relatives whom you haven't seen for ages? You need either God or Isolda; I've got neither.

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My car is in the garage and again I'm forced to take buses and trains. Sometimes I have an urge to fetch my car and use it in its present state, experiencing time to the utmost: no brakes, no hindrances of any kind. You glide along a motorway and crash into a hillside – into death, in other words. What would happen if, forgetting my father's words – 'When it's icy, brake gently' – I skidded on the ice and crashed into another car, not into the hillside? Would I deal with a local time, a poor relative of time? I didn't brake gently, ignoring my father's advice, but I did brake and that made all the difference. I put a spoke in time's wheel, so to speak. I don't know if time has a will, but it certainly has wheels – a lot of wheels and wings.

What if it has one? Suppose time spends a hundred years in a hospital. Will it lose the will to live on the verge of another century? Will this term of trial drive it to the verge of despair? Why don't we convey time to a hospital? Has it never been ill? Being out of joint is a sort of illness, as far as I know. Does it suffer from some form of mental illness? Should we convey time to a psychiatric hospital? Time is complaining of all the usual flu symptoms – a high temperature, headache and so on. Actually it's been HIV-positive for six years, but just recently it has started to develop the symptoms of AIDS.

'What symptoms do you want to complain of in my consulting room?' says a doctor.

'I'd like to complain about all the sex and violence on television.'

'Is that your only reason for coming to my office? Why did you walk out on the world?'

'I was bored.'

'Boredom isn't a disease. Onegin and many other literary heroes were bored to death. They're still alive and kicking.'

'But what will the world do without me? I'm worried, I'm bored, I wish I had another head.'

'Why?'

'Because I can neither nod nor shake *my* head. I neither agree nor disagree with anything and anybody. After so many disastrous centuries in office, many people are beginning to wonder if their old time is up to the job.'

'Why don't you retire then? Why not give birth to another time? Are you going to give up your job when you have your baby or do you think humanity will be better off with two times?'

'I could do something else. I could become space, for a change. Don't they say "space-time"? They hyphenated us almost a century ago. The transition from time to space is often a confusing period, but the hyphen will help me, I suppose.'

'I'm sure it will. That's the remedy I'll prescribe – a sort of painkiller. Just become space and don't worry about the consequences.'

'We'll soon have you back on your feet again,' says a nurse.

'Do I have to fill in this really complicated form?' says time.

'The blank space at the end of the form is for your name,' says the nurse.

'What's my name?' says time.

'Your name is Space-Time,' says the nurse.

'I'd get a handle to my double-barrelled name, if I were you,' says another nurse.

'What do you mean?' says time.

'A title. I like moving in the best circles. I think breeding counts,' says the doctor.

'Well, certainly without it, I wouldn't be here,' says time.

'Will you invite us?' says the first nurse.

'My assistants are efficient and well-bred,' says the doctor to time. 'I only hope that when we do go over to Prince Space-Time's, you won't let me down,' says the doctor to the nurses.

‘I’ll have to get a new dress,’ says the first nurse.

‘And new shoes and white gloves,’ says the doctor.

‘Moving in society is going to cost us a fortune,’ says the second nurse.

‘Well, why not? Just think we’ll meet a lot of Space-Time’s friends and go to smart parties and we can do some entertaining here as well – invite them back,’ says the first nurse.

***

I take a bus that is supposed to take me to a railway station. I go from my room to the railway station, changing planes on which my life unfolds as it moves from one minute to another. There are many movements in this ritual, considering that landscapes and cityscapes are also moving and changing at will. Not quite: it’s the bus driver who decides which cityscapes and landscapes I’ll see today. No, it’s up to his bosses to decide where to go: there’s a lot of determinism in his job.

Once I heard a bus driver shout at a car driver, ‘Don’t you know that buses always have right of way?’ Does that mean that bus drivers enjoy more freedom than car drivers?

So I’m sitting on a bus and waiting for it to arrive at the station. Time can be found inside my head and also in my legs that go numb; and yet the bus driver hasn’t chosen the longest route because he has no choice but to accept the itinerary decided upon by his bosses. Nothing prevents me from getting off and stretching my legs a bit. Why do I remain seated, waiting for the station and the train which is to take me to Paris? If I got off the bus, I would mix time and space together, creating a sort of cocktail – an unworthy reminder of space-time and whatever is appended to it. What I’m eager to explore, however, is the core of the problem, not just its edges.

Oil and water don’t mix; even if you shake them together they separate into two layers. What would happen if you followed the same procedure when coping with space and time, with their junction? Actually you could shake both of them – to no purpose. During a war, explosions shake buildings for miles around. Time is also shaken on this occasion – in your head, especially if you lose consciousness and never recover it. Time and space are brothers or sisters; they always live together, even if you spend your life in prison. Why not call them space *and* time? Suppose we are acquainted with Paul and Mary. Paul is Mary’s brother and Mary is Paul’s sister. We don’t call them Paul-Mary or Mary-Paul, do we? In other words, we don’t hyphenate them. Why should we?

I would leave them alone or rather separate. They live together; they often sit down on the same divan. They may even hold hands for a while, exhibiting their love in the presence of a particular observer. But the union of their hands has nothing to do with hyphens, even if these hyphens are drawn by a blind drunk individual who makes them look like curves. Even when Paul and Mary walk along, they often hold hands. So what?

At least in my mind – and probably in my body – space and time continue to separate into two layers, no matter how often I shake them. I shake my head; I jump up and down with excitement and

fury. The other day I was watching a horse race on television. A rider was thrown as his horse jumped a fence. What did he experience during and after his fall? A space-time of sorts?

Suppose you go to the Paris Metro at rush hour and take a train. Unintentionally you stand on someone's foot for a while. The situation may last for a few seconds, but these seconds give rise to an unpleasant dialogue and suddenly you realise this time you managed to mix space and time together with disastrous results. What counts, however, is these results and nothing else: something tangible took place at last. The train and the foot are parts of space; the seconds embody time. The victim says to you, 'You're now standing on my foot for the fifth time. If you don't get off it and stay off it I'll molest you viciously and it will be completely intentional.' In this case, you'd better stand on the man's foot once again and observe his reaction, which might enable you to understand the nature of space-time better and more *physically*: in books you'll find only *descriptions* of what goes on inside this realm.

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'What is, for one observer, a description of the state of the world at a given instant, is, for another observer, a series of events at various different times, whose relations are not merely spatial but also temporal' (Bertrand Russel, *A B C of Relativity*).

Let us analyse Wagner's opera *Tristan and Isolda* from this point of view: the divergence between the times to which the hero and the heroine are subjected at the outset of their amorous search. As we all know, in Act I the scene is laid on a ship bound for Cornwall where King Mark awaits Isolda so as to marry her. Tristan is supposed to bring Isolda home as bride for his uncle intact, at least in terms of reputation. Isolda first turns her attention to the sailor, who sings an insolent, offensive song, and then to the wind. The sailor's time has been floating for some time – like the ship on which he works. The storm, on the other hand, is wholly located in the future.

Hear my commandment, cowardly breezes!
Come on, be rash, be loud, be alive,
with mutters, with growling,
with anger, with howling!

Isolda both hears the storm and feels 'the fresh wind' about which the sailor sings. In her bowl, she mixes the future into the present – a common procedure reinforced with witchcraft. Isolda now takes up Tristan's case: she accuses him of treachery.

Whom I must love, O my lost love.
Handsome, hale, valiant, vile:
doomed are head and heart, doomed are heart and head.

Again she deals with the present and partly with the future: Tristan is still out of her reach. She then plunges headlong into the past, into the days when she first met Tristan.

A wounded man, in feeble breath,
helpless, lies near to death.
Isolda's arts are now of use,
her pure lotions, her balsam juice.
The wound from which he suffers
Isolda toils to cure.

Tristan the ungrateful comes at last, summoned by Isolda. The time where he lives is the present: the ship, the fresh wind that blows the ship towards Cornwall, King Mark's bride, her servant Brangaena. Acting on impulse can get you into a lot of trouble, as common sense points out. Thwarting Isolda's laudable intentions, Brangaena replaces a death-potion with a love-potion. Tristan doesn't waver in his support of King Mark.

Custom says, where I live,
the future bride will need a guide,
but he should bridle wide.

Tristan's time is solid as a rock: no switches, no swaying backwards and forwards. His time and Isolda's coincide at last as they drink the love-potion. For Isolda a series of events at various different times turns into one event, one time which is timeless to some extent. Tristan's time switches to another time of a similar nature: it is solid as a rock. This new time excludes the future altogether.

Why are our souls as mighty as ocean?
Why do our senses shudder emotion?
Love is a rose-bud, opening, yearning;
passion a bonfire, joyfully burning,
suddenly bright, leaping delight.

I am an unbiased observer of the opera. I see and hear the state of the world at a given instant and also a series of events at various different times. And I know what will happen next. My world is made up of a series of events and different times. So was Wagner's world, I suppose.

***

The following scene is set in a hotel where, for one night, I became infatuated with a dark-haired receptionist. In vain did I wait for her in my room:

> *They never come because they're on duty, and their duty doesn't concern their clients who wait for them in bed, counting minutes, seconds and what not. What did I count? My fingers, oddly enough; at some point I got the feeling my fingers had been produced in vast numbers for at least half an hour. What kind of piano was I supposed to play with so many fingers at my disposal? I began to play the sonata of my waiting, the ballad of time which was so close to me I was tempted to harass it sexually. For more than three decades, tests have enabled you to find out the sex of your baby before it is born. Time was born many millennia ago and we still have no idea to which sexual group it belongs. Anyway it is illegal to discriminate against anyone and anything on the basis of sex. So time might accuse me of sex discrimination if I don't make love to it on the spot, taking advantage of the intimacy between us that the receptionist had brought about quite unconsciously and unwillingly. It was pointless to ask time to undress: it was lying stark naked on my bed, under my blanket. Perhaps it was also waiting for a kiss, a caress, a declaration of love. What do we know about the nature of time? We speak about the concept of linear advancement which was espoused by Leibniz, Barrow and Locke, among others. We write, 'To the oldest forms of clocks belong the gnomon and sundial, both of which make use of the seeming rotation of the sun around the earth by measuring the shadow of a rod, column or obelisk, and (in the sundial) by tracking its changes of position.' We quote Aristotle, 'There is the number of motion with respect to earlier and later.' But can we quote time itself? How? By saying, 'One, two, three, four, five'?*
>
> *I was saying exactly that as time continued to lie by my side with my blanket over its body. I was tempted to throw the blanket out of the window to see what time's body looked like. Why didn't I do it? Because I was waiting for the dark-haired receptionist? Couldn't I have done two things at the same time? I don't think time would have minded my being unfaithful to it. Why didn't it say, 'Okay, you can get an eyeful of my body. But do stop thinking about this woman!' It said nothing of the kind; actually it didn't say anything. It was just lying in bed and pacing the room nervously, whenever* I *did it. Time was in bed, beyond the window and even beyond the walls – whenever I looked at them. The omnipresence of time was proved once and for all.*
>
> *Was time jealous of the receptionist's good looks? Is that why she didn't come? What does time look like? Isn't it the god of music and musicians? Does it hold a lyre?*
>
> *I can't affirm that time gets insanely jealous if I so much as look at another woman, man or androgyne. But that night it did happen, I suppose. I'm sure the receptionist was willing to share nocturnal delights with my ordinary yet attractive body and extraordinary mind.*

Did Christians of the first century face the same predicament as they awaited the end of the world and the return of Jesus Christ? ‘Blessed is the one who reads the words of this prophecy, and blessed are those who hear it and take to heart what is written in it, because the time is near.’ So they looked out of the windows and their doors were wide-open – just in case. Of course they knew that superior forces – even an ordinary angel – could open any door at very short notice, but they wished to show the extent of their hospitality. They kept repeating, day in day out, ‘Come, Lord Jesus.’ This prayer was said in Christ’s mother tongue as if Jesus had been unable to understand other languages, other sounds, other patterns of thoughts. They might have uttered a phrase seemingly unconnected with their ardent desire, for instance, ‘By midday the sand’s too hot to walk on.’ Of course Jesus can walk on hot sand, on cold sand; He flies over deserts, if necessary. Anyway He would have understood their meaning and might have hastened to their abodes in order to save them from Satan or from time, which amounts to the same thing. He did nothing of the sort, according to the landscape I see out of *my* window: this landscape would have disappeared a long time ago, had Jesus Christ come to Christians of the first century as they stood behind the wide-open doors.

First they awaited Him and prayed to Him, hoping He would hear their prayers and answer them positively. After a while, they focused their thoughts on time which might have been accused of negligence, given that it immediately took up office upon seeing the Big Bang out of *his* or *her* window. Could time be disciplined for deserting its post? Where was time in those days of prayers and hopes?

Usually time rode to work on its bicycle, being an ecologist from the outset of history: it was aware that an unpolluted atmosphere was essential to its own survival. It also knew that stricter controls on air pollution would help to reduce acid rain. Once, it picked its bicycle up and realised the handlebars had broken off. ‘Could I ride in any direction, disregarding the itinerary I’m supposed to follow on my errands?’ That was the question time asked itself several times in a row. ‘I’m supposed to ride towards the end of the world, towards the end of human history. From where I stand I can see the end and even what lies beyond it – another beginning. But a report my boss received a week ago criticises the ham-fisted way in which I ride my bicycle, often deviating from the norm for this time of year. The report says I should be on my guard even outside working hours. “Time should work 24 hours a day” – and so on and so forth. “Time shouldn’t enjoy the privilege of a 37-hour working week.” Without the handlebars I might lose the way and miss the end of history altogether, riding towards the middle of it instead.’

Or did time have a motorcar? One day it said to itself, ‘Something is wrong with the car – the engine feels a bit sluggish.’ The next day it repeated out loud, ‘Something is wrong with the car – the engine feels a bit sluggish.’ Words had a tremendous power in those days: things were words and vice versa. The influence exerted by this sentence on nature and humanity was awesome: everything and everybody became sluggish. Governments were dragging their heels over any issue, however

unimportant. The saying ‘Never put off until tomorrow what you can do today’ was born in those hectic times.

Philosophers couldn’t ascertain whether time slept at home or in its office. Did it really need any form of transport? If you sleep in your office, you need neither a bicycle nor a car – it goes without saying. You may need a bicycle or a car to reach your favourite restaurant at lunchtime, but otherwise you should remain at your writing desk all day long. Actually, some philosophers thought that time didn’t sleep at all. ‘So you should remain at your writing desk round the clock. But don’t write a novel, for God’s sake. Just scribble “End” on a scrap of paper and send it to God.’

‘Do you think time has to scribble a note to God?’ said other philosophers and theologians. ‘Doesn’t God know what He must do? When Albert Einstein said to Nils Bohr, “God doesn’t play with dice”, Nils Bohr replied, “We shouldn’t say to God what He must do.” Do you think time has any right to push God around like that? It’s not a chicken and egg situation, as far as we know – time was created by God and not vice versa. Do you remember what St Augustine said on the subject? “How could innumerable ages pass over, which thyself hadst not made; thou being the author and creator of all ages? Or what times should these have been, which were not made by thee? Or, how should they pass over, if so be they never were? Seeing therefore thou art the Creator of all times; if any time had passed before thou madest heaven and earth, why then is it said, that thou didst forbear to work? For that very time hadst thou made: nor could there any times pass over, before thou hadst made times.”’

‘All right,’ said other philosophers and theologians. ‘If we understand correctly your point of view, there are several times in the world. And all of them sit in front of their writing desks. Didn’t St Augustine say, “Nor could there any *times* pass over, before thou hadst made *times*”? Over three thousand Christians phoned in to complain about the time we’re talking about. Why not call in other times and ask them to lead us to the end of history? Actually, one competent time would be enough. We need a time which has great writing skills. Perhaps the word “End” should be written in a different way, in another language. Perhaps time should just pronounce it accurately. There are some sounds that our time finds difficult to articulate.’

‘It might be waiting for God’s command,’ say other philosophers and theologians. “When I give the command, fire!” – that sort of things. Time shouldn’t fire of course – it should just write down or shout “End”.’

‘Why do you exclude fire from the end of history? What about a world conflagration? How many historic buildings are damaged by fire each year? Why not damage, or rather destroy, the entire universe in this way? It’s not the only way of destroying it – we’re quite aware of the fact. What counts, however, is the destruction itself and not the means by which it’s achieved. God may just strike humanity on the head with an iron bar.’

‘And what about nature?’ said other philosophers and theologians. ‘Should trees and lakes survive us? It’s true that the world doesn’t exist if no one perceives it. But what if it does after all? Materialists think it does and we should pay attention to their point of view.’

Then all of them turn to time and speak to it thus: ‘Do you know why our clocks are round? The faces of clocks are made in a circle so as to simulate the heavens. Actually we simulate the heavens whenever we can, but the best way to simulate them is to say “goodbye” to the Earth. We shouldn’t only *simulate* the heavens – we should live in the heavens and sing in unison with them. We should shine like the sun and rise like the moon. Aren’t we already like the black, velvety sky studded with tiny, twinkling stars?’

And time answers them, ‘Your circular motion is so omnipresent I can’t counteract it. Even your discussions keep going round in circles. And what do you draw on the sheets of paper lying on *your* writing desks? A geometric design of overlapping circles. How do you intend to reach God and the end of history? By going round in circles all the time? Get rid of these ridiculous clocks of yours. From now on you should make only linear clocks and watches. Throw away your grandfather clocks and draw only linear diagrams on your sheets of paper. Are you so keen on Eternal Return, on the ever-rotating wheel of birth and death, of endless reincarnations?’

‘Only the enlightened yogi or Buddhist who has understood Brahman or the Buddha-Mind in himself “in a lighting flash of truth” is delivered in this life and can escape rebirth,’ answer the wrongdoers. ‘He has transformed the play of opposites and arrested all memory processes forever.’

‘So arrest all memory processes forever,’ says time. ‘Nothing prevents you from doing this properly. Forget everything except the City of God. Go straight to the point. On a clear, straight road you can pick up speed. All roads are straight when one is determined to win. And here is my advice: You should always check your oil, water and tyres before taking your car on a long trip. And the trip may turn out to be very long indeed. It may last for 20 centuries.’

‘Isn’t the end of the world at hand?’ say the wrongdoers to time. ‘We read the revelation of Jesus Christ, which God had given him to show his servants what must soon take place. Jesus said to us, “Blessed are those who hear it and take to heart what is written in it, because the time is near.” So we’re blessed because we heard every word of it. You’re near, aren’t you? You’re standing in front of us, only a stone’s throw away.’

‘You must be confusing me with another time,’ says time. ‘What you’re waiting for is the end-time. I am the middle-time. Talking to me is a complete waste of time. Besides, I’m very good at methodical work, but useless when there’s a lot of pressure.’

‘Really?’ exclaim the wrongdoers. ‘Can’t you talk to the time in charge on our behalf? We’ll send you a present to express our gratitude.’

‘You should talk to her yourselves. Your salvation is in your own hands, as you must know.’

‘Isn’t it enough to repeat, “Come, Lord Jesus” all day long?’

‘I don’t think so.’

***

A few years ago, in Paris I unexpectedly made the acquaintance of a Russian woman. Her husband was in Moscow so I saw him for the first time only some months later – *after* my encounter with his wife. They invited me to a restaurant and I enjoyed the meal very much: it was a good Parisian restaurant. In their company I went to several restaurants in Paris, Moscow and St Petersburg. Once I invited them to my place, but the dishes I cooked weren't up to their standards and even a bottle of old champagne didn't manage to cheer them up.

Recently I invited them again, anxious to reciprocate in great style. On the day of our dinner I went to my wine cellar and chose three bottles worthy of my intentions. I was waiting for their call, but they didn't call me in spite of our agreement. So I called them and touched upon the forthcoming dinner, thinking they might have forgotten about it. The woman's husband said they would come around 7 p.m., repeating the formula of my invitation. I asked if they would come alone or with some friends or relatives. 'No, this is just a short visit to Paris. We'll come alone.' What does the shortness of their visit have to do with the number of friends they want to meet? I wondered. Usually, if you stay somewhere for two or three days only, you see many friends in restaurants and elsewhere, assuming you have many friends in the city where you find yourself. I didn't say anything to this effect and went shopping. I bought enough food for three people and returned home, satisfied with my choice and the quantity of starters.

Upon arrival I found a message on my answer phone. 'We're coming with two friends of ours. Sorry. I hope it's not too late.' It was too late, but again I didn't say anything, as if determined to honour silence on the day of my spiritual and physical communion with some fellow creatures. Again I went to the shopping centre and bought an additional quantity of starters, cheeses and desserts.

As I opened the door I recognised the people my friends had brought to my house. I couldn't quite place them but their faces didn't look unfamiliar, for all the years that had elapsed between our last meeting and their appearance in my hall. The man held out his coat and I took it. Yet he followed me as I walked along the corridor towards the built-in wardrobe. 'You've got other rooms as well,' he told me, raising one eyebrow in a meaningful way. 'It's not just a pied à terre.'

'I live here,' I said.

'I wish *I* could live here,' he said.

I couldn't help wondering when he'd had a shower for the last time. I was under the impression he would never have a shower again, but he must have had it in the past, if only once. Had he never gone to a swimming pool?

He asked me if he could play a few notes on my piano. I'm usually reluctant to transgress the laws of hospitality and so I said 'yes', unmindful of consequences. He sat down at the piano and began to play a sort of potpourri which was unbearable on account of the way he touched the keyboard. He did his best to turn it into a scrap heap and the laws of hospitality didn't allow me to stop him. So he went on playing for 10 minutes at least; as soon as the sounds produced by his body died away he began to talk about his last recital that had taken place on the eve of our reunion. He enumerated the

pieces he had performed and expatiated on his approach to them. He also spoke about the pieces he hadn't performed, paying homage to Tchaikovsky's *Eugene Onegin*, among other operas. The other guests could hardly get a word in edgeways, but he didn't seem to long for their participation in his one-man show.

In the course of the soirée, he played the piano several times, punishing the keys, hammers and strings for a crime they hadn't committed. The nearer we got to the dawn, the louder he played as if bent on waking not only my neighbours but also the entire population of Versailles. He ate and drank sloppily, talking all the time about life and music so that the liver pâté he was consuming began to cover the tablecloth, bit by bit. As he talked and ate he swayed from side to side, backwards and forwards, and all but broke the chair on which he was sitting. He broke a coffee cup and asked me if he had broken an expensive cup or a discounted article of crockery. He liked the chocolate cake I had bought to the point of precluding his wife and friends from enjoying it in his company.

After three hours of sleep I began a search for my wallet: I hadn't found it in the cabinet where I usually put it. I left no stone unturned as I looked for it under my pillows and mattress, in my coat and jacket linings. I felt like I had been cooped up in my flat for millennia. 'What did I do in my former lives?' I asked myself. And I answered thus: 'I was searching for this wallet, for my passport and credit cards.' I called my friend and told her everything.

'I wish I could put a curse on him.'

'You're not a wicked witch,' she pointed out.

'I'll just curse him. But first I'll have to train myself by listening to *Rigoletto*. Do you realise I won't be able to go to Moscow and St Petersburg? Getting a new passport will take almost a month.'

'Where did you lose it?'

'In the shopping centre. The message I heard in my flat infuriated me. How dare they foist on me someone else's company at such short notice? Absorbed in my fury, I was totally oblivious of my surroundings, of my wallet and the Highway Code. I might have crashed into another car.'

'You should have said "no".'

'I always say "yes" because I'm nice. I always accept everything. I'll curse all my guests.'

'Don't be bullied, learn to stand up for yourself and what you believe in.'

'I'm too polite.'

'When you are bullied, it can destroy your self-esteem.'

'Don't worry about my self-esteem.'

'I'm also worried about your health.'

'So am I.'

'With a bit of luck, you might recover your papers.'

'Two thousand euros, my credit cards. And it's Sunday today.'

I found my wallet half an hour later. It *had* been waiting for me in the cabinet where I usually put it. This time it was lying in another corner of the cabinet.

***

I don't know where time is – probably on my writing desk
When I'm far from it. Or is it walking
Along the Milky Way? What is it doing there? Should I
Join it? My shoes left muddy marks on the floor;
I've no wish to remove these marks. Let them become time for a while.
Are they seconds or hours? No idea. My ideas are scattered all
Over the lawn; they're not eternal either. What would I do with their
Eternity? Nothing at all. I'd let it grow in my garden, in my mind.
But eternity doesn't grow: it's big enough and has already
Outgrown itself many times. I listen to it and try
To disentangle hard fact from myth or truth from lies. Eternity is both a myth
And absolute truth. There's no absolute in the universe
Except the Swedish vodka I drank two or three times. The dung in
Augeias's cattle yard and sheepfolds hadn't been cleared away
For many years. Where are these years now? In the cattle yard, in the sheepfolds,
On the moon, on the sun? Why should I look for those
Years? They're in the past or in the future. I don't own them. Who does?
Augeias? Heracles? Two rivers rushed through the yard, swept it clean
And went on to cleanse the sheepfolds and the valley pastures.
What's clean? What's unclean? Can we make
The sound of time any clearer? Leaves are fluttering down
Onto the path. Is this the sound of eternity? How long
Have I stayed in this room? I slept fitfully throughout the night and
Arose before dawn. Hercules goes on cleansing the Augean stables.
'Swear to accomplish the task before nightfall,' says Phyleus. The oath which
Heracles takes by his father's name is the first and last one:
No more oaths. A lot of stables, a lot of minutes to cope with on your own.
Young people live more in expectation of the future, old people
Look more at the past. Aging people generally feel that time goes
Faster, probably due to their own slowing down. Now
Time runs a mile in five minutes. Apparently it's time that gives birth to space –
Not the other way round. And what if I walk as far as the Neva? Will not
Time come into existence during my walk? Subjective time differences
Might be based largely on physiological factors such as
Temperature. A cold time, a hot time, a warm time. Is eternity

A deep-freezer? It's a painfully slow journey. I get out of my car
And squelch through the mud to open the gate. It was locked several years
Ago. What for? No one ever goes through this gate:
It's meant for me alone, for my time. My time's in my pocket. I take it
Out and look at it for the umpteenth time. The large central diamond's surrounded
By twelve smaller stones. The houses, the signs of zodiac?
Or just twelve minutes? What'll happen in a minute? A 12-minute
Bus ride. I get off and head for the railway station where no trains
Await me. Hunger's in store for the Earth, as they say on
Television. Is it? Will time ever go on hunger strike? There were pictures of
Emaciated time on the cover of a magazine I bought at the station before
Leaving it forever. No more trains; no more planes. No more
Plans. Plants as well as animals are adapted not only
To their spatial environment but also to time: to the solar day through
What is called the circadian rhythms, to the cycles of the moon,
To the tides of the sea, and even to the solar year. Yet they die
And the sun still goes round the Earth as if to boost our egos all day long.
The cliffs on which the houses are built are starting
To crumble. No point in crumbling the bread between your fingers:
A loaf of bread is hanging from the sky. Why are all things
Permanent? Though they take forms, they take really no such
Forms and in reality there is nothing born,
Nothing passing away. The rain beat against my face as I
Struggled through the wind. The wind won't subside and there are
Rain clouds on the horizon. So many drops for nothing.
Shall I measure time by means of these drops? How small is
Time – just a drop in the ocean. Is it? Many questions,
Many lies, many betrayals. Why are all things neither departing nor
Coming? Because though they are characterised with the masks of individuality
And generality, these masks coming and departing neither come
Nor depart. Nor does the future depart. The past and the future
Blend together in approximately equal proportions. They're on equal
Footing. A large wave swept away half the sandcastle.
Chance is complementary to causality. To the Greeks, the measures of time
Were the 'fetters of the universe'. My grandfather clock is lying at
The bottom of the sea. Shall I measure the sea and Lethe? Nothing doing.
I go out and go in, staying in the middle all the time. And time's a loaf

Of bread, a book on time. Time flows away as you
Leaf through its pages. Today we measure time by the oscillations
Of an electrified quartz crystal, an ammonia atom, barium
Titanate, or other substances. We don't measure it at all, letting ourselves
Go. Do we go to Newcastle, to the Dark Ages, to the Light Ages?
Wherever you go, you meet the end of time which ticks away
In spite of everything. Green tomatoes will grow red
With the passing of time. And yet they're neither red nor
Green. They're just tomatoes or something else – a clock no doubt.
Everything measures time and the results are
Known beforehand. Why should we measure what's predictable?
Time's stored on a hard disk and backed up on a CD. I've stored it away
Until next winter. I've replaced it by space, by a coastal plain and town, by
A mountain range and the Baltic. In high summer
The sun is Leo. It estimates all things by withering the plants
Which have no deep roots. A flower in a vase has no roots, no time,
No freedom. Time has already drawn this flower to a close. A closed
Flower, a closed time, a house enclosed by a high brick wall. The eighth
House? The house of death? This house concerns death, its time,
Quality and nature. Legacies, wills, last testaments. Someone inherits
The fortune and estates of the deceased. Every house
Is the house of death – even a doll's house. In Egypt the dead
Became one with the supreme God Atum. He is 'Yesterday,
Today and Tomorrow'. The god Heh represents 'unending time'. He holds
Two measuring staves, which were the hieroglyphic sign for 'millions of years'.
Millions of years, one year – they're interchangeable, short
And long; as long as a lingering kiss, as short as any memory, however long.
Another new year will come and go somewhere. The years we've known
Are praying for us and their prayers go upwards and forwards and
Backwards. 'Let us pray for those who aren't so fortunate
As ourselves,' they say to each other. Time escapes unscathed
From whatever happens. In a way it's enclosed by
A high brick wall. Close your eyes and listen, listen, listen to time.
It doesn't speak. A second gently brushed your cheek and was gone.
Listen to this sound that still resounds here, everywhere.
The sound of the door closing deceived me into
Thinking time had gone out. Some people come in, but you

Think they've just left the room. They're in between:
Neither here, nor there, nor on the moon. It's too late; it's never
Too late. Time stretched out its hand and helped me from my
Chair. Where is it taking me? What to leave? What
To pick up and carry along as a precious stone? So many diamonds
And not a single word of help. You're always at a crossroads.
This area is criss-crossed by railway lines. Many directions and
Only one destination. The Nine Roads of the moon. I'm lost on the moon,
On Jupiter, on Venus. The passage of time is merely to be regarded
As a feature of consciousness that has no objective
Counterpart. You think you're travelling in outer space;
You visit the moon and a sign of the zodiac. Yet you're at home,
In the same room where time strokes your neck. Why is it so hard
To believe in time? Don't we believe in clocks,
In our wristwatches? Don't we look at them all the time? Yet
We don't believe in time, in death, as if our watches had stopped many
Centuries ago. You can bend them, break them, throw them out
Of the window. They'll go on ticking. But
You'll snap time if you bend it too far. For the Maya each day was
Itself divine. Every monument and every altar was erected
To mark the passage of time. Stand aside, please,
And let time pass. The eighth house. I wish I could stand aside
Forever in order to climb a steep flight of stairs to the front door, to the altar.
Time moved forward and backward at a crawl; time moved sideways.
Time denotes not an actual existence but a certain capacity or
Possibility for a continuity of existence. You retire into your shell
And wait for nothing: there's nothing to wait for. Outside the house
I could hear the constant drone of insects – the music of time or space
Or space-time. Nature's neither time nor space; nor is it God. A tree isn't
God, even if it grows in the shape of a cross.
A bridge isn't time; yet it joins the past and the future.
What does the bridge say? Another
Mystery; and time's running out. A cup of wine
And everything's forgotten. There's nothing to forget save
Life and death and nature and truth. They're
Swept away by a large wave. No longer do the stars
Talk to each other. A murmur of agreement came from the Earth.

Another harmony – to no purpose. A cloud
Can't reach agreement with a bush
And the worldwide harmony's destroyed. Again Troy
Succumbed last week after being pounded with heavy artillery
For more than ten months. Heroes build another city and
Get assassinated. The celestial bodies aren't the first
And original measures of time. We've always measured it in our brain,
In our body. And our body's too small for time: we aren't
The macrocosm. Time's rhythm inspired man to invent
The pendulum. We've been swinging to and fro ever since: in the sky,
On the gallows. The god Chronos was identified with Saturn –
An old man with a sickle. Father Time devours
His children and all things. The wind is beginning to pick up as it
Talks to the Earth, to pampas grass, to limestone, to happy endings,
To the Hereafter. The wind has no sense of rhythm
So he's a terrible dancer. Stones are what they are and also a broken
Monument, a statue of liberty we'll never find.
I was lulled to sleep by the gentle rhythm of the boat in the water.
And then the water began to flow heavenward as if losing
Touch with trees and lakes. What am I thinking about?
My thoughts are seconds or minutes. They don't mean anything
Outside time and its tyranny. Our tyrannical father and mother and sister.
Time was wearing a black and white spotted dress. For once
I didn't recognise it. 'You count to a hundred and we'll go and hide,'
Said my sister. Time's everything and everybody.
Time's black with death and her tongue is out to lick up
The worlds. Her teeth are hideous fangs.
They're building new times by the river. Why do they need
So many times? Time stretched out and listened
To the sound of the rushing stream. That's how the sound is born.
Why should it be born? Let all sounds die for their country so I can listen
To the non-sound, non-stream, non-world, non-music. Let there be
A small country with few people. Let there be ten times
And a hundred times as many utensils but let them not be used.
Why use all the times we have within our reach? Let them lie
Where they're lying. Let them stand or run or float on their backs
Like starfish. One time's indispensable, but even this time won't be used

For a while, for two centuries. Heaven's Way is indeed
Like the bending of time. When it's high,
Bring it down. When it's low, raise it up. When it's
Slow, give it a push. Say to your pendulum, 'Get swinging
And I'll give you a push.' Time's too fast, too slow, too meddlesome.
Look at something else. This mountain isn't time.
You can look at it as long as you wish without feeling any
Pressure. The pencil you hold isn't time so you can draw whatever
You wish: no strings attached. A tedious walk or flight.
Another flight of stairs, another flight of fancy.
Time has just learnt to crawl. It was born yesterday, tomorrow,
Next month. Without sound, without
Substance, fancy or flights, dependent on nothing,
Unchanging, all-pervading, unfailing, unassailable, unavoidable, uncanny.
A huge crack went from the top to the bottom of time.
Large cracks began to develop in the walls of its house or museum.
This second is an exhibit in the museum of time. I'll grow it
Under glass until it becomes an hour, a decade, a patch of snow
Under my window. Time produced the One.
The One produced the Two. The Two produced the Three.
And the Three produced the ten thousand things. Time's no
Longer. The Three can produce today and the Hereafter where the Two
May be reduced to the One. I'll reduce the problem
Of time to a few simple questions. Where are my gloves and keys?
What shall I have for dinner and lunch? What's your address?
What's on in London? Where's the nearest railway station or airport?
Where's the air I could breathe? Where's the star I could live on?
One, two, three, four. A dog can tear a rabbit apart
In seconds. Reversion is the action of time.
Weakness is the function of time.
All things in the world come from time,
And time comes from non-time.
When are you going?
When are you coming back?
When will you talk?
When will you answer?
When will you set off on a round-the-world cruise?

What did I wear?
What size shoes do I take?
What happened after I left the room?
Where does she live?
Where are we going?
Where's the party being held?
Where did you put my umbrella?
I've left my keys somewhere and I don't know where.

***

You ask, 'What kind of event's in store for me?' And time answers, 'You'll get a letter. You'll get an email. You'll break your arm. You'll break your leg. You'll break your favourite vase. You'll hear the sound of breaking glass. You'll go shopping this afternoon. You'll talk rubbish tonight. You'll quarrel with your dearest friend first thing tomorrow morning. You'll tear *The Guardian* into pieces. Your illness will first manifest itself as severe stomach pains. Your brother will die in Australia. Your dog will bite you. Your mother will scold you. You'll have an attack of diarrhoea. You'll be attacked and seriously injured by a gang of youths. You'll have another white hair and another wrinkle on your forehead. You'll come home drunk and vomit all over the kitchen floor. You'll vomit up your lunch. You'll vomit up your dinner. You'll be vomiting all night. Tomorrow you're bound to vomit as soon as you try to eat. You'll fall in love. You'll fall out of love. You'll fall down the stairs and injure your back. You'll sing a hymn to God. You'll sigh deeply and sit down. You'll start to swear at a taxi driver and he'll walk off. You'll walk briskly in Hyde Park, swinging your rolled-up umbrella. You'll say to your relatives, "If I could just take up a moment of your time." You'll say to Paul, "Time passes so quickly when you're enjoying yourself." You'll say to Peter, "Time has stopped."'

The point is time doesn't answer questions; and yet we go on asking them. You may call these questions 'hopes', 'prayers' or just 'stupidity'. Prayers are answers in disguise: we are almost sure they'll be answered, otherwise we wouldn't pray so often. There are events and bodies and things and souls. They come or float in the room where you're sitting and start talking to you or punching you in the stomach. You're then dragged away, kicking and screaming. But you're bound to return to the same room.

You just sit and wait for something to happen. Or you go somewhere in the hope of meeting somebody or finding treasure. And your television set shows a face or an animal, a flying saucer or Lake Windermere. That's how time enjoys itself in our midst.

I'll no longer *embroider* upon time; nor shall I analyse it, probing deep into its enigmas. There are no enigmas to speak of.

I woke at dawn. No explanation is needed. I woke at dawn. I even looked at my alarm clock, but I don't recall *when* I woke up. From now on I'll note down what I see on the dials of my clocks.

***

5.25 a.m. I'm leafing through a book entitled *Time*. I chance upon a paragraph where Marie-Louise von Franz speaks about biological and physiological clocks. Apparently plants have a time memory; they know the sun will rise and so open their buds a few hours before it does. A plant says to itself, 'The sun will rise today as it did yesterday, whatever Hume's opinion on the matter. He said the sun might not rise tomorrow, but I'll open my buds – just in case. Sometimes they put me in a dark room to find out how I'll react to darkness. I say to myself the sun won't rise again and so it's no use opening my buds. I open them all the same because I've nothing to lose if there's no sun beyond the darkness. Pascal spoke about it, didn't he? You bet on the City of God and lose nothing if the city in question doesn't exist. If it does exist, however, and you fail to bet on it for some obscure reason, you'll be deprived of Paradise and celestial music.'

This is my first attempt at coming to terms with the mentality of plants. Suppose I have a few buds I must open at sunrise so as to live through another day, another stretch of time. Should I open them *automatically*, in spite of the darkness created by my curtains? That's all I would have to do: opening buds, closing them. Some insects would land on my buds and suck my blood; I wouldn't mind.

6.00 a.m. I'm watching TV. The early morning news. They show Cairo where some people hurl abuse and stones at other people. A dozen dromedaries charge the crowd; so do bulls. They lower their horns and charge. The battle is taking place on a square. Outside the square there are many Russians. They're reluctant to leave the country where they're spending their holidays. 'I'll stay whatever happens,' says one of them.

'What if they kill you?' says a journalist.

'I'll kill them in retaliation for the murder.'

Opening buds, closing buds. A woman picks you up and puts you in a vase. Life goes on. Permanent things.

Even within one country you can find another space where you can distance oneself from the crowd or two crowds. Two groups of people hurl stones at each other, shouting, 'Ah! Oh! Ah! Oh!' The Russians go to nightclubs and dance till dawn. Is this a biological clock or a psychological one? Every night they go to nightclubs, whatever the news. For them the sun rises as usual; so does the moon. Egypt has been plunged into darkness; they don't turn a hair. Opening buds, closing buds. When *do* they close them? At 7 a.m.?

7.30 a.m. In the Fifties the Russians built a nuclear power plant. The Americans thought it would take their rivals more than ten years. Within one year the plant was built, undergoing several tests. In the Nineties the same Russians started to dismantle their machines because their boss – the one who had come up with the idea of the plant – was known chiefly for his commitment to nuclear

disarmament. ‘It would cost $600 million to decommission your nuclear installation,’ said the Americans. ‘Never mind,’ said the Russians. Opening buds, closing buds.

9.24 a.m. I opened the taps in my bathroom and listened for a while to the water music. ‘Shall I put on some music?’ I asked myself as I opened the taps before stripping my Japanese pyjamas off. My bath composes and performs its own music. I liked this piece so much I almost forgot about the water which dutifully continued to fill the bath. The water might have overflowed its receptacle, but for my timely interference. By means of my favourite bath salts I imparted the smell of orange blossoms to the water and the bathroom. Usually the smell of my bath salts keeps company with my bathroom and myself for more than half an hour; and it lingers in the memory until my next ablutions.

9.31 a.m. My body and my thoughts are in the bath. I’m about to sing a quartet from *Rigoletto*. I’m not sure I’ll sing it today; I might put it off until tomorrow. Agatha Christie used to write in her bath. Why not write a detective story? M. was murdered last night. Only a member of his family could perpetrate the crime: all the doors and windows were locked. But the family was locked in so one of its members was bound to murder the victim. Perhaps a member of the family suffered from claustrophobia and therefore blew off steam by killing the wealthy octogenarian. He or she thought that everyone would say to the police, ‘He died a natural death. He was very old. It’s no wonder that he died.’ Some members of the family didn’t contradict the culprit’s train of thought, whereas others said nothing at all: they were struck dumb by what had happened. So the corpse was buried and the show went on. But, at some point, the show stopped because the niece of the deceased had found some arsenic in the attic. The body was exhumed and the authorities carried out an autopsy. They didn’t detect any vestige of the arsenic in the tissues of the corpse; and yet the ritual – a fragmentary resurrection, no less – wasn’t altogether useless. An expert discovered a wound *inside* the body and everyone wondered how the blow had been dealt. ‘The murderer made a small incision into which a tube was inserted,’ said one expert.

‘The murderer got the victim to swallow a miniature bomb which was to explode in the latter’s stomach,’ said another expert.

‘You really need a knife with a serrated edge for cutting an old man’s insides,’ said a surgeon.

‘A bullet must have gone clean through my uncle’s groin,’ said the dead man’s nephew.

Shortly afterwards, two bottles of lemonade doctored with rat poison were found in the kitchen. Inspector Job had a sneaking suspicion he was going the wrong way. He was wrong and the dead man’s nephew was right: the bullet he kept on speaking about *had* gone clean through his uncle’s groin. But no one could find the bullet – neither the inspector nor the victim’s relatives. They rummaged around the house and even went to the garden, hoping to find the bullet on one of the trees. They found nothing and consequently accused the nephew of leading them up the garden path. ‘We’re looking for a bullet instead of focusing our attention on knives.’ The nephew was arrested and his sister threw a tantrum, for she knew the bullet was embedded in the wall behind the mirror. ‘My brother had no motive,’ she said.

'Didn't he inherit a large sum of money?' said a voice.

'Didn't you inherit the house?' she asked. 'And yet no one suspects *you*.'

'And you inherited the garden,' said the voice. Apart from the prisoner's sister, no one knew the identity of the voice. Soon the sister was maliciously murdered and the inspector was at a loss to know who had committed the second murder. Nor did he have any idea which member of the family had murdered the head of the family. At this point Miss Doolittle appeared on the stage, in the house where the murders had been perpetrated. She spoke at once about knives and axes. 'What about the bullet?' asked Inspector Job.

'The bullet entered the body at chest height,' Miss Doolittle said. 'But it was another chest and another bullet.'

'What do axes have to do with our murders?' asked the inspector.

'Haven't you read *Crime and Punishment*?' asked Miss Doolittle.

'Why do people always drag Raskolnikov into the conversation?' asked the inspector.

'Because people are often killed this way,' answers Miss Doolittle.

'Old ladies perhaps,' says the inspector.

'Young men too,' says Miss Doolittle.

'We haven't found an axe,' says the inspector.

'How many mirrors have they got in this house?' asks Miss Doolittle.

'Not the foggiest idea,' says the inspector.

'Did none of them crack from side to side?' asks Miss Doolittle.

'To the best of my belief – none.'

'Did you take the trouble to look *behind* all these mirrors?'

'No.'

'You should have.'

'Why?'

'Because axes are often hidden behind mirrors.'

So they start removing the mirrors from where they've hung for centuries and they find axes, bullets, knives, poisons and ropes.

'How many people have been killed in this house?' asks Miss Doolittle.

'The entire population of the Earth,' answers the inspector.

'What kind of house is this? Is it a macrocosm or a microcosm?'

'It's just a treasure trove of time,' says the nephew.

'No, it's our uncle's collection,' says his sister. 'He was fond of history and murders.'

'Did *he* murder anyone?' asks Miss Doolittle.

'He'd have killed my aunt and his own brother, had he been given enough time to carry his project out,' says the sister.

'He must have had an illegitimate daughter,' says Miss Doolittle.

‘Do you think she returned from the States and was hired as a servant girl, which enabled her to avenge herself and her mother?’ asks the inspector.

‘She must have come from Australia,’ says Miss Doolittle. And then she asks a question that puzzles everybody, ‘Are you really your brother’s sister?’

‘I am my brother’s sister,’ says the sister.

‘But you’re speaking about another brother of yours, aren’t you? You left him behind when you set off for England.’

‘With all due respect, Miss Doolittle, I’d like to point out that I lived in New Zealand,’ says the sister.

‘The only problem here is that we’ll find it difficult to raise new capital if we lower our dividend,’ says a brother to *his* brother. ‘A reduced dividend might well discourage new investment.’

‘What are you talking about?’ asks Miss Doolittle.

‘They’re sharing my heritage,’ says the victim’s former wife. Now she is a widow and her tears have already become proverbial. ‘They intend to murder me and build a new factory with my money.’

‘With all due respect, Madam, we’d like to create the world’s largest media and entertainment empire,’ says one brother.

‘In the space of just 10 years, our company has grown from one small shop to a multi-million-pound empire,’ says his brother.

‘So you don’t need *my* money, do you?’ asks the widow.

‘One’s always in financial difficulties,’ says his brother.

‘Are you going to murder me?’ asks the widow.

‘In one or two weeks – we haven’t found an appropriate weapon yet.’

End of story. At least this is the end of *my* story. The brothers’ plan exposed them as murderers and they were brought to justice.

9.37 a.m. I decide not to write any more, devoting my sojourn in the bath to idle thoughts. But my thoughts are never idle: for more than 50 years they’ve been studying martial arts and acrobatics. They denounce stupidity, cupidity and all sorts of crimes that no one takes notice of. Their acrobatics prevent me from sleeping like a log: my sleep is punctuated by words, poetic license and nonsense that lie outside the Kingdom of Morpheus.

Lying in the bath, I think about Plato, Nietzsche and Heidegger. I then look at the ceiling and realise that philosophy doesn’t mean anything. At least its meanings don’t concern my bathroom that lives its own life and doesn’t depend on Plato’s ideas and caverns. Why can’t I live like my bathroom? I would hear water all day long: my pipes aren’t young any more and so they perform an endless piece of music even when I’m away and consequently can’t admire it. I don’t know what’s wrong with my pipes. Have they clogged up over 50 years? (The house was built in the early Sixties.) Thousands of cubic centimetres of water run through them every day. And each of those cubic centimetres leaves a little deposit, a little smear; gradually they turn into the keyboard of a water piano. I wish I could play

this piano all day long. I might go to sleep naturally, without making any effort if this brand-new water music lulls me to sleep. Even if I stop playing the piano, the pipes will go on, inspired by the water, deposits and smears.

The piece played by my pipes is very beautiful, but I'm tempted to compose a symphony for my bathroom in which the taps would play an important role. I fiddle with them for a while, trying to find out what kind of music they can yield when submitted to my creative will. Two minutes later I get out of the bath and submit *myself* to a rub-down with a towel.

10.25 a.m. I call my friend who is supposed to come and fetch me at around 11 a.m. My car is still in the garage and I'm weary of carrying bags from shops to my kitchen. Sometimes I carry them from one shop to another shop where I'm given other bags which in their turn become my travelling companions. My arms can't bear this torture any longer. At this rate, in 2012 I won't be able to play my water piano.

10.33 a.m. I sit down on the divan installed in front of my TV set. In Siberia a lorry driver found a few sacks filled with roubles on the road. The total amount approached $120,000. He went to the nearest police station and put the sacks on the chairs that awaited visitors and lawyers. 'Here you are,' he said.

'Why have you brought your potatoes to us?' asked a policeman.

'These sacks aren't filled with potatoes,' said the driver.

'With carrots?' asked the policeman.

'You can't eat their contents,' said the driver.

'I can eat anything when I'm hungry,' said the policeman.

'Can you drink anything when you're thirsty?' asked the driver.

'You mean when vodka's out of reach?'

'Exactly.'

'I can drink eau de cologne.'

'Can you eat money when you're hungry?'

'Why should you eat money? A spy can eat a message scribbled on a scrap of paper for fear that his enemies might read the message and drop a bomb on his native city. But you'd better spend money in a shop, buying a car or a washing machine. You can also buy a villa on condition that you've got enough money at your disposal. In this case, you'll have to go to an estate agency.'

'So you won't eat money, will you?'

'No. Why should I?'

'So I can entrust you with the safekeeping of this money,' says the driver, opening the sacks one by one.

'What is it?' asks the policeman.

'I told you the sacks weren't filled with potatoes.'

'Where did you find all this money?'

‘On the road.’

‘On which road?’

‘Do you think I left a few sacks behind? Too late – I picked up all the sacks strewn along the road.’

‘Did you go to the end of the road?’

‘I don’t know where the end of this road is located.’

‘I know,’ says the policeman, rushing out.

He hadn’t turned up half an hour later so the chief officer had to find a stand-in. Another policeman stalked into the room and the ritual began anew as if nothing had happened.

‘I’m wasting my time,’ said the driver.

‘If you go on talking like that, I’ll arrest you,’ said the policeman. He counted the money and asked the driver why he had brought it to the police station.

‘Where was I supposed to take it?’

‘Why didn’t you *spend* it?’

‘I had no time to spend it.’

‘You might have taken your time. Were you in a hurry?’

‘No.’

‘Did you have another assignment?’

‘No.’

‘Why didn’t you put the money under a floorboard in your room? Why didn’t you dig up a hole in a stretch of wasteland?’

To earn this amount of money, the driver would have to work for 20 years at least. He doesn’t care: he is about to retire from the company. But he won’t get $120,000 from the company when he retires. So why didn’t he appropriate the sacks? After all, they weren’t filled with potatoes. And even potatoes may come in handy, especially since the price of potatoes has risen sharply over the last year.

A plant doesn’t need money. What it needs is buds: it must open and close *something*, otherwise its life makes no sense. A hotel porter pushes a door open and, if necessary, closes it afterwards. He may call you a taxi, but he chiefly concentrates on the door assigned to his care. He has managed to hold down a steady job. What’s wrong with that? If you open your eyes and shut them, you don’t work for the sake of society: no one needs your eyes, either open or shut. (No one needs *my* eyes.) A hotel porter’s job is a real job. But for him, many people would neither check into the hotel nor get out of it.

10.44 a.m. I put on my briefs, my trousers and the rest of my clothes without which I can’t go to the garage where my car has been waiting for me since yesterday. But yesterday my friend was busy and I had no wish to confront the people who had deprived me of my car for almost a month without being able to repair it properly.

A week ago she called the garage on my behalf, saying they should make amends for the trouble they had caused me. 'The car parts themselves are not expensive, it's the labour that costs the money,' she said.

'I understand you,' said the receptionist, echoing de Gaulle's famous speech. (*Je vous ai compris.*)

11.28 a.m. We are driving to the garage. 'Why didn't you take the shortest route?' I ask.

'Because I don't want to get lost. Last time I did take it and circled for an hour before I found the way. Why waste our time?'

How does one waste one's time? Does one ever waste it?

Eight years ago I wrote a novel about the Flying Dutchman – the mythical captain of a spectre ship haunting the waters around the Cape of Good Hope. In Wagner's opera the Flying Dutchman gambles his salvation on a rash pledge to round the Cape during a storm and so is condemned to round the Cape forever. He may be redeemed only through the love and death of a woman. So in Wagner's opera, in the film *Pandora* and in my novel he dutifully falls in love with a woman. Here is a paragraph I didn't include in the final version of *my* legend:

> *The Dutchman often got the feeling that time had branched out at some point, letting him fly and sail, kill and pardon – as the fancy took him. He was alive; he was dead. He lived in Paris and nowhere. He was a Martian and an earthling.*
> *In the 20th century he never failed to bring up the theory of relativity as soon as his thoughts concentrated on his past or future. 'The moments of time relative to the Flying Dutchman,' he wrote, 'mean that time is linear for him; the moments of time relative to the Sailing Dutchman mean that time is cyclical for him. Sailing for ever around the Cape of Good Hope. I can no longer fly, but I can sail. So my time is cyclical: it repeats itself. Not always. I am faithful to a woman; my time is cyclical. I betray her with another woman; my time is linear. I murder a woman; my time is cyclical. I let a jealous husband pierce my heart with his sword; my time is linear again. It might be an idea to try and find –'*

Why did I waste my time on this paragraph? Because once again the road of time branched at the bottom of a hill and I followed only one road, as so many people had done before me. No, I resolved to reach the top of the hill instead of carrying on 'the good work' and I saw the objective time disappear in the distance. Is that what Bergson calls '*durée*' (duration)? It was a long climb to the top of the hill, but it was worth it for the view from the top.

Now I no longer climb to the top of the hill which may represent a sort of personal time, being vertical and leading only to panoramas and immobility, not to a definite goal. I follow the crowd, the road at the end of which there's a wall. And I don't wish to know what view is hidden beyond the wall.

Was the whole thing a waste of time? Writing novels, climbing to the top of the hill, looking around instead of walking along? Any *durée* is a waste of time, according to the point of view adopted by my contemporaries. Any view is excellent if you're on holiday, but as soon as you're back your life turns into a road which doesn't branch lest you waste your time and make a lot of unnecessary decisions. Our ancestors spent their time on hilltops, on mountaintops; we drive along one road.

We drive on and I listen to the drone of the engine which doesn't remind me of my bathroom's music. Is there only one music in the world? Does it never branch at the bottom of a hill? No explanations, no meditations.

A series of events at various different times. But all this happens in the head of *one* observer who joins the past and the present as if to counteract the pernicious effect of Hamlet's remark: 'The time is out of joint.' There are no past, present and future; there's only the present, the everlasting present. Eternity.

11.42 a.m. We stop on our way to buy a few organic cucumbers. Another waste of time? Health food is believed to be good for you because it doesn't contain artificial chemicals or much sugar or fat. The cucumbers I bought don't contain artificial chemicals, but my body certainly does, considering how much junk food I've eaten over the last 30 years: in the Soviet Union, agriculture was still largely based on traditional methods. Anyway my body has been artificial for many years and I hardly recognise myself as I look at my body when lying in a hot bath. Nor do I recognise my face as I look at my reflexion in the bathroom mirror. What *do* I recognise? The road?

> *He recalled how he used to roll whenever provoked into a laughing fit by an incongruous remark or uncouth conduct—at the beginning of the 17th century. He would literally roll from one wall to another, entrusting the comfort of his body to carpets or just to a parquet floor.*

The Flying Dutchman again. Why do I think about this novel of mine on the road to the garage? Did I take the wrong road? If I don't fetch my car today I can do it tomorrow. But what am I supposed to do today? I could have stayed at home and watched TV all the time. I could have called a Moscow friend.

'What are you doing?'

'Watching TV.'

'Which channel?'

'No idea. I'm just watching it.'

'What do you see?'

'A woman, a man.'

'I can see a woman and a man too. We must be watching the same channel. Could you describe the woman?'

'Not very beautiful.'

'Neither is mine. The same woman.'

‘Do you think there’s only one ugly woman in the world?’

‘Perhaps. I don’t look at ugly women.’

‘What about the man?’

‘Not very handsome.’

‘Do you mean to say the world’s ugly?’

‘I didn’t say the man was ugly.’

‘We’re going to a ball tonight. What do you think my wife should wear? She can’t make up her mind.’

‘Can’t you help her?’

‘I can’t make up my mind either. I don’t know anything about fashion.’

‘Neither do I.’

‘Are you going to a ball tonight?’

‘No. My car’s still in the garage. I’d better fetch it first thing tomorrow morning.’

‘My wife showed me two dresses. I asked her, “Which dress do you like best?”’

‘What did she answer?’

‘She said they were both all right.’

‘Only all right?’

‘Only all right.’

‘All right then. Toss a coin.’

‘She said she couldn’t wear both of them.’

‘She was right.’

‘I said, “The blue cotton one is very smart but I’m not sure it goes with the hat.”’

‘You were right too.’

‘These summer balls are a real pain in the neck. You never know what to wear.’

‘But surely with this summer weather, a sports coat would be all right?’

‘Don’t forget it’s a ball. The house looks like a castle. It *is* a castle, by the way.’

‘Perhaps the answer is not to go at all.’

‘You’re right. We’ll stay at home and watch TV.’

‘Hopefully you’ll see some beautiful women and handsome men.’

‘You mean rather than make fools of ourselves.’

‘I don’t mean anything of the kind.’

‘What *do* you mean?’

‘Nothing at all.’

‘All right. Bye then.’

At some point the Dutchman murdered his wife who had turned out to be unfaithful to him. Actually she *was* faithful – within another time. But he heard about the latter too late: his wife had

already been murdered. No more balls, no more dresses. ‘Should I wear this? Should I wear that? Should I wear nothing at all?’

I won’t need my car if I watch TV day in day out. What else is there to do anyway? I don’t like the games offered by my computer. I’d rather watch a football match on TV, when in need of a game. Last spring my Petersburg friend came to Versailles, cast a glance at my computer and said, ‘Before we start our dinner I’m going to bring you up to speed with the latest developments.’

‘I only use the word processor.’

‘You should play games with your computer.’

‘I play games with myself. It’s all good clean fun.’

‘Do you play cards or what? Playing card games is not my idea of fun.’

‘I just play with myself.’

‘You need a response when you play games, real opposition.’

‘I’m my own opponent. And I often have a decided advantage over my opponent.’

From time to time I play a game of darts. I say to myself, ‘My opponent in the quarter-finals is the No. 1 seed.’

0.27 p.m. We are in the garage. I check the bill and pay it. My friend feels like a cup of coffee. I drive back home.

1.12 p.m. On my way I stop at my favourite shop and buy French onion soup, Thai chicken soup, the soup of the month (Back to roots! Swede and carrot), wild mushroom soup, spinach & nutmeg soup and spicy butternut & sweet potato soup.

1.44 p.m. I ask myself two questions, ‘What’s for lunch?’ ‘Shall I heat up some soup for lunch?’ I answer the first question thus, ‘An organic cucumber, French onion soup, Thai chicken soup, the soup of the month (Back to roots! Swede and carrot), wild mushroom soup, spinach & nutmeg soup and spicy butternut & sweet potato soup.’ This list is no help to me at all: I want a decision. But, after all, it’s *my* decision and so I have to make it. I can’t say to myself, ‘Let me have your decision by next week.’ I should make up my mind at once. I shouldn’t argue about it for hours, eventually realising I’m hungry. I wish I could make a decision, instead of floundering about. But wouldn’t I come under fire for my decision to eat Thai chicken soup for lunch?

I said to myself in the shop (1.19 p.m.), ‘You shouldn’t buy this Thai chicken soup because it’s not a vegetarian product. Of the four million people who have become vegetarians in France, nearly two-thirds are women. Don’t you wish to add one man to these statistics? What about solidarity among male representatives of the human species? Your team came second in the competition. A couple of victories would improve the team’s morale enormously.’

I answer the second question, ‘I’ll eat some soup for lunch.’ But which soup should I choose? This is another question. It is hoped that a compromise will be reached in today’s talks. Anyway the talks are aiming at a compromise, otherwise I’ll go hungry until tomorrow.

2.25 p.m. The compromise has just been reached: I’ll eat three soups instead of one.

3.12 p.m. The lunch is over.

3.15 p.m. I sit down in front of my TV set. Should I have put the dirty dishes into the dishwasher? Too late. The programme I'm watching requires my immediate attention.

3.17 p.m. I start giving the programme my undivided attention. The presenter talks about a Canadian zoo where you can have a swim in the company of polar bears. Of course they would eat you alive if you weren't protected in some way or other. So the director of the zoo had a glass partition installed in the swimming pool. This partition is 25 centimetres thick; and yet you get the feeling you can embrace and even kiss a polar bear. At least the children I see on the screen behave as if there was no partition between them and the monsters. So the children play with them. I can play with them too, although I'm not swimming at the moment. Should I swim in my bath? It's not big enough, I'm afraid. But why should I *swim*? I could just *sit* in my bath and look at the polar bears. Should I put a television set in my bathroom? Some of my colleagues have TV sets everywhere – even in their boxrooms.

3.22 p.m. They show a woman who was trying to sell her three-month-old child. 'How much does your son cost?' asked a middle-aged man.

'Thirty thousand dollars,' said the mother.

'I don't think he's particularly beautiful,' said the man.

'Babies are never beautiful. You must be confusing them with kittens.'

'I'll buy a kitten, then.'

'A kitten will never talk to you.'

'Is it better to talk rubbish than not to talk at all?'

'My son won't talk rubbish if he's properly educated. I hope you'll educate him privately.'

'He'll watch TV. Most children's television programmes aim to educate and entertain at the same time.'

'I won't sell my son to you. I love my son. I want him to be properly educated.'

They interview a police officer. 'She could envisage only three solutions to her problem: either to sell the child abroad or to sell the child in Russia.'

'What's the third solution?' says a journalist.

'To bump him off.'

3.43 p.m. They speak about human kindness, about good and evil. Somewhere in the north of Russia there's a woman who believes in compassion, sympathy, gentleness, benevolence and kind-heartedness. Many children come to her or are sent to her school situated amidst lakes and forests – in the heart of nature. What does she teach them? Love? One of her pupils answers the question, 'You learn what you want to learn. You learn your future. You yourself are your future. Why learn something else? You are love and nature.' When asked the same question, the head of the school enumerates the benefits of her system. 'Our children grow naturally. They get natural food, natural

facts, natural ideas, natural vibrations, natural emotions, natural solutions to their problems. Even their problems are natural and not artificial.'

4.00 p.m. A lecture on Tolstoy and Dostoevsky. A scholar speaks about how Dostoevsky triumphed over his enemies and his own misfortunes when he made a speech at Pushkin's jubilee. As far as I know, he enlarged upon Pushkin's capacity to understand the whole world and not only the Russians. He was attuned to the world and therefore could express every nuance of the feelings experienced on the other side of the globe. In other words, Pushkin and the crowd were on the same wavelength. The Russian poet didn't even have to look at the faces of those who surrounded him in the crowd: he had always known them and could draw every feature, every pimple at short notice. He could also write a poem about what was going in the heads he had never seen: you aren't allowed to see the entire population of the Earth. That's what Dostoevsky said to the audience on this memorable occasion, adding that Pushkin would have relinquished ecstasy and Paradise, had there been one sufferer on the Earth. Even if this sufferer had been in a class of his own, the poet would have felt miserable. Would he have sought to meet the sufferer in order to boost his morale?

'You're not in a cheerful mood this afternoon.'

'I suffer.'

'Don't just suffer in silence.'

'Do you want me to wail?'

'Don't suffer at all – life's beautiful.'

'It's not. I'm at the end of my tether.'

'Are you always at the end of your tether?'

'By 6 o'clock after a busy day I'm at the end of my tether.'

'Have a nap. Don't go to work tomorrow and the day after tomorrow.'

'I'd suffer from boredom, from idleness, from pangs of conscience.'

'I can't settle in Paradise if you stubbornly refuse to be happy. Can't you become happy on *my* account?'

'I can't. I suffer too much.'

'Your attitude shows a selfish disregard for others.'

Why do I so often talk about humanity instead of picking up a few individuals? Because of my Russian background? Intelligent, artistic, gifted, passionate, compassionate and beautiful. Why not pick up a few men and women? Instead I talk about stupidity, degeneration and black holes; about overall salvation.

Tolstoy went even further as he meditated upon the destiny of humankind. His ambition and dogged determination ensured that he rose to the top of his profession. But he didn't feel quite satisfied. So he became a teacher. Not only did he teach everybody how to act and what to do, but he rewrote the New Testament. In a way he was Jesus Christ's teacher.

4.50 p.m. Four women discuss the news. One of them says, ‘I saw the following inscription in a doctor’s office: “The poor should never fall ill. The rich should be ill all the time.”’

‘How will he talk the rich into staying in hospital?’ says the second woman.

‘You’d better be ill because this will help your body learn to defend itself,’ says the third woman.

‘You’re right. I’ve noticed that people who are always complaining live longer than those who never fall ill,’ says the second woman.

‘He won’t talk to the rich,’ says the fourth woman. ‘He’ll just put a small dose of arsenic into their cutlets every day.’

‘But they’ll grow immune to arsenic if they consume it twice a day,’ says the first woman. ‘That’s why Yusupov couldn’t poison Rasputin – he was immune to arsenic because he was used to it.’

‘And what if the doctor puts *another* poison into the cutlets?’ says the fourth woman.

‘You mean if he *changes* the poison?’ says the first woman.

‘Or do they grow immune to *all* poisons if you administer arsenic to them?’ says the fourth woman.

‘I don’t think so,’ says the second woman.

‘I think they do,’ says the third woman. ‘They get over it and leave the hospital.’

‘So what do you do to make them stay in?’ says the fourth woman.

‘You can’t bribe them, can you?’ says the second woman.

‘Of course not,’ says the third woman. ‘They’ve got enough money for their great-grandchildren.’

‘You just tell them, “Sooner or later you’ll fall ill again. I can cure your future diseases now. This may take some time, but prevention is better than cure,” says the fourth woman.

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The day before yesterday I wasted a lot of time because my St Petersburg friend had been wittering on about his neighbours for half the morning. It’s really dangerous to call your friends: human beings are as unpredictable as my cat. ‘Why do I call them?’ I ask myself.

‘Because you’re bored,’ I answer.

‘I’m not.’

‘Are you sure?’

‘I’m not Eugene Onegin.’

‘There are other people in the world. You, for instance.’

‘Life’s too short for this kind of luxury.’

‘Could you repeat what you just said?’

‘Boredom is such a luxury.’

‘Yet you manage to get bored. Even TV seems boring to you from time to time.’

‘I’ve got as many as three hundred channels.’

‘Why not go out for a change?’

‘I can see the sky from where I’m sitting.’

‘There are other things to see. Are you only interested in the sky?’

‘There’s a stray cat in our car park.’

‘Why not pay her a visit?’

‘I’m not sure she’s a woman.’

‘Don’t you like men? Can’t you call in on a man?’

‘Of course I can. But it’s going to rain. It’s raining already.’

‘Take your umbrella.’

‘I don’t like carrying things.’

‘Take your hat.’

‘I don’t have a hat.’

‘Take your beret.’

‘I used to have berets in my childhood. In my chest of drawers I keep a photograph. I’m standing by my mother’s side. I’m wearing a beret and my mother’s holding an umbrella.’

‘You must have worn it outside this photograph as well.’

‘Sometimes I think there’s nothing outside this photograph.’

‘There’s your television set.’

‘They sing too much on TV. The more they talk the better. They talked about apples this morning.’

‘You haven’t eaten them for a long time.’

‘Somehow I manage to keep the doctor away.’

‘Touch wood.’

‘I’ve touched so many pieces of furniture in my life.’

‘That’s why you’re still alive. Are you alive and kicking?’

‘I hope so. My mother liked apples very much. Duck goes with apples, doesn’t it?’

‘It’s the other way round.’

‘How do you mean?’

‘It’s apples that go with duck.’

‘What does it matter? Anyway it depends on the sauce you put in the dish.’

‘Don’t forget to stir the sauce gently until it begins to boil.’

‘I don’t know what I’ll eat today.’

‘You’ve got a lot of different soups. Some of them are open.’

‘I might go to a restaurant. I don’t like stirring sauces.’

‘What *do* you like to stir?’

‘I wouldn’t mind eating a duck for lunch.’

‘Don’t you pity ducks? Aren’t they living creatures? Do you want them to die for your sake?’

‘They can’t die for their country, for their religion. Why not die for the sake of my lunch?’

‘I’d eat vegetables and apples, if I were you.’

‘Our neighbour in Moscow had a huge Adam’s apple. Many people mistook this apple for a second nose.’

‘And they mistook your neighbour for Adam, I suppose.’

‘One of our neighbours died. His widow said to my father it was my fault.’

‘How did you kill him?’

‘By playing the piano. He couldn’t bear it. He collapsed and died of a heart attack.’

‘He should have cut fatty foods out altogether.’

‘What about my duck confit?’

‘Don’t eat the fat.’

‘What else is there to eat?’

‘The duck, the apples, the sauce.’

‘I haven’t stirred it yet, have I?’

‘It’s not lunchtime yet. Watch your TV.’

‘I must have seen this film 50 years ago. My former life.’

‘How many former lives have you got?’

‘She says to him, “You’ve ruined my life.” He answers, “*You*’ve ruined my life.”’

‘They let the palace of their love fall into ruin.’

‘They live on a barge because their house hasn’t been finished yet.’

‘They let the barge of their love fall into ruin.’

‘He sleeps in a sack. Then he moves to a student hostel. He carries his suitcases through the village. “Did you quarrel with you wife?” inquires a passer-by. “I’m doing weight training,” he answers.

‘Do you know what time it is?’

‘No.’

‘Perhaps it’s lunchtime.’

‘I’m not hungry yet.’

‘Do you still trust your biological clock?’

‘Even if the sun doesn’t rise today, I’ll go for a walk. And I’ll eat sooner or later.’

‘Is it worthwhile eating if the sun doesn’t rise?’

‘Do you think it’s the end of the world?’

‘You saw the birds, didn’t you? They showed them on TV.’

‘The dead birds?’

‘They’ve fallen from the sky. They’re scattered over fields, along country roads.’

‘Some think the end of the world has come.’

‘I don’t think so. The end of the world will come when humans begin to fall from the sky.’

‘They’d have to get up there first.’

‘Corpses are scattered all over the earth and no one buries them.’

‘Not even Antigone?’

‘She hasn’t fallen from the sky yet.’

‘Will dogs bury their bones?’

‘Why not bequeath the Earth to dogs and cats?’

‘They wouldn’t fight, would they?’

‘At least they wouldn’t fight over bones.’

‘They’ve patched up their marriage. The film’s over.’

‘It’s time for the news.’

‘They speak about icicles all the time.’

‘Why speak about them? They just hang from roofs.’

‘They fall from the sky and kill babies in Petersburg, in Moscow. You push a pram down the street and you suddenly realise your son or daughter is dead.’

‘A huge icicle can kill an adult.’

‘And it can damage a car. You buy a Bentley, wake up and realise your Bentley’s no longer a Bentley. Just a scrap heap.’

‘And you can’t sue anybody. People say, “Icicles are unpredictable. They fall or they don’t. An icicle can hang from your roof for ages without bothering anyone. Don’t you like icicles? Aren’t they beautiful? If it weren’t for them, your roof would look naked. Just a scrap heap.”’

‘Icicles are not as beautiful as stalactites.’

‘The end of the world will come when stalactites begin to fall.’

‘They’re falling already.’

‘Let’s wait and see what happens.’

‘Haven’t they shown the end result yet?’

‘There’s a strange programme on TV. Anyway, they’re not speaking about the stalactites.’

‘What *are* they speaking about?’

‘About animals, plants and insects.’

‘It’s not over yet. Life goes on.’

‘They’re speaking about humans too. A human is speaking about humans.’

‘They might have filmed this programme a long time ago.’

‘Usually they show the news at this time of day.’

‘No news is good news.’

‘You mean it’s all over? I can hear the cars zooming up and down the street.’

‘This might be an echo.’

'I was thinking about moods the other day.'

'About bad and good moods?'

'There are other moods as well. For instance, if you say, "The drink has put him in an amiable mood," you don't mean that his mood is good, do you? His mood may change during the course of the conversation, especially if he goes on drinking. His mood may change dramatically after the 10th glass of vodka. At first it's good, but you know it may turn aggressive at any moment because there are two bottles of vodka on the table. So even his amiable mood wasn't really good. And the bad mood he exhibits after drinking a bottle of vodka isn't as bad as all that – he's about to fall asleep. And heavy sleepers are always in a good mood. When you say, "The Prime Minister was in defiant mood in the House of Commons yesterday" you don't mean he was either in a good or a bad mood. It depends on what or who he was defying. Actually he might have been beyond good and evil, for all I know. Another film. A married couple's looking for a flat. Why move into another space? The hero says, "I feel like eating something," and yet it's not lunchtime yet.'

'Why don't you move into lunchtime?'

'They're going from one flat to another, from one city to another. "Why should we waste another hour?" he says. I think she's about to divorce her husband. They got divorced a week ago. Apparently she divorced her husband on the grounds of mental cruelty. Now they're looking for two flats. That's why they travel so much. She says, "Our son's afraid of dogs." "I've never been afraid of dogs," says her husband. "There weren't so many dogs 30 years ago," she says. "Can't we live *differently*?" he says. "What did you say?" she says. She wasn't listening. Neither was he listening to his own words, to her words. These people don't listen – they just talk for hours on end. And there's no end to these hours. Even if a million birds fall from the sky these hours will tick away. "She's my wife," he says. Are they still married or did he talk automatically, without thinking? "You're a woman," he says. "I'm not a woman," she says. "When I married you I was a woman, but you've been squeezing me dry for years and years. Now I'm completely dry."'

'Some plants grow well in dry soil, in a dry climate.'

'Yes. I wonder why humans can't grow well in a dry climate. Are we inferior to plants? There are magicians in Moscow now. They come from France, from England. They make announcements and their publicity enlivens newspapers. They say you'll get a million roubles if you merely write to them. Your letter reveals your name and address. If you don't speak about your age and hobbies in the letter you send to a magician, his secretary is likely to question you on the subject when you call the office to ask about the roubles. Instead of the promised amount of money, you get by post a catalogue of talismans you're supposed to buy in order to prosper on Earth and even in the Hereafter. These talismans are very expensive and you fill your house with them, hoping to get in exchange 12 million dollars. You spend a lot of money on your happiness, but you're still unhappy because you don't know what happiness is and how you should handle it if it eventually comes. You carry these talismans with you in a suitcase. They hang from your neck, from your wrists. Overloaded with them, you can hardly

walk. Why should you walk? Stay at home, surrounded by your talismans, fiddling with them. Don't you feel happy when playing with your talismans, with your potential happiness? Forget about your car which is waiting for you in the courtyard. In Moscow they often forget their cars in courtyards. Nobody comes, nobody cares. These cars prevent other cars from moving around, from finding a sanctuary – away from traffic and accidents. They don't care either: time has got the better of them. They know that the game of happiness is eternal and so no longer wait for you, unperturbed by the people who always go somewhere, molesting their cars. They just stand there as if somebody had asked them to turn into monuments. But nobody asks them anything and they don't answer because their answers are not in great demand. This part of town isn't a tow-away zone; yet some people wonder why these cars remain where they are for such a long time. They point at a car which reminds the surviving veterans of World War II, of how they fought against the Nazis. 'Is it a war monument?' they ask other veterans. They receive no answer and so depart, nodding their heads.

LAST LOVE, LOVE LOST

1

You cannot help looking at the world, even if you are reluctant to do so on a regular basis, every day and every morn. Every morning, every mourning, you say something to yourself as you yield to yet another linguistic temptation and begin to play with words and letters and even commas. You look at the world and it looks at you as if you were a young man, a promising artist or scientist; or just the picture of Dorian Gray. The more you look at each other, the more you pay attention to death, for you are nearer to death than ever; yet you have never been too far from it. The nearer you get to it, the more details you notice, which is not surprising or amazing; and it is all the less surprising since you are no longer amazed by what happens around you and even inside your body and soul. Another pain and another thought. The pain might be brand new because you have not yet experienced all the pains available to human beings. But somehow you are used to it or to the thought that no pain is new, given that all pains come and *go* – not always, not always – and you can hardly tell one pain from another because they all lead to death and there is no difference between this death and that one. Napoleon said in *War and Peace* as he looked at Prince Andrei: '*Quelle belle mort*.' But death is never beautiful, wherever it takes place, pride of place; you may be a hero, but your death is not beautiful because your corpse is ugly and your face does not look like an archangel's face.

You stand by a window and look at a tree as if you had never seen a tree in your life, in your former lives which often come to you now as if to suggest you should think about a series of new lives, given that this one is over and done with. The tree does not look at you as if it knew you by heart: your face, your thoughts, your fears, your death and life. You look at it and do not say anything to yourself for a while; and then you realise that so far you have thought only about the trunk of the tree, taking no notice of its leaves. Now you take notice of every leaf, however tiny and ugly, and you look at the way it falls to the ground, if it takes the trouble to perform this ritual in your presence. Why not do it at night when no one looks at you? You would rather die at night, talking to yourself, to no one else, and saying your last words to the walls that have always listened to your screams and groans.

Your gardener tells you that this tree should be cut down because it is already dead and it would be cruel to prolong its suffering, agony and death rattle. And you agree with your gardener; you agree with whatever one says to you now and you say to yourself or just think that it is easier to agree with people than to contradict them. You contradict them, but they do what they like and you kick up a tremendous fuss about having to endure their wills to live and wills to power; and also their representations. You waste your time, your energy, and the world carries on the good work or the bad work, for the world is not yet beyond good and evil. There are evil empires and good emperors who do not care about your forthcoming death, about the leaves that fall in your garden as you look out of your window as if you had nothing else to do. Looking out of one's window is a full-time job and it is very difficult trying to bring up a child while doing a full-time job. That is why you have no children,

no wives, no marriages, no presents that one is given after a wedding ceremony or before it. And no one puts anything under your Christmas tree for the simple reason that no Christmas tree enlivens your Christmastime; and no Christmastime enlivens your life because you no longer notice time, times and births.

You do not go from strength to strength; at least this morning you do not feel like drawing your strength from Dante or Shakespeare, from the sun and the sky where the birds sing their hymns and oratorios. You listen to them and then stop listening because your attention span is almost as short as that of young children. But you refuse to talk to yourself about your second childhood and content yourself with your age, your prostration and inability to be consumed by passion for the girl next door. There are a few next doors and some girls must be living behind them. You live and let them live, as any gentleman would do in your shoes. Once a Japanese lady said to you: 'Sometimes a real gentleman doesn't behave like a gentleman,' but you could not bring yourself to make love to her. Now she would not have said anything: she must know you will never be a real gentleman, however hard you may try, doing your best to overcome obstacles, resistance. You know that too; you refuse to live in never-never land.

You never talk to yourself in the first person and this attitude towards life and your ego enables you to forget about your inabilities and worries, about your laziness which invades you as you start thinking about what you are supposed to do today and tomorrow. You do not have to do anything, for you are prepared to starve to death and die on your floor, unable to reach your mobile phone which happens to hide in another pocket, in a pair of trousers you have not seen for some time. You have not worn them for a month or so because they do not fit any more. Putting on weight is one of your fortes, but you no longer care about it, about getting out of shape and even out of your mind. Both your mind and body have got bent out of shape and you do not seem to worry about this fact, about this illusion. Let us say it is just an illusion, a false representation. The world is different and even *your* world is not similar to this horror. But you wonder if you still have your world and end up saying to yourself, 'Let it be, let them be, let her be, let me be.' You are, you still are.

You go out from time to time as if determined to make your neighbours realise you are still alive against all the odds. The girl next door says 'hello' and gets into her car, prepared to bluff her way into this job, that job. She is one of those people who are very good at bluffing their way out of trouble. You admire her but you have no wish to spend a night with her body in your bed or any other bed; yet her body might have appealed to your senses nine years ago. You would have done your best to seduce her in those days, in days of yore. Now you look at her car and do not say anything to yourself or anybody else; nor do you feel anything, for all your longing to be young again. Not young at heart – young in body.

She disappears round the nearest corner and you go down the street because you are bent on following your doctor's advice. Your doctor says to you, 'You should take more exercise.' And he embroiders upon this statement to make you understand you are teetering on the edge of a nervous

breakdown. So he says, ‘Regular exercise reduces the risk of coronary heart disease.’ And then he rises from his armchair and makes a few movements; you watch his bodily contortions and say to yourself that you are wasting your time and your doctor’s time. ‘This exercise is designed to develop the shoulder and back muscles.’

‘I won’t need my back muscles any more,’ you say to the doctor.

‘Why?’ asks the doctor.

‘Because I’m no longer interested in women.’

‘Are you interested in men?’ asks the doctor.

‘I am not.’

‘Are you interested in children?’ asks the doctor.

‘I am not.’

‘Are you interested in books?’ asks the doctor.

You go out and once again your native city engulfs you, and you realise that the Buddha’s words – ‘The flames rapidly engulfed the world’ – describe the situation better than your frustration and lassitude. You no longer have any desire; you are extinguished, on the same wavelength as a corpse. Yet there are flames in your body and even in your brain which is as cold as any ice cube, any polar ice cap. These flames are hidden and you do not know much about them unless they make you rush towards exits and entrances, towards doors beyond which you hope to find a multitude of girls who will understand everything and remain polite in bed, whatever happens or does not.

You go shopping because starving to death is not your cup of tea, whatever you say when you are desperate and think about death in terms of self-slaughter. And if you stick to this mood of yours, you do not go out; yet going out will never prevent anyone from taking their own life. You can throw yourself under the wheels of a vehicle, provided the wheels you are aiming at are big enough to grind you to powder. You become what you are destined to become and a report says, ‘A packet of white powder was found and police scientists are analysing it.’ You let them analyse you because you do not care about their analysis or any other analysis; even Freud is not welcome to your superego and other egos of yours. No one is welcome anywhere, as far as you are concerned, as far as your life is on God’s agenda, on Satan’s agenda. There are many agendas around, in the neighbourhood, and you had better be on all of them, otherwise you are likely to die at once.

You do not; your dying takes some time and you go out to provide your sinews and veins with food, strength, optimism and *élan vital* about which you know nothing or next to nothing; or next to anything. This *élan* carries you on its wings and you fly across oceans and jungles, saying to yourself that flying is better than sailing on a yacht, even if you are served a glass of champagne every two minutes. It is true that, whenever you get drunk, you fly somewhere – in the direction of your tomb, as it were. You do not care about your tomb, but once a month you do care about the girls next door and even about those who live in the middle of nowhere or on the outskirts of everywhere. You fly to these outskirts and find no one; no point in flying, as the saying goes. And then you get into your car and

just drive to the nearest chemist's where you usually buy the pills you need for your diseases and health.

You are still able to get into your car and drive to the nearest chemist's which is not far from your house. You might walk over to this stock of medicine if you were as fit as a fiddle; you are not and you use your car for the purpose. Besides, you have got other roads and paths where you can walk for hours, thinking about your health and the birds that seem to welcome you around every corner, at the end of every yard, even if you do not listen to them. Life recedes as much as it can, but it does not disappear around the corner. If it does, it will not be life any more and life struggles for life as long as it can without enduring too much suffering. In these matters you do not know exactly what is 'too much' and what is 'all right': the information you receive from your brain is processed in a random order. Never mind – your car is in the garage and you take your seat and drive to the nearest chemist's, provided there are no roadworks, no lorries, no children who like playing soccer in the middle of the town square.

At the chemist's you find whatever you are looking for and this time you do not even look at the young ladies buying pills for their mothers and fathers; nor do *they* wish to look at you. They are right: you are neither their mother nor father, and your age deters them from falling in love with you and saying 'yes' to your demands – if any, you might add today. No invitations of any kind, no happy and long marriages. Automatically you look at this pair of legs, at that pair of arms, and you continue to queue as if nothing had happened, as if you had not seen anyone, not even a shop assistant. And suddenly you see a wonderful young woman – such things happen all of a sudden, as usual – and you forget about your pills, diseases and even about your life which makes no sense without this woman. Nothing makes sense without her; even your death is nonsensical in her absence. But your death makes no sense anyway – within the framework of your life and its beauty.

You see this woman who buys a few pills as if she was as old as you are, as ill as your body that needs a lot of medicine to cope with time. You look at her hands, at her clothes and realise that perfection is not a fiction: it does exist on Earth, whatever they say about life and politics and wars. Her handbag is almost as beautiful as her hands and you feel lost in the presence of such beauty. You feel lost anyway: life is a number of losses and you lose yourself and whatever you own because you cannot do otherwise. Nor can your destiny do whatever it wants to do. There is a destiny beyond your destiny, above it – above the destiny of the world. You may call it fate, *fatum*, but the words you use do not count and you do not know what counts and what does not. Probably nothing counts, but you continue to count whatever you find on your way. Nothing responds to your prayers, whatever the number you reach in the course of your multiplications.

The woman you are looking at is unique, in a class of her own, and you ask yourself what else you may need to go on, to live through years and storms. You do not have to: there are loopholes which offer you deliverance. But you cling to your life because in this life of yours there are women who buy pills and park their cars in front of shops and other buildings. They park their cars, get out

and go somewhere, following a path where you wait for a miracle; and yet you know that miracles do not happen. And if they do, you have to merit them, their appearance in this world. And only saints deserve such honours and you are no saint because you do not have any stigmata in spite of your prayers. You do not deserve anything except a hearty meal washed down with a bottle of white wine or red wine.

What can you do? The woman is so beautiful you lose your notions and motions. You can move because you are not paralysed, not yet; but moving does not mean victory except if you follow this woman, her car, to find out where she lives, where she is happy in the company of her husband and children. A woman like that must have a few husbands and a multitude of children, otherwise our life makes no sense. You can live and die without asking too many questions. Why should you ask anything? Who do you expect to question, hoping to get many answers, many pieces of advice? Ask the universe or God – this depends upon your standpoint. You stand here, you stand there. You shout and hear something; and you do not know what you hear. And if you do, you do not know what all this means except that its means nothing.

But love does mean something and you continue to look at the woman who is by your side for the moment: she is handing a few banknotes to a shop assistant. And then she leaves and you see her car, dress and legs that disappear inside the car. And you recall the phrase: 'Reversing round a corner is one of the manoeuvres you are required to perform in a driving test.' She performs a driving test; she performs other tests. You look at her disappearance and wonder what you can do. You can jump into your car and follow hers as far as you need to follow it. She is bound to go back home or pay a visit to her lover. All is possible; everything is within arm's reach. Where are your arms? You seem to have forgotten your body that no longer answers your questions. Why should you recall this useless quantity of matter, this substance of sorts? You remember only that woman who vanished into thin air as if this evanescent air was the only treasure house of beauty.

You are still at the chemist's as if you wished to spend the rest of your life there, deprived of women, men, comets and stars: you cannot see anything out of the only window that adorns the house you are in for the moment. You see a few cars if you look out of this window, but the only car you are interested in is no longer in front of this house and once again you feel your loneliness and also the loneliness of any human being who falls in love and knows that his feelings, sentiments and passions do not count in the world where he lives because he is no longer up to standard. He does what he can and what he does may be useful, but he knows that the end of his field of vision and that of his tether are not very far; he can see this end and other ends. He sees many ends and they make up another world where he might live, if he was prepared to live in any world, resolved to live somewhere, to die nowhere. Life disappears and he, she and it look at it from many windows that help one find one's whereabouts in many worlds, among many stars.

The young woman is no longer by your side and you are not prepared to jump into your car and follow her to the end of the Earth. Such women live at the end of the Earth, of the universe; and also at

the end of your tether. They live at the end of something and you are at the end of life which ends in your room, in your bed where you dream about the woman you met this morning or yesterday, last week. You speak to her as if she was your nurse, your companion in misfortune, and she answers you because your imagination is mad to the point of making you listen to a woman you will never meet again, whatever you may do in your leisure hours. You will never meet her or talk to her, even if your dreams listen carefully to your desires, which means that even in your dreams you will not talk to her. But you can do that during your waking hours or years. And you do that, nothing else.

You say to her: 'You're so beautiful. You're a platonic idea of beauty.'

'What are you talking about?'

'I'm talking about your beauty, about my love.'

'I don't understand.'

'You'll understand me if we spend a few hours together.'

'I'll never understand you.'

'No one knows the future. Even prophets don't know it.'

You recall your life: you cannot recall the future and so are bound to fall back on your past, on your youth when you were a gentleman and a scoundrel. There were women in your life, but you invited neither eternal strife nor anything of the sort. You invited those women who came and drank champagne with you; and you would *conquer* them because at the time you did not care about the words you used. You thought in terms of actions and actions spoke so loudly you do not remember whether the women who slept with you were conquered or not. Perhaps they conquered you: everything is the other way round, as you realise at the end of your life. Your end is probably your beginning and vice versa. You are in your bed and you think about your past, about the women who were somewhere, not far from your bed and armchairs. You are happy. Not quite.

Only a young man can be happy, or a young woman; and you are neither, according to your passport where your age looks at you and says, 'You're neither a gentleman nor a scoundrel. You're nothing.' Your age and objects talk to you now as if they had taken pity on you, for others leave you alone and you are alone. You know you are alone and nothing, but that does not mean you know yourself or others or animals or plants. You know a part of yourself that does not care about your desires, if any. Until yesterday you thought your life was over and you were right for once: your life *was* over and there was no point in being alive and kicking. You were alive, but not kicking and there were many points around you and even inside your body: suspension points and the ones which are always beside the point.

And then you saw that woman at the nearest chemist's. The woman was far away, but you saw her at the chemist's that was not too far from your gate, your garden and your car. So you might have thought the young woman was not far away either because nothing is far away unless you are dead and do not feel any presence – even that of your coffin and tomb. And for once you did not feel the presence of your tomb which always surrounds you – to the point of making you say, 'My tomb is my

surroundings. I walk around my tomb, you know.' To whom do you say that? To nobody, not even to domestic animals who might have listened to you, had you taken the trouble to buy a cat. Instead of a cat, you bought a lot of medicine and you do not regret it because you are still alive and you have no idea what you would have become and in what tomb you would have been buried, but for this medicine.

Apparently a glance can make a difference. You read about it in a newspaper because you still read books, newspapers and notes which pertain to your life or to life in general; and you are still fond of your life, however odd it may appear. It appears strange to you and probably to others, but they are far away – even further than the woman you do not know and you do not know what you can do with this woman, others and the distances you see everywhere. You see space, you feel time, and both get on your nerves, for you still have a lot of nerves and tendons that are mostly rotten. You think of a tendon and say to yourself, 'It must be rotten,' and you are right once again. But you cannot replace this rotten tendon or muscle with its fresh-as-a-daisy counterpart. So you continue to rot in your garden or elsewhere because you think it does not really matter where you rot; and even a hundred beaches would not bring you back to life. The same goes for a hundred suns, for a hundred sons and daughters; for a hundred families and wives.

And then your thoughts go back to the woman in question, to the unquestionable woman with whom you would have fallen in love 40 years ago. Suppose you are still young; you are 21 and every woman says you are a handsome young man in whose body and mind lodge a number of great expectations. Here are great expectations; there are small expectations. You dismiss, discard, obliterate short or small expectations and become a superman who conquers every woman, every man and every child, let alone every animal, flower and tree. You do not even have to *stoop* to conquer; you just conquer and everyone bows to you and your manners, your brain, your genius. And the woman you saw bows to you too; what is more, she crawls at your feet and you admire her naked body. And your desire comes back as if you were a handsome young man, a beautiful young woman, a playful child. You are nothing of the sort; you are a genius of sorts.

A glance can make a difference; anything can make a difference, provided there is something in your life. There is nothing in your life and therefore nothing makes a difference, even if you make an effort, two efforts, three efforts. You cannot make four efforts; you know that and you do not make anything, not even the smallest effort one can think of when thinking about a human being. You are still a human being, though; you are not an animal yet, to all intents and purposes. 'Neither domestic nor savage,' you add musingly. Nor are you a plant, a vegetable. You have to put up with what they call the 'human condition'. Of course they do not know what they are talking about, but they continue to talk about this and that, and someone listens to them. The world goes round; so does the Earth and even other planets circle round the Sun and do their rounds as if they had nothing else to do.

Your parents taught you not to talk to strangers unless you were born in the United States of America. If you were born in New York, you would know that talking to strangers can make you

happier and that is the goal you must pursue at all cost, even if you cannot pursue it. You talk to a stranger and he or she says to you, ‘Why are you talking to me?’

‘Because it makes me happier.’

‘Really?’

‘Yes.’

‘Are you happy now?’

‘I’m a little bit happier than three minutes ago.’

‘Really?’

‘Yes.’

‘What about me?’

‘I don’t know.’

‘Do you think I’m happier now?’

‘I don’t know.’

‘I’m not, you know.’

‘Really?’

‘Yes. I feel more miserable.’

‘Really?’

‘Yes, I do. Bye-bye.’

Making eye contact and not rushing may make us feel more connected to our fellow humans. All right: we are more connected to our fellow humans. They are more connected to us as well, according to this theory. So what? We are connected, interconnected; we are the human Internet. So what? You press a button and see a woman, and this woman says something to you. But she is not the woman you saw at the nearest chemist’s and you could not care less about actresses and other stars and their stripes. You are connected to them and you think you will live eternally, for your health takes advantage of all these beauties and their words, their communication cords. You communicate and fall asleep. But they say to you, ‘Social mores that promote silence on public transportation may mean we miss out on interactions that make life more enjoyable.’ You are on a plane and you begin to talk to everybody, even to the pilots, seats and so on.

Benefactors of humanity ask train passengers to talk to strangers. They talk to strangers; others talk to strangers as well. They say to each other: ‘Let us talk.’

‘For whose sake?’

‘For the sake of talking.’

‘Why?’

‘Because we’d like to live eternally.’

‘Really?’

‘Yes.’

‘Do you think I’ll offer you eternity?’

'A *bit* of eternity.'

'What about other bits? The *whole* of eternity?'

'There are other passengers on this train.'

And then a great admirer of Hitchcock's American period comes out of the blue and says, 'Talking to strangers on a train is asking for trouble,' and you no longer succumb to the allurements of eternity and infinite health. Even infinite death – this notion is less absurd than the previous one – may get on your nerves all the more easily since you are probably a churchgoer and speak of your forthcoming resurrection every other day. But some of us listen to all these notions calmly: after all, these are the notions fabricated by human beings who know nothing for sure except that they will die. This inadmissible lack of knowledge explains, if only in part, their eagerness to make up stories inhabited by the gods and other creatures whose only raison d'être is the assistance they may occasionally give to humans, animals, plants and precious stones.

You do not need to create anything or anybody: all your assistants and torturers saw the light of day in days of yore, thanks to Christian, Buddhist and Muslim exertions. And of course you have not forgotten Hinduism. Whenever you think of love and death – what else can one think about? – you take advantage of this religion and its doctrines which allow you to migrate from one body to another. In this way you might become a woman you are in love with except that, in this case, you will not be able to have sex with her unless you resort to do-it-yourself rituals. And you are reluctant to perform such rituals that let you down even more often than your former erotic dreams.

You know you had better not speak to strangers on trains and even on planes, but no one forbids you to accost beautiful women in shops – at your chemist's, for instance. You missed such an opportunity because the woman in question was of Indian origin, according to your intuition, calculations and lifelong experience. You used to watch beauty contests on TV and often your mesmerised eyes followed Indian ladies whose beauty was a blend of philosophy, religion and eroticism. There are individuals who spend hours gazing out of the window when they should be working. You did not have to work.

So you thought one might not accost an Indian lady nonchalantly in the hope that she had been brought up and educated in Europe by a bunch of scoundrels who paid attention only to her beauty, not to the future of her mores and morals. You were afraid of being rejected – not on the grounds of your advanced age, but because of your being boorish in her eyes. Of course you might have said to her, 'Do you know that strangers on the street are supposed to alleviate one's existential angst?' And had she questioned you further on the matter, you would have said something to the effect that The Bhagavad-Gita is the gospel of Hinduism.

Even if you had not encountered that woman, you would have reread the book once again because death has no intention of leaving us in peace and the only way to reconcile ourselves to this phenomenon is to believe that we cannot die. In other words, one is neither born nor spends one's life under the permanent threat that might be called a 'sword of Damocles' on condition that one does not

mind dragging in the Greeks and their symbols. Oddly enough, that woman also looked like a Greek goddess – 'come to think of it', you said in a whisper. 'Let us leave that matter aside for now and talk about the more urgent problem facing us,' you added. 'What did you say?' asked a stranger.

'Oh, nothing, I was just thinking aloud.'

'What were you thinking about?'

'Mind your own business.'

'I'd like to be acknowledged by others,' said the stranger. 'Do you know that today companies spend billions on travel? We can all get our work done from afar, but face-to-face meetings are important.'

'All right. I was thinking about a goddess.'

'Which goddess?'

'Aphrodite.'

'Really?'

'Have you ever read The Mahabharata?'

2

Once again I'm not tempted to go on because storytelling is not my forte, contrary to what one may say about any successful writer living in today's world and not only in its libraries and bookshops. Autobiographies are written in the first person and anyway I am the first person, as far as my house and my own life are concerned, otherwise I would be unable to follow Pindar's advice; I wouldn't build myself up successfully. 'I searched myself,' says Heraclitus. 'He was no man's disciple,' writes Diogenes, 'but said that he had searched himself and learnt everything from himself.' Of course you may create Baron de Charlus, thinking that you mustn't speak of yourself because it's not done; besides, you might have something to hide and a real writer should be able to call on their imagination, even if they have no imagination, as Proust said about himself when asked why he was about to leave his flat.

I'm not prepared to use a friend of mine, taking one third of his substance required for the creation of my hero because I am my own hero and in this respect – and in many other respects – I am unique and in a class of my own. And even if I am neither Proust nor Max Stirner, I am the first person and have little in common with the second and fifth persons, whoever they are and wherever they may live. Apparently Baron de Charlus' substance is hospitable to the point of lodging as many as three dear friends whom Marcel Proust used for his creative purpose which involved disagreeing with Saint Beuve on every tiny issue. The former was against the latter's doctrine, according to which authors can't help describing their own wretched existences instead of creating a brave new world. So, on the one hand, Proust owned up to the fact he had no imagination, neither in his body nor in his brain; on the other, he categorically refused to depict his own life in minute detail, opting for the chapeaux worn by the duchesses he was acquainted with. That's why he had to go out in spite of his asthma that was

inclined to use the word ‘bedridden’ when talking about its prey; and yet in Proust’s river-like novel – another Volga, another Nile – his asthma doesn’t talk as if it was far less important than Baron de Charlus.

In short, I’m not eager to create a character for the sake of a story and inner detachment which might allow one to create another world, as if one’s own self wasn’t a majestic playground of the rich and famous, of the poor and unknown. You can get involved in the situations where Baron de Charlus would behave like a helpless child. Why should you reduce him to this state instead of facing the obstacles on your own, instead of describing your reactions, your defence mechanism? You read the Mahabharata and the Bhagavad-Gita – it is myself I have in mind – and you lived in the Soviet Union where one might encounter the absurdities that Paris has never produced so far despite Mr Hollande’s indisputable gift for clownish behaviour and farcical decisions.

What’s more, I feel like making a comment on the Bhagavad-Gita, on some episodes and remarks that come to the fore despite my memory’s proverbial weakness, shortness and rottenness. I would have added ‘mischievousness’ to the list, had I not being weary of describing my memory’s shortcomings whenever I’m short of themes and dreams, as Nabokov might have put it: he was keen on what I call ‘automatic wordplay’. I’ll talk about him later on: for the moment I have other fish to fry, although I have no idea whether these fish are bigger than Nabokov or not. To tell the truth, I don’t even know whether it is worth my while frying these fish about which I know nothing, frankly speaking. All I’m aware of boils down to the statement: ‘Today I’ve no wish to talk about Nabokov.’

This morning I went to the 21st-Century Museum of Contemporary Art, which means that once again I am in Japan: the museum is situated in Kanazawa where I played 15 years ago. I was reminded of this recital by a lady who was hospitable enough to welcome me at the hotel whose name sounds English or American – or Australian, for that matter. ‘What does it matter?’ one is tempted to say and I have no idea whether one does it or not because there are no other pianists in Kanazawa; and if there are, they didn’t come to this city yesterday from Brussels. Once again I’m in a class of my own and it is therefore useless to speak of Baron de Charlus and any other character, including the old man I endeavoured to depict at the beginning of this book.

I went to the museum in search of inspiration and imagination, as Proust might have put it: after all, he was fond of contemporary art and often drew much inspiration from it. And on my way to Japan, on the plane that took me to Tokyo, I turned to *The New York Times* for inspiration because I know from experience that most newspapers do the trick unless you’re not inspired at all and therefore can’t embroider and comment on the articles they provide you with either on a plane or on a train. This time I fiddled with an article entitled *A Glance Can Make a Difference*, laying myself open to ridicule with such unashamedly extreme views. ‘What views?’ says a stranger I’m talking to in the breakfast room of the hotel.

‘I think a glance can’t make a difference unless you’re in love with the person you’re looking at.’

‘What about *my* glance?’ asks the stranger.

‘I’m not in love with you yet.’

‘What a pity!’ she said, roaring with laughter. Incidentally, I’m not likely to fall in love with a woman who is in the habit of roaring with laughter.

‘Luckily for me, I won’t have to cure anyone in Japan where staring at others is considered rude.’

‘I would be flattered if you took the trouble to stare at me,’ said the stranger. Once again she roared with laughter, covering her mouth with her fingers on which two rings continued to sparkle even when she removed her hand from her mouth to put it near a pair of chopsticks. She had a nasty cut above the left eye and the right one wasn’t far from this cut; her eyes were close-set and my mother used to mistrust the people whose features displayed this ‘flaw’. She was a short, plump woman with a plump face, and my father disliked both: plump faces and short women.

Needless to say, this Japanese lady wasn’t as beautiful as the lady I encountered near my place only two weeks ago. I obliterated her presence and went to the museum where no eye contact awaited me or any of the other tourists for that matter. Instead, we saw a number of installations or whatever they call these objects that make us aware of what’s going on in the world. At least that’s how many critics describe the effect produced by one of the exhibits – *The Invisible Garden* – surrounded with mirrors: you look at both the garden and yourself. You should go to Kanazawa if you’re longing to realise at last that you’re part of nature, that you’re at one with each other and with the world, even if you don’t understand it. But critics have the knack of spoiling your enjoyment of art by telling you what happens when you look at a picture or listen to an oratorio. They are born spoilsports, but they can’t just spend hours gazing out of the window when they should be working. So they work all the time either by going to museums or by writing their immortal works at home; sometimes they do their homework in front of invisible gardens that they’re unable to see, engrossed as they are in their masterpieces. ‘By intervening boldly in our everyday lives, brilliantly reflecting our states in response to the existence of ordinary things, the artist encourages the habit of making a full body response when people face his or her works and receive the full, uninhibited force of his or her creativity.’

The artist I’m very fond of, Jan Fabre, put a sculpture on the roof of the museum, which represents a man and a number of clouds he measures as he lifts a yardstick to the sky. The sky is always there except when there are a few clouds that do their best to make it disappear into their bosoms or elsewhere – beyond our field of vision and probably beyond the clouds themselves. One can’t help wondering what the man and his yardstick are measuring when there are no clouds in sight and only the sky looks at humans as if calling into question their very existence. According to the brochure supplied by the museum, this measurement ‘evokes thoughts about life, death and freedom’. If one can’t see the sky, one is bound to think about death, if not about Hell, for heaven seems to be closed – under repair, as it were; or it is closed forever, given that no amount of heaven works can repair it.

I'm fed up with the artists who limit their participation in the creative process by putting an animal in a barn or making you visit a Soviet train, one of its compartments. That is what Kabakov does. You come across dirty berths and chipped glasses into which a plump woman pours some reddish brown substance called tea, served at twilight and dawn. I saw many compartments like that and they evoke neither death nor life because they're just facts and I have no liking for bare facts, for their nudity and matter-of-fact qualities jar on my nerves. But you could meet somebody on such a train: a stranger, a beautiful woman who had no Bentley in her garage. She had neither a garage nor a Bentley, but her beauty made up for her poverty and wretchedness. Why didn't Kabakov put *her* on the train? On a decent berth? She was sure to find one even on such a train – with the compassionate assistance of her guardian angel. Why didn't Kabakov put *my* body on the train?

I also went to the D. T. Suzuki Museum. I read the books he had devoted to Zen Buddhism, but I left them at home, unaware of what was in store for me in Kanazawa. Many years ago Suzuki played with the word 'wonderful' and I'm tempted to imitate him, creating a sort of anti-world where the keyword is just the opposite of what 'wonderful' means. 'Ugly, awful, the most awful horror, the most horrible ugliness, nastiness, more, more, more, even more than that, even worse than the worst of hells. And yet beautiful, wonderful, magnificent, divine. Love lost, love found.' He just wrote:

wonderful,
wonderful,
and most wonderful wonderful!
and yet again wonderful

He was probably right and I am wrong in spite of my partial knowledge of Paradise instilled into humanity mainly by Mozart who, incidentally, knew a lot about Hell, about the most awful horror; otherwise he wouldn't have written the *Fugue in C minor*. But we listen to his C-major works – to the *Jupiter*, for instance, whereupon men and women alike forget about Hell and death, about their toothaches, earaches, stomach aches and about the St Vitus's dance they dance round the clock as if they couldn't dance a waltz or a mazurka. 'No, it isn't a sharp pain – just a general ache,' they say.

'This painkiller is good for general aches and pains, but maybe you need something stronger? The *Jupiter*, for instance?'

They come a week later and say, 'We've forgotten our pains, but our pains still recall our bodies and souls. They don't seem to enjoy Mozart's music.'

'So Mozart's works do not work.'

'They do not.'

'Why don't you try D. T. Suzuki?'

'Did he also compose quartets?'

‘You must confuse him with T. S. Eliot. No, he was writing about our wonderful life. But he knew that some of us would be at death’s door sooner or later. So he thought we shouldn’t lay anything at death’s door because it is up to us to reverse any situation, however dangerous and irremediable.’

You can say whatever you wish, even if you’re not you but rather ‘I’, ‘he’, ‘she’, ‘her’, or ‘one’. Even if you’re ‘two’, you can say that life is wonderful and whatever happens is just an invisible garden. You have to find this garden and look at it until you see yourself. And then you’ll realise you’re as immortal as nature and the picture you admire on condition that it is a picture by Leonardo da Vinci you’re looking at. Whatever you see is yourself and that’s why it is pointless to invent characters who may act as artificial barriers to your self-realisation. You endow them with the gifts you’ve got in your heart of hearts and one wonders why you don’t let them mature *inside* yourself, at the very core of your substance. Instead, you describe Baron de Charlus who enjoys life to the utmost despite all the nonsense he says from time to time. And what about you, about Proust? He used to lament over his grandmother’s death and his biographers point out that in fact it was his *mother*’s death he would have spoken about had he not resolved to contradict Saint Beuve on every tiny issue. By substituting one death for another, we may satisfy our creative urge, if any; but our grandmothers and mothers are dead. What’s more, we are dead too and no creative talents and powers will ever bring us back to life.

After reading William James, Suzuki pointed out that we had to create an opening in our substance and the only way to do this was to fall ill or to feel miserable to the point of acquiring a suicidal urge. (The surgeon makes a small incision into which God is inserted.) If you’re too self-reliant, resilient and inventive, you may think that God doesn’t exist because you don’t need Him or Her or It. Indeed what we need does exist unless we are born daydreamers and let our imagination run away with us as soon as another desire makes its appearance in our bosom. But the sick and the desperate know that God exists, otherwise they would already have died many times on their private crosses or just in their beds or in hospitals, on the road. Death is a theme provided with a set of variations and even Beethoven’s *Variations on a Waltz by A. Diabelli*, Opus 120 do not exhaust the variety of its waltz-like strikes.

If you’re fatally ill, you shouldn’t despair and wish to take your own life because it will be taken anyway, whatever you do and however strong your will-to-live is or was. You may open your heart to let God penetrate it to make a few changes thanks to which you’ll recover in no time at all, provided you still have a variety of time you may call your own. There are other times around you and some of them run parallel to yours, but the point is you can no longer run, either literally or metaphorically. Besides, parallel lives never meet in space, for they have no idea of what Lobachevski and Riemann thought about more than a century ago. Nor do I know what they thought about because I think only in terms of my life, of my self-building, and mathematics isn’t in my line, in the middle of my country lane. Another homage to Nabokov and his wordplays. It is also another homage to my *world*play.

It is high time I quoted the Bhagavad-Gita because you can't really comment upon it unless you quote its lines, lanes and lives extensively. I got acquainted with it in Russia, many years ago, but I no longer have the copy I annotated in those times. Never mind: you can always find a copy of the book you're in love with, even if you have to cross the Atlantic and pay a visit to the Library of Congress. But if you leave behind a copy of your life, let alone the original, you'll never find it again, whatever T. D. Suzuki and other Buddhists might say on the subject. Actually you'd better say nothing on the subject, on any subject, because truth, whatever it is, lies elsewhere and it often *lies*, paying homage to a wordplay or just on account of an angle of vision which doesn't correspond to what you see and ponder over. You may affirm that no one can kill or be killed; you may also hold the opposite view and that in view of what happens in the world where wars and weapons of mass destruction are still on the agenda. Not only on the agenda, mind you: you go to a deserted warehouse and realise it's not deserted at all, given the quantity of bombs you stumble upon as you enter it.

I wonder if I would feel happier if I let the protagonist of my unfinished story die in my place. Wim Wenders does something of the sort in one of his films that starts with a few sequences where a sort of nuclear war is being prepared or fought. Or it is the aftermath of such a war and the people one sees are looking for their fellow creatures or a few bones they might suck. They've been sucking their thumbs for a long time, for years perhaps; now they need something more calorific. We don't know whether they found any bones or not, for the film is unlikely to be finished. We gradually come to this conclusion as we listen to what the film director says to his actors. The film couldn't be finished and this disaster was in no way linked to the lack of inspiration, for Wim Wenders is not Fellini, it goes without saying. I'm not Fellini either, but I couldn't finish the story I had embarked upon in the hope of finishing it by the end of the summer – for the reasons made public in *8½*. Actually Fellini didn't even *begin* his story. Perhaps it is better not to begin anything.

'Do thou thy allotted work, for action is better than inaction; even the maintenance of thy physical life cannot be effected without action.' In the light of what Krishna says to Arjuna, it is better to begin your story, any story you may write, even if you're bound to fail like Beckett who continuously spoke about failures and abandoned works in his mature years. You have to mature for years and years before you can fail with dignity, majestically – as Joyce did in *Finnegans Wake*. I'm not mature enough for such an exploit and therefore I continue to write and I will do so come hell or high water, come paradise or low water. They all come, but I continue to write as if nothing had happened, as if Krishna had said, 'One can neither write nor be written off.'

Suzuki quotes a few sentences in his turn as if following my lead or that of the Fathers of the Church who quoted the Bible day in day out; even in their dreams they quoted the Bible, saw the Bible, took part in it. Suzuki quotes a book published in America a long time ago, given that he died in 1966. According to him, this book made the bestseller list for a while, and I see no reason not to believe Suzuki who wasn't in the habit of lying, judging from his books that I've got at home. In the

American book he read about ‘the conversation between a mother and her young son, who had just returned home after a day outside:

‘“Where did you go?”

‘“Out.”

‘“What did you do?”

‘“Nothing.”’

Suzuki thinks that in this dialogue, ‘in light-hearted and humorous form, is expressed the true principle of “freedom” in the Eastern sense. This is truly the realm of the bodhisattva!’ I disagree with him for once, and I might have disagreed with him many times 30 years ago when I read his *Essays on Zen Buddhism* for the first and last time. I say ‘for once’ out of politeness: I know how strict the Japanese are in this domain, bowing and scraping before everyone, however unimportant and insignificant the person in question. For them, insignificance is more or less limited to bad manners and therefore it is enough to observe the Code of Politeness to pass yourself off as a dignified gentleman or lady – in the Western sense. And your importance depends on how you behave in public and what you do for the company that employs you either as chairman or assistant chairman.

Today I got back to Tokyo and found in my hotel room a sheet of paper where my table reservation is enriched and commented upon with a view to bringing out the light and shade in the aforementioned code; and in some other codes as well.

> *Our Dress Code is casual. We don’t ask customers to wear jacket. However, we do not accept T-shirts (men and women), short pants (men) and sandals (men).*
> *As we serve Japanese cuisine with subtle and delicate aromas, we ask all the guests NOT TO wear strong perfume in order to fully enjoy the delicate flavour of the dishes. This is an essential part of Japanese fine dining culture, so please kindly understand.*
> *Unfortunately if you don’t respect our Dress Code and Perfume policy, we reserve the right to cancel your reservation and apply the cancellation fees.*

All these codes and policies, however, do not prevent the Japanese from being rude now and then. In the country where I am today, the so-called Middle Way is virtually unknown despite its Buddhist overtones. Well, I don’t think that Suzuki is right when drawing a parallel between the young American’s rudeness and the bodhisattva. I don’t remember exactly what this word means, but I’m pretty sure that the boy’s remark is tantamount to ‘get off my back’, to put it mildly. I wonder why in our contemporary world many children are allowed to break things with the exception of Ferraris and jewellery.

An American mother asks her son, ‘The tiara was set with diamonds and rubies. What did you do with the diamonds?’

‘Nothing.’

'What did you do with the rubies?'

'Nothing.'

'Did you sell them?'

'I don't have the foggiest idea.'

'If you don't answer my questions properly, your father will give you a good spanking.'

But if the same youngster breaks a television set, no one will say anything, even if he answers 'nothing' all the time. After all, no television set is set with diamonds and rubies. And even if there *are* television sets of this kind, the quantity of diamonds and rubies they put on display is quite negligible in comparison with the aforementioned tiara. So there's nothing to worry about and a Buddhist can still go into raptures about this homemade, light-hearted bodhisattva.

Krishna seems to disagree with Suzuki as well, for he thinks that 'action is better than inaction; even the maintenance of thy physical life cannot be effected without action.' Does the American teenager break Ferraris and tiaras for the sake of his bodily maintenance? If so, his mother should continue to question him about his schedule. Here is his answer: 'Yeah, dear Mother. I did break your tiara and I sold a few rubies to buy a Ferrari for my girlfriend. She prefers sports cars to jewels, you know. Krishna says that action is better than inaction. Why didn't you buy that old villa in Italy? Because your husband, alias my father, thinks that old houses need a lot of maintenance. Do you ever think about the maintenance of my physical life? By the way, have you read the Mahabharata?'

When I encountered that fabulous lady at my chemist's, I might have asked her the same question because it is pointless to say something along the lines of, 'I saw you last year in Hollywood.' Every beautiful woman is used to weighing up the relative merits of her suitors, and spending a few days in Hollywood doesn't set you apart from many other Europeans. You'd better say to the woman you've just fallen in love with: 'Do you want me to tell you about my exploits? While travelling around Africa I killed two elephants and seven tigers.' And what if she prefers animals to humans and even to roses? I'm not as old as the hero of my unfinished story and rotten branches never remind me of death; but I was also in two minds whether to speak to her or not. Eventually I made up my mind, one of these two minds, and she disappeared first inside her BMW and then in the depth of the perspective I was too lazy, too weary to explore.

Of course I might have asked her if she had read the Mahabharata: she was unlikely to voice her preference for the Ramayana. I asked her no questions and consequently was told no lies, but sometimes it is better to hear a few lies than nothing, for silence is the end of everything; even love dies when engulfed by silence. If she had said, 'Leave me alone,' I would have answered, 'You can't just wave me away as if I was a child.' Actually it is better to say to a woman, 'I'm a child, but please don't wave me away,' given that every woman is first and foremost a mother. So many nonentities are coddled and cuddled only because they behave like babies, going so far as to cry on beautiful women's shoulders. And if the woman you've just set your heart upon does wave you away, you can say to her, 'You'll go right down in my estimation, if you continue to wave me away.' She opts for reaching the

very bottom of your estimation and you have no alternative but to bow to the inevitable, to her untimely disappearance. You bow all the time, like a Japanese man who has a lot of friends and colleagues whom he meets on a regular basis: in the streets, in theatres and even in never-never lands.

In the Peter Brook production of the Mahabharata I saw five warriors who slept with the most beautiful woman in the world. 'I'd be failing in my duty if I didn't go to bed with her,' said every one of them to his brothers who knew perfectly well that this duty had been imposed on all of them by their mother. And my mother did her best to prevent me from going out. I couldn't even say to her, 'I went out. I did nothing.' That's why I have no idea what the bodhisattva means and how to reach this state of mind and body, described so vividly in the books by Suzuki that I've got at home. He must have described the bodhisattva *vividly*: I can't believe he accomplished his task and duty merely by retelling the story inserted in the American bestseller.

All right, I missed this opportunity, for even when I was allowed to go out, I took advantage of my mother's benevolence to the point of doing almost *everything*. So upon my return I would say to her, 'I walked with Helene down the street, along the river. I kissed her twice. The second kiss was long and juicy.' I never lied to my mother to whom I told nothing but the truth; and yet I don't know what the word 'truth' means and whether it exists on Earth. I'm speaking now about the truth itself and not about the word, although the word 'truth' isn't far from the absolute truth itself because it denotes it. Words are never too far from the objects they denote and embrace, otherwise we would have got lost a long time ago. We did get lost somehow, but not many centuries ago, judging from Musil's and Beckett's achievements. I haven't lost my love for them yet, which is a good sign: the word 'love' is close to the word 'life'.

And once again you become a teenager and so do I because at my age it is the only way to succeed where adults fail and old men commit suicide. There's a spot, a kind of turning point, which projects you either towards life or towards death, and of course you love life more than death and consequently wish to persevere in your being, as Spinoza put it. He might have put it differently, but I'm sure he preferred life to death and rejected the seamy side of life and other sides of the same kind unless they depicted the other world. 'The seamy side of paradise,' he used to say to those who talked about the bliss one is supposed to experience beyond St Peter's gate.

A teenager identifies with heroes and heroines who kiss and have sex in every book we come across – even as adults and intellectuals. I'd like to join the brothers I saw on Peter Brook's stage for the sake of their common wife; but my dreams go further, beyond this turning point, beyond that stage. I wish to have five wives at my disposal, in my palace, and I'm not inclined to share them with any brother or distant cousin, however nice and intelligent. Luckily for me, I've got no brothers and therefore can enjoy my wives all the more intensely and fabulously since I am young again; I am in my twenties or thirties. I enjoy them to the detriment of my studies and other occupations because I have no other occupations, being a light-hearted symbol of the bodhisattva, whatever that is. 'Nothing,

nothing, nothing,' I repeat over and over again. And then I say, 'My wives, my wives, my wives, my wives, my wives.'

'Did you go out?' asks my mother.

'No.'

'But you should have gone to school.'

'No.'

'What did you do at home? Your homework?'

'In a way.'

'How do you mean?'

'I've had sex with all my wives.'

'What?'

'Nothing, nothing, nothing.'

I'm curious to find out what the bodhisattva really means and how I can apply this notion to my life without spoiling the fun I have with my wives and their sisters, friends and so on. In the Bhagavad-Gita, Krishna says, 'He who in action sees inaction and action in inaction, he is wise among men, he is a yogin and he has accomplished all his work.' I didn't go to school and stayed at home to have sex with all my wives, thereby seeking action in inaction and vice versa. I spent the whole day in bed and in spite of my erotic and pornographic occupations I sought inaction in what I was doing because I wasn't doing my homework. In my mother's eyes, going to school and doing one's homework are the only actions worthy of notice, but Suzuki thinks otherwise; so does Krishna.

Here is Radhakrishnan's commentary upon the above excerpt from the Bhagavad-Gita: 'So long as we work in a detached spirit our mental balance is not disturbed.' Only nowadays can I caress a woman in a detached spirit; my body is detached too, not to put too fine a point on it. Oddly enough, my mental balance *is* disturbed in spite of the fact that I work in a detached spirit and with a detached body. (I'm no longer in my second or third childhood. I am my old self.) I try to detach myself from the reality of my overall detachment and since I'm bound to fail once again, my mental balance is disturbed. And the rest of my substance keeps my imbalance company so that *everything* is disturbed, as far as I am concerned.

Try as I may, I can't manage to persuade myself that I'm not concerned about this state of affairs. Incidentally, I think that Wim Wenders' film I touched upon is entitled *The State of Things*. And even if I resolved to replace inaction by action, I wouldn't succeed because I'm not connected to the Internet in this hotel. And I'm too lazy to go downstairs to the reception desk to find out what the code is and how to use it. Once again I must bow to the inevitable which, in this particular case, concerns my unconquerable laziness. A good omen? A bad omen? Am I on the edge of the bodhisattva? Am I on the brink of collapse and extinction? I think nirvana is nothing but the extinction of all desires and passions. In other words, it is nothing – nothing to write home about.

‘Passion (rajas), know thou, is of the nature of attraction, springing from craving and attachment. It binds fast, O Son of Kunti (Arjuna), the embodied one by attachment to action.’ All right, I’m no longer attached to action, as far as women are concerned; and this is none of my concern, strange as it may appear. Last year I was cured of my lust and thus lost all the loves I might have had in the course of this year. I must be on the edge of the bodhisattva or nirvana, which amounts to the same thing, I suppose. At least I wouldn’t mind being attached either to the bodhisattva or to nirvana and vice versa.

‘Though the self is not the agent, rajas makes him act with the idea “I am the doer”.’ Not at all, not at all. No rajas, no ideas. A rage perhaps. My sudden towering rages are terrifying: even I am terrified when I hear my screams. From time to time I let out a bellow of rage, my face contorted with bitterness. I run from my house, my arms flailing in the air. I’m no longer a man, and I’m not yet a woman or a child. Even a child feels something when his mother kisses him: apparently, he gets an erection. I don’t remember anything of the kind, which is unkind of me, needless to say. Yes, it is unkind of me not to thank my mother for those erections, however tiny and sterile. What’s more, I really don’t remember them. Well, good riddance! No rajas, no wrong ideas. I am *not* the doer, far from it. I am not even the thinker. I wish I could forget this disaster altogether. No more thoughts of *this* kind. All other kinds are welcome. All other kinds are kind.

‘But dullness (tamas), know thou, is born of ignorance and deludes all embodied beings. It binds, O Bharata (Arguna), by (developing the qualities of) negligence, indolence and sleep.’ If you read Shakespeare, you’re bound to realise that sleep is more precious than anything; more precious than life and its fury. Or *my* fury, for that matter. Indolence. After a sudden burst of activity, you lapse back into indolence. That’s how you were and what you felt in your mother’s womb: nothing, nothing.
‘Where did you go?’

‘Nowhere.’

‘What did you do?’

‘Nothing.’

Yes, you go back to your mother’s womb. Many individuals speak about this ritual: poets, psychoanalysts. Let them speak; you *act*. You really go back to your mother’s womb. In action you see inaction. Nothing doing, doing nothing.

3

You take a walk in Tokyo because you have nothing to do, although you’re not in your mother’s womb, not yet. You’re indolent and you have no wish to learn where this word comes from and what it really means. ‘mid 17th cent.: from late Latin indolent-, from in- not + dolere suffer or give pain. The sense *idle* arose in the early 18th cent.’ All right, all right. What does it matter? An indolent remark or question. The devil finds work for idle hands, but your hands are too idle for the devil. He

doesn't find anything for you or rather for me, because I'll speak again in the first person and you have nothing to do with this story of mine, even if I feel like speaking about you now and then.

No characters, no barons, no Charluses, no Clarissas. Tomorrow I'll take a walk and, given that I'm in Tokyo and really have no wish to take a Shinkansen to go to Kyoto, I'll take a walk in Tokyo and not elsewhere, however beautiful this elsewhere can be in Japan, outside Japan. And you'll stay at home or go shopping in your respective countries. With all due respect, I don't envy you. I envy myself, my younger self, but not to the point of becoming another Faust whose actions and inactions are slightly ridiculous, especially when he cancels his suicide on account of some church bells and hymns.

We must stay alive at all cost.
We're about to make a hole
Through which God will enter.
Welcome, welcome, welcome!
Did you come, did you come?
No-one, no-one, no-one.
Nothing, nothing, nothing.
Dear Buddha, you're our god.
Please, don't shirk your duties.
You should cure us of Aids
And take care of our sins.
And see to it that we come back.

No, I wouldn't relinquish the idea of my own extinction upon hearing this hymn or any other hymn and song; upon seeing any dawn. As everybody knows, Gandhi renounced the use of violence; I wouldn't renounce the use of self-violence, if I may put it this way. Actually I can put anything in any way, considering that I'm on the edge of solipsism and the verge of self-discovery. Maybe I'm about to discover the absence of my own self and someone else's presence either here or everywhere: when a Hindu says 'here', he means 'everywhere', whereupon you see a cosmic form, a man made up of planets, stars and stardust. Ashes, in other words, but sometimes you don't feel like uttering *other* words, let alone *writing* them. You look at Krishna or his assistant, as they say nowadays in order to avoid the word 'secretary'. And you see the cosmos, as usual.

'Of many mouths and eyes, of many visions of marvel, of many divine ornaments, of many divine uplifted weapons. Wearing divine garlands and raiments, with divine perfumes and ointments, made up of all wonders, resplendent, boundless, with face turned everywhere.' That's the vision granted to Arjuna and other human beings – through the Bhagavad-Gita. Any Russian oligarch or rather his wife can bestow upon us such an honour, provided she wears the tiara I spoke about a few

hours ago. Of course the uplifted weapons do not adorn her dress and breasts, but weapons are no longer in vogue; we can disregard them altogether, even when reading the Bhagavad-Gita.

As for the perfumes and ointments, you can use them of course, if you're in the mood for this kind of luxury which is not accessible to the poor about whom we should think day and night to atone for our sins. We atone for our sins and make an abundant use of our perfumes and ointments, but on the threshold of the Japanese restaurant I touched upon three hours ago we are stopped by the bouncer who smells our clothes and skin. 'I'm afraid I feel duty bound to cancel your reservation.' And you pay 20,000 JPY to the owner of the restaurant and 10,000 JPY to the taxi driver who takes you back to your hotel.

Krishna wouldn't be admitted to this restaurant; neither would God, our Christian God, Who wears neither ornaments nor anything else. But even the saints exude an odour that the faithful or whatever you call them inhale day and night, in transports of delight. The saints I'm speaking of are dead, but they continue to bless the air around them and the faithful take advantage of the saints' generosity and proverbial kindness. They inhale the air; they exhale it and even the air they exhale is sacred to the extent of turning all other pilgrims into saints or at least immortals. This means that immortality and eternity are conveyed through the air. That's why the *true* yoga, as the Bhagavad-Gita puts it, pays so much attention to the air and the way we inhale and exhale it.

O Lord, we know You're everywhere.
You're the air we inhale and exhale.
We inhale Your body and Your soul,
But we don't exhale them. God forbid!
We exhale the air, not Your substance.
We exhale nonsense. We hold You.
We keep You inside our bodies.
Our bodies are You; so is our blood.
The air comes to us everywhere;
So do water, the Earth and the Sun.
Everything comes and nothing goes.
Infinite life, eternal love. And vice versa.

I didn't go out this afternoon because I realised one can be happy in a foreign hotel, even if one has no books and no computers in one's room; even if the Internet remains beyond one's reach. I slept a lot and upon awakening was suddenly seized by a feeling of great insecurity and loneliness. I knew I couldn't call anybody because it was too early in Europe where I live and shall probably die unless an earthquake will enable the Earth to swallow me without any gravedigger's help. I could neither call

anybody nor play with the Internet, and I just decided to have a cup of tea or rather three cups of tea: the teacups I found in my room were as tiny and delicate as Japanese women and their daughters.

The kettle was within my reach and I fiddled with it for 20 minutes as if I had to prove to myself that I'm not on intimate terms with electrical appliances and machines in general. I supplied tangible proof of this incapacity of mine to my guardian angel who hovered nervously in the doorway as he watched my struggle with modern technology. And yet it was just an ordinary kettle that I might have used at home 30 years ago, in Versailles, not far from the Château. Then I struggled for a while with my own mind which was reluctant to see anybody in the room where I was staying so as not to spend nights and days in the streets of Tokyo. Again I was in two minds whether to call the Instant Service or not, for I was sure the service in question was closely related to the word 'instant': after all, I was in Japan.

In the long run, one of these minds overcame its rival – without my interference, mind you – and I called the aforementioned service in the hope of drinking three cups of tea 15 minutes later: I had to nip down to the Family Mart to buy some milk. Soon I heard the doorbell and a rather beautiful woman entered my room and headed for the kettle because she had no intention of making my bed that was half-uncovered, the blanket having been rumpled by my boisterous dreams. Her face was as tiny as the rest of her *substance* – I can't replace this word by anything else – and for a minute or two I thought about her legs and their curves. She managed to plug the kettle in at once and began to explain how to handle the apparatus which was by now as tame as the shrew at the end of Shakespeare's comedy. 'Mlknoknjnjjknjjknkjkjhhghghxddxhchcg,' she said. 'Push,' she added touching a huge circle at the top of the kettle. 'I'm sorry I didn't understand your explanation. You know, I'm rather hopeless at –

'Ykljkbuyvmlmllkbkjbjhjhjhljbn. Then push,' she said.

'I beg your pardon?'

'Ykljkbuyvmlmllkbkjbjhjhjhljbn. Then push,' she said.

'I see,' I said.

'Push,' she said looking at me. I touched the same circle and pushed it. Nothing happened, nothing, nothing, nothing.

'Push,' she repeated without looking at me. I felt so discouraged I couldn't even bring myself to touch the accursed thing. And then I realised I was longing to hear her say this magic word once again. Push, push, push. Her 'sh' was as soft as a rectangular cloth bag filled with soft material, such as the feathers of a Phoenix or some other mythical bird. A pillow, in other words; a pillow of paradise.

push,
push,
and most wonderful push!
and yet again push!

‘We only recruit go-getters who will be actively involved in the company’s development,’ said a middle-aged Japanese man whose daughter was my mistress 22 years ago. He could speak about his company for hours and I’ve always had only a few minutes for any company, any factory. I listened to him out of politeness and also for the sake of my relationship with his daughter whose adoration for her father knew no limits. We seldom know the limits of our loves: they seem to be unlimited as if once again we thought about the divine circle and its centre. God is the centre of this circle and its centre is everywhere, as everybody knows; Cusanus knew that too. This Japanese man had two centres in his life: his daughter and his company. And their circumferences were nowhere to be found. But our love didn’t last: I found the circumference, cut it and got out.

I would recruit the woman who brought my kettle back to life, for I liked her face which was so Japanese you didn’t have to describe it. If someone says to you, ‘I saw a Japanese face tonight, a woman’s face,’ you’ll automatically see *her* face as if there were no other Japanese faces in the world. Sometimes you should rely on archetypes and symbols. You say, ‘Japan’ and immediately those you’re talking to recall the word ‘haiku’ and birds and fishes and Fuji. ‘Fuji is now thoroughly identified with Japan,’ writes D. T. Suzuki. ‘Wherever Japan is talked or written about, Fuji is inevitably mentioned. Justifiably so, because even the Land of the Rising Sun would surely lose much of her beauty if the sacred mountain were erased from the map.’

And what about the young lady I saw at my chemist’s? Is it enough to say, ‘A beautiful young lady one may meet at the nearest chemist’s’? Of course not. My protagonist thought she was of Indian origin – for the simple reason that I was determined to comment upon the Mahabharata. No, she was rather a Greek goddess, a Russian goddess. If I say goddess, you immediately visualise a woman; so do I. And it is this woman I saw at my chemist’s – the very idea of beauty, as Plato would have put it. Absolute Beauty, if you prefer. This notion is different from that of Absolute Truth which is as elusive as any truth, however relative. Of course if you say, ‘This plate is on the table,’ and you show both the plate and the table by touching them, you tell the truth and nothing but the truth. There are more things in heaven and earth than this plate and the table on which someone put it a few hours ago.

I looked at the hands of this young woman, at her fingers holding a credit card. In Belgium cheques and chequebooks disappeared a long time ago; in France they’re still in use and you can spend three minutes in the company of a young beautiful woman in a supermarket, in a boutique. The only snag is that young women prefer cards to the chequebooks they use very seldom – not in shops anyway.

A goddess. That’s how I remember her now: my visual memory is as short as her sisters. These are little women who are of no help to me and I’m often tempted to discard them altogether, replacing them with the Japanese employee and a kettle, a few cups of tea. I have no wish to shorten my goddess by putting her in my memory for safekeeping. Instead, I’ll put her in this book of mine, in this *roman-*

fleuve; I'll find her in the *Iliad* and fairy tales. In the Mahabharata. And yet she is certainly not of Indian origin.

'Wearing divine garlands and raiments, with divine perfumes and ointments –' In the Mahabharata one meets a woman who is bent on avenging herself. I, for one, wouldn't like to meet her: she isn't the woman I spoke about either yesterday or the day before – the incarnation of beauty. And it is this woman I'm yearning to meet either in this world, in its theatre and in the wings of its numerous stages, or in the other world, whatever that is, whatever difference it makes or not. 'Revenge is sweet,' says the woman determined to murder the man who once let her down. To perform this ritual successfully and appropriately, she turns into a man, for she may think that men are stronger, more powerful than women. She lived in the days when such a point of view wasn't instantaneously stigmatised by feminists and their supporters, by Simone de Beauvoir and Jean-Paul Sartre.

So Krishna may turn into a woman all the more organically since, in the Mahabharata, we come across what they call a 'precedent' in American courts of justice. But there are other women in the world and in the Mahabharata. One of them bears the unbearable weight of Krishna's name: it's not easy to be a god or the incarnation of Vishnu. So I adorn my goddess in accordance with Krishna's cosmic appearance in the central episode of the Bhagavad-Gita. Not only the Jews shut their eyes when God vouchsafes to show Himself: the warriors one sees on the battlefield during a performance of Peter Brooke's Mahabharata also shut their eyes. Arjuna alone contemplates the god's magnificence without exposing his eyesight to danger: he knows he'll need his eyes to fight the battle to the bitter end. One wonders if there are *sweet* ends in human life.

> *When I see Thy mouth, Thy hands, Thy fingers, I lose sense of the directions and find no peace. Be gracious, O Goddess of goddesses, Refuge of the worlds, of my soul! Yonder hosts of gods enter Thee and some, in fear, extol Thee, with folded hands, and bands of great seers and perfected ones cry "hail" and adore Thee with hymns of abounding praise. As the many rushing torrents of rivers race towards the ocean, so do I rush into Thy flaming mouth. Thou art the mother of the world of the moving and the unmoving. Thou art the object of its worship and its venerable teacher. None is equal to Thee, how then could there be one greater than Thee in the three worlds O Thou of incomparable beauty? Therefore bowing down and prostrating my body before Thee, Adorable Goddess, I seek Thy grace. Thou, O Helen of Troy, shouldst bear with me as a mother to her son, as a beloved to her lover.*

Is it a substance or just a load of nonsense? Why do I use the word 'substance' so often? Because whatever is the opposite of substances is unsubstantial – a dream, perchance a dream; or nothing at all. And even the notions which are akin to what I call 'substances' – and I have a vague notion of what substances are – do not hit the spot. They're wide of the mark, miss the mark, overstep the mark. There are only marks in our life, as someone put it. There are individuals who put something,

somewhere, as if they hoped that something good could come out of this mess. Everybody and everything is pigeonholed. So what? What can come out of a mess? Another mess unless there's a messiah somewhere, not too far from the Earth. This messiah comes and says, 'I wish you'd do something about the world – it's a real mess.'

'And what about your Second Coming?'

'It is my *Third* Coming.'

'All right, all right – we're not good at mathematics.'

'Go and clear up that mess in the kitchen.'

'What kitchen?'

'The Earth, *la terre nourricière*. I speak all the languages, you know.'

'So what?'

'I wish you'd do something about your houses. A real mess.'

'We went to Mass last Sunday, you know.'

'To a Black Mass, I suppose.'

'To a White Mass, to a Red Mass.'

'Are you communists?'

You are not. You don't know what you are and how the matter stands and where it stands, if it stands at all. Suppose it stands. So what? All the questions you can ask boil down to 'so what', as if it was really a question. It is an answer and everyone knows it as if it was Absolute Truth or Universal Truth or Cosmic Truth or Cosmic Untruth. Everything is cosmic because we are connected to planets and stars thanks to quantum mechanics and those who came up with the idea that is pigeonholed like all other ideas. The name of this idea is 'quantum mechanics' and one gets the feeling of ploughing through the Revelation of St John – the Apocalypse, in other words. And the name of this star is plague. And the name of this rider is death. And the name of this colour is disaster. And the name of this woman is fatal. And the name of this fatality is woman. So is the name of this frailty. And the name of this life is calamity. And the name of this calamity is family. And the name of this family is Smith. And the name of this Smith is family. And so on, as they say. And so forth, as they say.

And then they no longer say anything because there's nothing to say, as they say. There are no more names, no more riders, no more swords that are brought to the Earth daily by every messiah who turns up somewhere, in the middle of nowhere or just on the right-hand side. Let's go to this side or that side; they're all alike, as far as we know. And we know a lot about sides and minds. All right, let us proceed with the case. What case? There are always cases and procedures. Kafka brought everything down to the common denominator – the Law. But we don't care about laws and rules. Our doctors say we should go on a diet. And we say to our friends, 'We're on a diet,' and then proceed to eat a plateful of chips. That's how we should deal with the world and its laws. There are no laws, as some physicists say; so we eat a plateful of chips. And we feel like a million dollars or like a billion roubles.

I, for one, prostrate myself before Thee – the woman I saw at my chemist's and in my dreams: last month, two months ago. I no longer have dreams of this kind. In Japan I have erratic dreams that show me my books; they fall down together with the shelves on which I put them eight months ago. There are only numbers, digits and shelves that fall around you and you spend your life picking up books and your thoughts as if your thoughts were books in disguise. They are if you read the Bhagavad-Gita or any other sacred book of the East or of the West or of the North, let alone of the South where you find only sacred books or sacred poems or the Bible. You find them and open them at random; and you read something that puzzles you, although you belong to the Earth and to her progeny, to her ideas and nephews, to her oceans that are her cousins.

'But those who worship the Imperishable, the Undefinable, the Unmanifested, the Omnipresent, the Unthinkable, the Unchanging and the Immobile, the Constant.' I'm not sure all this is related to the woman I saw in the midst of the pills I can find if I take the trouble to open my garage and drive my car for three minutes. She is the Imperishable and the Undefinable, as far as I am concerned – myself and my capacities as a writer. Under the circumstances I identify with Dante who couldn't write about Absolute Beauty, Absolute Ecstasy and Absolute Light. 'I can't, I can't,' he used to say before fainting in the middle of the road. The Unmanifested? And what about the chemist's and the fingers I saw? The Omnipresent? Yes, Yes, Yes. Everything, everything, everything. The Unthinkable? Yes. Yet I think about her day and night. The Unchanging? I don't know: I've never seen her in a nightshirt. The Immobile? And what about her BMW? The Constant? We'll see, we'll see. I'm so bored and frustrated I wish my destiny would give me something I could really get my teeth into.

I don't wish anything and this happens rather often as if my wishes had been removed not only from my body, but from the surface of the Earth and even from her bowels. I'd better go to the bowels of the Earth where I might find something – a number of wishes and desires or probably a sort of renunciation about which those anonymous authors speak in their epics and sutras. I renounce my wishes, but nothing can replace them, improve upon them, because I don't call this process 'renunciation'. It is just a period of lassitude I'm going through, assuming that I can go anywhere either in space or in time or in the cosmos where wormholes or whatever they're called await interstellar travellers. They say, 'Come to us. Use our space as a destroyer of space and time. And at the end of our tunnels you'll see some distant star.'

I'm tired and what I say about the numerous women I see in front of me, in my visions that have nothing to do either with reality or unreality, is not true because I lost my truths in one of the tunnels to which I no longer have the key. She was beautiful, of course, my fair lady; she is still beautiful, given that only a few weeks separate my body from hers, from its appearance at the chemist's, from my representation. I could have touched her several times, flouting conventions and scorning policemen who are always on the lookout for paedophiles and Jacks the Rippers. These rip women's bodies open before ripping them into shreds. The shreds remain where they are until a policeman spots one of them, picks it up and takes it to the nearest laboratory where they analyse it and find out what

genes were at work on this occasion. I don't even remember how they identify these murderers and what formulas they use in their laboratories and police stations. There's the formula of death which doesn't differ much from the formula of love, whatever they say on TV during their humanist programmes. They say that love triumphs over death and wins hands down in the struggle for life; and shortly afterwards they die, cursing their fate and humankind. Is that kind?

The Bhagavad-Gita is of no help either, whatever they say when publishing their commentaries upon the sacred text you're not supposed to touch because it is sacred and therefore untouchable. Of course you can comment upon it and the more comments you write down in your notebooks, the better. All your notebooks and computers are brimful of the Bhagavad-Gita and the comments related to this sacred book you can touch only from the outside. Accordingly, you touch it from the outside and write about a woman – a goddess, in common parlance – after quoting the following passage from the Gita: 'If, however, thou art not able to fix thy thought steadily on Me, then seek to reach Me by the practice of concentration, O Winner of wealth (Arjuna).' You're not a winner of wealth, as far as I'm concerned, and you're not a winner of women either: I speak of myself, needless to say. You, O Winner of women, must have won all the bathing beauties of your district and now you drink red wine with them, sprawling in an armchair in front of the TV. You watch a porn movie and the beautiful ladies caress your body as if you were unable to do it yourself. But you're no longer an expert at enjoying yourself in solitude and therefore rely on others, on their hands and lips, to get the job done.

I switch the TV off and concentrate on my goddess, seeking to reach Her by the practice of concentration; but I'm out of practice and fail whenever I concentrate on her hands and eyes. I see someone else's eyes, hands and legs, and the legs I see do not inspire me in the least; my imagination remains untouched as if it was sacred in some way or other. Yet anybody can touch it, with the exception of ugly women, and I say so to my imagination and don't fail to remind it that it is not sacred, not in the least. On the contrary – it is profane and the longer I watch porn movies the more profane it grows; and I won't be surprised if one of these days my imagination utters a stream of profanities. When you're alone, you talk to your body and even to your imagination which you cannot touch because it is actually not your body. It is just something you would find inside your head if you were able to go through another wormhole connected to your imagination and not to a distant star. What do you care about those stars? You don't even care about film stars, although some of them – those who are of Indian origin – are really beautiful. But no one brings them to you on a plate or in a huge cake; you have no alternative but to relinquish all the ideas related to them and this renunciation enables you to guard against nervous and other breakdowns. I, for one, do not like breakdowns and the less I have to deal with them the better, as my doctor puts it when he is in a good mood; otherwise he just sends me home and I get his bill two days later.

'If this spiritual condition does not arise spontaneously – and it does not, I can assure you – we must take up the practice of concentration, so that we may gradually fit ourselves for the steadfast directing of the spirit to God.' To the goddess! To the goddess! No point in using too many

exclamation marks: she won't come anyway. You put an exclamation mark and she comes; you put a question mark and she hovers nervously in the doorway, like your guardian angel. Perhaps she *is* your guardian angel, but if this is the case she should be at your side round the clock, even if the clock you're looking at is not round. All right, it is square. So what? 'My time stops at every angle,' says the angel. 'My time doesn't like angles.'

'You're always making excuses for not helping me.'

'I always derive great satisfaction from helping other people,' says the angel, 'especially if they happen to be my clients.'

'I'm not your client. I'm your master.'

'Don't confuse me with bathing beauties. Even they would never be your slaves.'

'So I can rule neither the waves nor those whores.'

'No, you can't. You should seek to reach God by practice.'

'I can't seek Him either by practice or otherwise.'

'Then be as one whose supreme aim is My service.'

'*Your* service? Are you Krishna?'

'The news of Krishna's coming is always a bolt from the blue. Have you read the Mahabharata?'

'What about the Messiah, the *real* One?'

'When performing actions for My sake, thou shalt attain perfection.'

You spend your time talking to ghosts and they answer you back, however often you may repeat the following sentence, 'Don't you dare answer me back, young lady!'

'Well, if you don't want me to answer you back, from now on I won't say anything.'

'Answer me back. Please, answer me back.'

'Why should I?'

'Because you're my bathing beauty.'

'I am Krishna.'

'You are not.'

'I am Vishnu.'

'What kind of nonsense is this?'

'You won't last long in your job if you carry on being so rude to the gods.'

'And what is my job, pray?'

'To persevere in your being.'

As I pointed out earlier, the dreams I have in Japan are rather erratic, and they grow more and more erratic as I continue to lose my sleep on the road to renunciation and the extinction of all desires without exception. The dream I had to cope with only a few minutes ago was all the more terrifying since the hero of this nightmare happened to be my cat whom I adore more than my own self, ego and superego. In the Soviet Union I lived in a skyscraper that I seldom see in my dreams nowadays,

although I used to visit it rather often at the end of the 20th century. But this century of ours decided to deprive me of a tiny bit of my overwhelming nostalgia and now I have to content myself with some photographs that don't elicit the same response from the treasure house of my tears.

A few minutes ago, however, I saw my skyscraper from the inside and also from the outside because my cat jumped from my apartment situated on the 12th floor and I had to take a lift to look for him on the pavement. Obediently tears came to my eyes that let them flow at will as I did my best to reach the ground floor in no time at all. But, as it usually happens, the time one comes across in nightmares grows longer and longer as if yearning to outstrip eternity in the domain of immobility. As I finally reached the ground floor and the pavement I saw a crowd, a horse and a cart – instead of my cat. I thought that all these people had gathered to see the dead body of my cat, but I saw a number of dead fishes lying on the cart; my cat was moving under the cart. I saw his movements, picked him up and kissed him frantically.

Yesterday I met an author of many bestsellers; even her first book was a bestseller, but unfortunately I got this book only the day before yesterday and so couldn't read it from beginning to end. However, I had an opportunity to read two other books of hers, if only in part. In Japan I have to play concerts and give interviews, which leaves little room for other occupations, considering that I have to practise as well, otherwise the pianos will roll away from me, for they treat with disdain all those who don't caress them enough.

I admired our affinities, her adherence to the postulates of quantum mechanics. 'Chizuru was kneeling with many pages in Banana Yoshimoto's writings and went so far as to single out one paragraph to demonstrate her eyes closed, praying with all her heart. She was beautiful. The walls of the cave were grey in the candlelight. Chizuru looked so dignified, she made the cave seem as if it had been created just for prayer.' I reminded the journalists that, in the world of subatomic particles or whatever they call this phenomenon, objects fall under the influence of observers. Probably these journalists know much more about quantum mechanics than I do and I'm aware of the fact – to the point of adding 'or whatever they call this and that', whenever I speak about science and also about other domains and kingdoms. 'And your heroine exerts so much influence on the cave that it turns into a temple,' I added looking at Banana. She nodded several times and I said to myself that I had never spoken to a famous writer before.

She writes in the preface to her first book: 'For a very long time there was something I wanted to say in a novel, and I wanted, no matter what it took, to continue writing until I got the saying of it out of my system. This book is what resulted from that history of persistence.' One is reminded of Kafka, of course – of the worlds he had in his head. Any creative urge helps one distinguish the quick from the dead, for the latter create only their skeletons – with the aid of worms, as Hamlet would have put it. 'Now I write with a view to allowing my readers to find solace in my books.' I pointed out we were doing something superfluous, not to say unnecessary, and that people might find solace in the fact that impalpable things were as important as cars and washing machines produced in factories.

‘Isn’t it very reassuring to know that one’s imagination is not just a figment of one’s imagination? You’re read by millions of people and a lot of money is involved in this spiritual relationship. Under your influence, many readers have become daydreamers.’

Besides, all of them realise now that they’re not alone in the world, that someone else thinks along the same lines without losing money. Many people are attracted by the prestige of working for a top company and no one writes poetry because it is pointless, superfluous and even harmful, as far as your family is concerned. And all of sudden you learn that someone writes poetic stories and novels, becomes famous and is worshipped all over the world, which means that the world isn’t as small as all that. There are other ways of life and you may command respect, even if you’re neither a footballer nor the president of a multinational corporation.

Banana said something to the effect that she was trying to construct a sort of bridge which would be like a communication cord or a rainbow. I don’t remember the exact wording: she was speaking Japanese and habitually so much gets lost in translation – not only paradise, I’m afraid – that you can’t be sure of the meaning of what was said, let alone of the words and commas. Anyway she did construct this bridge a long time ago and ever since she has been able to reach out to her fellow citizens and the whole of humanity without aiming at the lowest common denominator. And I said I was writing for Martians and those who would live in the 24th century or beyond. What else could I have said? Of course I have a few rainbows on my writing desk and I walk along these rainbows now and then to reach my private Olympus or Valhalla. They’re so private no one pays attention to them and I stay alone on some cloud or other.

4

Back to the Mahabharata where I may find the sky and the gods with whom one can dwell somewhere, not necessarily in Valhalla or another castle built by giants or the Goths. I might have acquired a certain amount of freedom, but if you’re free to help yourself to some chocolate or ring up a colleague, this doesn’t mean you’re free to walk around the Earth on a red carpet strewn with flowers. There are red carpets everywhere: many tennis players deserve them, let alone Brad Pitts, Angelina Jolies and jolly good fellows, all of them. But there’s a shortage of red carpets right now, as they say, so you walk in the mud, as Beckett’s heroes do whenever guided by their creator. When left on their own, however, they go to three-star restaurants and five-star hotels where they have the time of their lives and many times of many lives. And then Beckett summons them and they crawl on all fours, as usual – back to barracks, to their rubbish bins, garbage cans and what not.

‘If thou art not able to do even this – what, what? I can’t remember – then taking refuge in My disciplined activity, renounce the fruit of all action, with the self subdued.’ My self has been subdued for years and years, if You must know. Of course my course of action or inaction depends on what You mean by the ‘self subdued’ or by the self because You’re not Freud and we can’t read your books as the whim takes us because we don’t really know who we are and where our whims happen to lodge.

We are lost once more and You ask us – or him, or myself – to renounce the fruit of all action, but you seem to lose sight of our laziness, ignorance and indolence. There are no more actions in my life – let me speak for myself – and I don't care about the fruit of my actions because there are no actions to speak of, let alone the fruit of all action.

The fruit is probably on my writing desk or at my feet unless my charwoman removed it from where it had ensconced itself – two weeks ago, before my departure for Japan. Or is it in Tokyo now, at the hotel where I'm staying and trying to fall asleep before the rehearsal scheduled for this morning? Where is it? Under my bed? Hardly. There's a glass of champagne on my writing desk and it is a fruit of my action: by playing the piano I earned enough money to buy two bottles of champagne. I'll get rid of these bottles, alias the fruit of my actions, by drinking them down to the dregs. That's what I call 'Reading the Bhagavad-Gita'; just another action.

'If you cannot dedicate all your works to the Divine, then do the work without desire of the fruit.' All right, you can analyse this excerpt to your heart's content, but you should know – I'm addressing Radhakrishnan – that I've already dedicated all my works to the Divine, and I'm not alluding to Greta Garbo and her imitators, her doppelgangers, if any. And if the Divine is in your mind – in *my* mind, to be exact – you dedicate to Her whatever you do without thinking about it. You dedicate to Her all your life without saying to yourself anything, without giving any promise, without taking an oath of allegiance to your Goddess. You don't say, 'My dear Goddess, the Divine, as I call you, as everyone calls you except stupid jerks – Sorry, I'll begin again because I can't permit myself to fail this exam, this life and afterlife. Call it what you wish as long as you listen to my oath. I promise to dedicate this book to you and all the books to come. For the moment, they go and don't come back, which means I've got a few ideas, but as soon as I concentrate on them, they vanish. Have I ever got any ideas? Except you, except you. And you're not an idea – you're tangible, real, and I saw you in the flesh, not on television, not on my computer screen. I can assure you.'

'What are you talking about?' she says.

'About love.'

'Love lost, paradise lost?'

'Paradise found. What's the exact wording?'

'Regained. You don't remember the words, do you?'

'I don't.'

'Do you remember me? Or do you remember only the pills you buy at the chemist's?'

'I remember your fingers. And your eyes.'

'And my legs?'

'No. I didn't dare look back to study them. I think you wore trousers –'

'Not close-fitting. Is that what you thought?'

'I don't know.'

'Hypocrite.'

‘No, I’m just a secretive child.’

‘Didn’t I appear to you in all my majesty?’

‘Of course. You’re never otherwise.’

‘Wasn’t I infinite in form on all sides?’

‘You were.’

‘My legs were infinite, weren’t they?’

‘They were.’

‘Why don’t you recall their infinity?’

‘I do.’

‘I appeared to you with numberless arms, bellies, faces and eyes. Why don’t you recall any of them?’

‘I do.’

‘I usually appear with numberless arms and eyes to allow my suitors to recall at least a few elements of my substance.’

‘I see.’

‘Too late. I’ve got another suitor now. At least he recalls my legs.’

What can I say to her now? Of course I can write a few books, but she’s not likely to read them so there’s no point in writing them, let alone speaking of them. You speak of the books you’ll write one day and then nothing comes either out of the void or of you, whatever you say, and the blank pages reappear in all their splendour. ‘Filmmaker completing scripts for 3 sequels to *Avatar*.’ Thus speaks Zarathustra or rather the *New York Times* or some other times that inform the reader that the company – there are no other companies in the world – is on the point of setting a standard for large-scale, multimedia entertainment. I don’t entertain anybody except myself, except my life, and that is probably not enough to feel happy and accomplished, as someone says. I don’t say that and I read a few newspapers to find out who says something to replenish the world with words and other things such as avatars or filmmakers who make lots of avatars and Che Guevaras. Or do I confuse them with ex-communists?

‘Billions of dollars are riding on the effort. The effects-heavy sequels will be expensive; Mr Cameron has vaguely said that their combined production cost would be less that $1 billion, though the movies cannot be budgeted until they are written.’ Are they written or not? It doesn’t matter, as usual: as soon as you start talking about billions, you know what you’re talking about and everyone listens to you, even those who are hard of hearing. You show them a few billions and they feel happy as if they were born yesterday; and children are always happy even when they’re denied a few chocolate-boxes.

There are other articles in the newspapers I get every morning because every morning something is bound to happen and every night is full to the brim of whatever can happen in human life: murders, betrayals, lifelong happiness – in the plural, of course – and scientific discoveries,

among other things. They tell us that ‘there is no proof as to the existence of STAP cells.’ Apparently, somebody is moving towards denying the existence of STAP cells, but this person cannot say that the cells absolutely do not exist. Does that mean that somebody tries to STOP the STAP cells from multiplying and replenishing the Earth? Let them replenish whatever they wish, as long as I don’t know what all this means and where these cells or their absence stay this night. Haruko Obokata produced STAP cells using an astonishingly simple process. Teruhiko Wakayama said the cells ‘did not match the mouse strains supposedly used in the research, which could suggest Obokata created STAP cells based on a different mouse strain.’ In other words, Teruhiko Wakayama produced STOP cells, and nothing can stop him now from having Obokata’s biology research centre disbanded.

All right, disband what you wish as long as it remains outside my life. I do accept its tragic aspect – or its tragedy, in other words. I accept everything and everybody, but I don’t say ‘yes’ to life, turning a deaf ear to Nietzsche’s advice. How could I say ‘yes’ to the death of my father, to the death of my mother, to the death of my first cat, to the death of my second cat? Say ‘yes’ to your madness, if you wish, my dear Nietzsche – to your madness, to your sister and mother, to your wretched existence and loneliness. I won’t say ‘no’ either. I won’t say anything. My *amor fati* is silent. I accept life and destiny as they are, but I’ll never stand up and sing a number of hymns. I may sit down and bow to the inevitable. So what? I’ll bow, but I won’t sing anything except:

The king was in the counting house
Counting up his money.
The queen was in the parlour –
Was she? Was she? Was she? Was she? –
Eating bread and honey.

No, that won’t do, certainly not: anybody can eat bread and honey. The queen was eating caviar, drinking Salon, Haut Brion *blanc*, Mission Haut Brion *rouge*. And the king never counted his money: he had many assistants or secretaries, as they said in those days, in days of yore, when everyone was happy except the Pandavas who fought battles and killed their cousins or vice versa. There were Pandavis and Pandavas and Mandalas and many other things and beings about which we know nothing or next to nothing; or next to anything. And now we content ourselves with newspapers where we find a lot of information because our era is the era of information and we’ve got enough ears to hear this information and our memory holds it tight.

All right. Let us proceed because we aren’t dead yet, as far as our body is concerned; even if something is none of its concern, it lives and prospers – modestly, modestly. We’re modest; we know that only the gods are arrogant, but even they die, the gods, as Krishna did at the end of the Mahabharata that I haven’t read yet. I saw this end and many other ends in the Peter Brook production of the epic, and I recall a few things – a body lying under a thin crust of ice, for instance.

This body lies under a thin crust of ice and another body asks this particular body, ‘What are you doing there?’

‘I’m lying.’

‘What for?’

‘The doctor told me I should rest for a few days. Or for eternity.’

‘You shouldn’t. I’m bound to kill you.’

‘Are you?’

‘I am.’

‘You should look away from the computer screen to rest your eyes.’

‘What computer? What are you talking about?’

‘Everything is virtual and unnatural. Do you think your murders are natural? Are they in the nature of things?’

‘They are. Krishna told me that.’

‘But a woman put a curse on Krishna, if I’m not mistaken.’

‘That’s right. So what?’

‘Why do you believe such a man, such a god? The god under a curse?’

‘I do not. Nevertheless, I’ll kill you.’

‘My doctor said I was looking run-down and ought to take some time to rest.’

‘Under this crust?’

‘Yes. It’s better to be under a crust than under a curse.’

‘Get out!’

You’re weary of these heroes and their gods who say whatever comes into their heads. Likewise a lot of things go *out* of their heads as if to do justice to the expression ‘comings and goings’. One wonders if this is an expression or something else, but one reads a lot of words uttered by the gods, especially by Krishna who is very talkative. Now he says, ‘You shouldn’t fight this battle, for you’ll be destroyed if you march towards the battlefield.’ Next he contradicts himself, saying, ‘You can neither kill nor die, and be that as it may, you’re duty bound to fight your cousins, brothers, nephews and other offspring of your grandfathers.’ And if asked why he says all that, he answers, ‘Because I am like that, full stop!’ That’s how the gods behave in epics and everyday life. We chose to have one God only Who never contradicts Himself. For once I won’t add ‘Herself and Itself’.

For once I had no choice in the matter in spite of my free will, which means I didn’t raise my hand at the moment when humanity had to opt either for one God or a host of gods. Humanity decided to have one God only so as not to bother too much about arithmetic, and mathematicians agreed to this decision: they’ve got their differential calculus and the gods can only disrupt their systems and methods, especially if Krishna makes his appearance in the neighbourhood. But if Krishna appears, one is duty bound to remember Vishnu and in this case Brahman and Indra are not too far, whatever Hindus say. They pretend that, like Christians, the Jews and Muslims, they’ve got only one God Who

is probably not identical to ours. To all outward appearances, they don't live in a multi-storey palace, as they say when trying to describe their religion to Europeans and Americans. 'There's only one floor in our palace, and only one God lives on this floor.' That's what they say and their sacred books speak of a prime mover who doesn't move while constantly setting the universe in motion.

But I have nothing to do with their prime movers and secondary gods who turn into men and women, determined to guide us and our cousins with suggestions such as, 'Strike him on the legs.' And we answer it is forbidden; what's more, it isn't really playing fair to try and strike your opponent on the legs. And the god says to us, 'Strike him on the crotch or on the crutch.' We know it is also forbidden, but the god insists and he also insists on telling us every single detail of what we should do to strike our enemy on the crotch. We grow so angry we forget ourselves, the god and swear loudly; but the god insists that all swear words be deleted from the epic. They're deleted and we accept the god's advice, hitting our enemies on the crotches and legs; they spend the rest of their lives on crutches. That's how we live with the gods and the longer we live with them, the more we realise the advantage of creating a sort of monotheism which doesn't speak about crotches and crutches. Our God just says, 'Kill everybody with the exception of one cat,' and we kill everybody; and we kill the cat as well.

Sometimes we plead with our God, saying, 'All right. We'll kill all our enemies and their cattle, but please allow us to spare their children and dogs. We promise to bring up their children and give food to their dogs.' Our God doesn't listen to us, and if He does, he says after a while, 'All right. Don't kill them. But someone should be killed – many people, as a matter of fact. This number is already known to me, like the rest of Creation. If you don't kill *them*, I'll kill *you* instead.' So we kill men and women, children and dogs, and as we perform this religious ritual we glance around in search of fair maidens. And whenever we spot some, we glance at them sidelong and smile, thinking about their submissiveness to our wills to powers. After all, we are their conquerors and the spoils of victory include mounds of treasure and armour, and crowds of fair maidens.

There are troublemakers everywhere, even in Japan, and newspapers speak about them as if there were not enough Mothers Teresas around us. It is about *them* we should talk to our children because Mother Teresa's goodness – or godness – is an example to us all, especially to our children who are in need of good examples. They see many bad examples on their computer screens and Mother Theresa liked neither television nor computers; she seldom, if ever, appeared on their screens in her lifetime. We should multiply Mother Theresa's image, replenish the Earth with Mothers Theresas, and our children will no longer wish to look at monsters and play monstrous games. Instead, we speak about troublemakers and troublemakers speak to us through newspapers and magazines where their speeches enlarge upon wars and historical wrongdoings.

Toru Hashimoto says that Allied soldiers liberating France during World War II raped French women, which means that not only the Japanese used sexual slavery during World War II. This war and whoever took part in it saw thousands of women – mainly Koreans – forced to work in military

brothels, and up to now I've known nothing about it, strange as it may seem. Of course, for nothing in the world would I fight a war, even if I was allowed to rape every woman and every maiden, regardless of their nationalities. This job is open to all, regardless of previous experience, as officers and soldiers said looking at maidens and also mature women. Many virgin soldiers became men during the war because even God doesn't forbid you to rape your enemies' wives, daughters and nieces.

Historians agree that there were rapes by Allied soldiers in France. But apart from the Japanese, there's no generally accepted evidence of officially sanctioned sex attacks by any military during World War II. And what about God? But I'm more interested in women now – in those women who crouch and lie down as you walk through the crowds of maidens and both maidens and women look up to you, at you; so do all their synonyms such as housewives, damsels and so on. You walk and crouch from time to time, eager to examine at close range this or that beauty who will never say 'no' to their conqueror because he is supported by a whole army and also by God. These women might have different gods, but they don't need any explanation and justification. They know that their destiny is to lie down as soon as they see a conqueror and this time I am their conqueror – like Marcello in a Fellini film. I've had such dreams so many times I no longer know if they're dreams or reality TV or just the reality we encounter whenever we leave our unreliable doppelganger high and dry – the one whose imagination runs away with him – and go out in every sense of the term 'out'. I have no idea whether it is a term or just three letters; at least I know that for once I'm not dealing with four letters and their words.

I leave my house and go out of myself, taking advantage of the movement that seems to liberate you from your chains and chances about which you think no longer. There are no opportunities, no jobs, no first prizes, no victories because, as Nietzsche put it, every victory is a defeat in disguise. 'Only barbarians always win,' he used to say, thinking about the Germans who beat the French army fair and square – to such an extent that Parisians ate mice for quite a while, following in the footsteps of their cats. Didn't they eat all their cats first? I remember only the mice – not those three blind mice that always run, whatever happens, even if there are no wars and no pursuers. Likewise, there are people who always run, saying to others that they're always on the run. Apparently they speak about their jobs which should be done, otherwise those people will be undone. And their neighbours say to each other, 'Jim had just been on a run and was dripping with sweat,' which isn't true, given that Jim is *still* dripping with sweat; one shouldn't speak of his sweat in the past tense.

The same goes for other inhabitants of the district with the exception of these neighbours who are lazy good-for-nothings and bad-for-everythings. So when one neighbour meets another neighbour, he says to her, 'Where's that good-for-nothing son of yours?'

'Which son?' asks the neighbour. 'I've got three sons and every son of mine is an idle good-for-nothing.'

'An idle good-for-nothing or a lazy good-for-nothing?'

‘Both.’

‘All right. Let me rephrase my question, “Where are those bone-idle sods of yours?”’

‘I haven’t the foggiest. I think they went out two hours ago.’

‘Out of themselves?’

‘Perhaps out of their minds.’

‘I hope they didn’t walk out on you.’

‘I wouldn’t mind.’

That’s how they live in the realm of the bodhisattva. They talk nonsense of course: if you don’t talk nonsense, you’re not a Zen Buddhist. You’re probably a *Zek* Buddhist – Zek meaning a prisoner in Russian – but you’re certainly not a *Zen* Buddhist. If your mother asks you where you’ve been, you just say, ‘Out, in.’

‘Out or in?’ asks your mother.

‘All this amounts to the same thing.’

‘Really?’

‘Of course, Mother.’

So you go in, out and hang from the ceiling for a while so as not to miss this opportunity, which is an opportunity, whatever your neighbours and parents may think about it. You never know where opportunities and chances await you, but it doesn’t mean you have to seize *every* opportunity and hang from the ceiling all the time instead of going to the cinema. All right, you reject all chances and opportunities because Zen Buddhists do not like opportunists, but for all that you still hang from the ceiling from time to time – for the sheer pleasure of being suspended in mid-air. Your mother may ask you what you are doing under the ceiling, not far from her favourite chandelier, and she even wonders if you intend to hang yourself. You assure her that such an idea has never crossed your mind and that you’re a down-to-earth sort of boy, even if you permit yourself to hang in the air like a dirigible.

And then you start smoking – that’s how our children live in the contemporary world where there are cigarettes, whisky, soda, vodka and drugs. They smoke cigarettes and their mothers scold them for filling their houses with smoke which may lead to asthma and other fatal diseases, let alone lung cancers that live in smokescreens. So boys and girls buy electronic cigarettes and say to their mothers that these cigarettes are a healthier alternative to tobacco because electricity is healthier than nicotine. People don’t die of lung cancer if they switch their washing machines on; the same goes for their dishwashers and vacuum cleaners. Besides, e-cigarettes *vaporise* nicotine instead of stuffing your lungs with it day in day out and also at night because you like enjoying a smoke after a scary nightmare. If you smoke an e-cigarette, nothing but electricity penetrates your lungs and next morning you run against the clock for two hours. And usually you don’t even have the energy to get out of bed.

Mothers say to their children: ‘There’s insufficient evidence about the product’s health risks and whether e-cigarettes are prompting people to stop smoking.’ What do their children answer to their mothers? They say, ‘Nothing’ to remain in the realm of the bodhisattva that they prefer to all other

domains – even to Disneylands and Promised Lands. What are these promised lands? We'll go to the cinema, we'll go to the zoo – promises, promises, promises. But children stick to their bodhisattva all the more energetically since this domain allows them to say whatever they wish without incurring their mother's wrath.

Your mother says to you, 'What are you talking about?' and you answer, 'Nothing, nothing, nothing at all.' And you hang from the ceiling for a while, before you're prepared to enjoy your first e-cigarette or w-cigarette. There are now wave-cigarettes that owe a lot to quantum mechanics, and we shouldn't forget p-cigarettes which are made up of elementary particles. All of them vaporise nicotine and even nip it in the bud because many serious illnesses can be nipped in the bud if they are detected early enough. Your three-year-old boy doesn't smoke yet, but you give him both a w-cigarette and a p-cigarette, saying, 'They'll nip your future diseases in the bud.' And if he says he doesn't like them, you should say to him, 'These cigarettes are sexy, rebellious and glamorous.'

'Nothing' is a manifold word and everyone knows it has a lot of meanings; at least it *makes you think*, as they say, although nothing proves they do think when uttering the word 'nothing'. But nothing prevents *you* from thinking, nothing and nobody with the exception of a few Buddhists who say and repeat, 'Don't think, don't desire anything, don't attach yourself to this and that.' You think and say to yourself, 'All right, I go out, and I'm supposed to say to my mother, "Nothing" when I return home and fall around her shoulders as if I was her luxuriant hair.' You like to impersonate the various parts of your mother's body because you love your mother to distraction and cannot hide this fact at the bottom of your heart.

So you're bound to answer 'Nothing,' whatever your mother says to you, but in your heart of hearts you say to yourself that something goes wrong, and you don't like being in the wrong. You go out and walk along the street, up the street, down the street; you can't say you *don't do* anything – even for the sake of the bodhisattva. While walking you look up and down, at the sky, at the road where many holes are prepared to swallow your feet and even your legs, if you're not on your guard. You're on your guard and therefore do something, otherwise you risk being swallowed by the Earth in no time at all. And you jump over holes so as not to find yourself at the very core of the Earth in the footsteps of Jules Verne's travellers. You do all sorts of things. When you say to your mother, 'Nothing, nothing at all', you are lying and the bodhisattva doesn't like liars. The bodhisattva likes bone-idle sods and hates liars of all sorts.

So what should you say to your mother? 'I walked, I jumped over holes, I was on my guard. And I met an old man who said, "You're a descendant of an old Indian race.'

'I'm the only descendant of a French duke,' I said to the man.

'Yes,' says the mother. 'This duke was my lover.'

'And my father.'

'Yes, and your father.'

'But the man said I was wrong. And he added that the bodhisattva didn't like liars.'

‘Is it a French word? My lover never uttered it.’

‘It must be an Indian word, Mummy. Apparently I’m the only descendant of an old Indian race. Pandavi, Pahlavi, Poshlyaki – I don’t remember the name he uttered. You know, I have no memory for names.’

‘You trace your line of descent back to this French duke,’ says the mother.

‘This man is writing an epic about my ancestors. And, as far as I know, he doesn’t write about French dukes.’

‘He is an innocent dupe. Or a guilty dupe. You shouldn’t talk to him if you meet him again.’

‘He also said, “Krishna is Vishnu and Vishnu is Krishna, and whoever thinks they’re different goes to hell.’

‘Let him go to hell, my son.’

‘He also said, ‘Siva is Vishnu and Vishnu is Siva, and whoever thinks they’re different goes to hell.’

‘Let’s talk about paradise, my son.’

And they talk about paradise for a while, allowing hell to go to hell – the action our hell is keen on, otherwise it wouldn’t have been hell for many millennia. And what do *I* do among all these people, their hells, paradises and other spaces where they may disport themselves unless Satan decides to roast them in some oven or other and baste them in oil and lemon? They’re not my characters, for I don’t need any character in my life which I centred upon myself a long time ago so that there are no plots in it either. Even if you expect someone, your time isn’t devoted to plots and suspense – perhaps to suspension points. Why should you entertain your readers or whoever wants to hear a story and kill time once again? Time is just wounded and you’re bored to death in spite of the pastries you eat day and night.

Your TV is on; so is your computer, but you still need a story and you’re prepared to pay nine bucks for this story, provided it is a real cliffhanger or a surreal cliffhanger. You like hanging from your ceiling and turn a deaf ear to what your mother says to you, but you know that hanging from a cliff is even more exciting. So you wish to hang from such and such a cliff when loitering outside the cinema where you’ve just watched a cliffhanger – a Hitchcock film, for instance. In Hitchcock’s films they always hang from cliffs that represent American presidents and not Belgian prime ministers, whatever the Belgians may think about this misrepresentation of their country. You hang from a cliff and someone puts a boot on your fingers to make you fall from grace, from our world where bread, milk and honey await you at every corner. But you still hang from this cliff for the sake of the suspense enjoyed by millions of people and also by bankers who know how their clients earn money in this world of ours. In other words, you know which side your bread is buttered on.

You talk to your mother about the bodhisattva and the Mahabharata where Panzani and Pasnavi are supposed to fight a battle with the help of a few Krishnas. But your mother says to you, ‘My son, don’t fill your head with Krishnas and Vishnus. Fill your head with fun and hang from a cliff for a

while. I'll hold a mattress under your body so you don't have to worry. Even if you fall, you won't die.'

'But I won't die anyway,' says the son. 'Krishna says –'

'Never mind what he says. Listen to your mother. We need money, you know. Hang from that cliff over there.'

'Why should I?'

'Many people will come and look at you. I'll pass the hat around.'

'And what about the mattress?'

'I'll hold it, don't you worry. I'll hold the hat and the mattress. I'll hold both. I can hold three things at the same time.'

So the teenager hangs from the cliff, falls like a Hitchcock hero or heroine, but his mother continues to pass the hat around. As she carries this ritual out she does what is usually described as sales talk, for she needs money and everyone can see and hear it. And Krishna talks as well: he cannot do otherwise because an epic always instructs the individuals who know nothing about life and the universe. They know they were born and they may look at their parents, if you say to them, 'Please look at your parents, otherwise we'll never know where you came from 30 or 40 years ago.' But they know nothing about wisdom and Samkhya Theory, let alone about Yoga Practice. So Krishna says to them, 'From anger arises bewilderment, from bewilderment loss of memory; and from loss of memory, the destruction of intelligence and from the destruction of intelligence they perish.' And Krishna points at them with his walking stick.

They say to themselves, 'We get angry every night and every morning. I, for one, feel a lot of anger towards my father who treated me very badly as a child. I've felt this anger for many years, but I'm not bewildered, whatever Krishna or the Bhagavad-Gita says. I'm just angry and wish to kill my father, and I'd have killed him many times had he not died 20 years ago, when I was on holiday, hanging from a cliff for the last time. As for my memory, it is really perfect – I can recall every leaf, every second of my life and Borges would have been delighted to meet me, had he not died 30 years ago. I don't understand what Krishna wishes to impart to future generations. Even my generation doesn't understand his words, gestures, teaching and standpoints.'

Unabashed, Krishna continues to talk like a clockwork Vishnu or some other god we know nothing about except that the Mahabharata doesn't say a word about him or her. 'But a man of disciplined mind, who moves among the objects of sense, with the senses under control and free from attachment and aversion, he attains purity of spirit.' The same man or woman is bewildered and says out loud, 'My memory is perfect, my intelligence intact. I'm alive and kicking, as you can see and hear. If you wish to measure me, you can do so because I don't mind being analysed and studied by intelligent people, by students and suchlike. The point is we don't move among the objects of sense because the only objects we see and touch are the objects of nonsense. And this nonsense is under control; it stays and seems to be rooted to the spot. All right, you're free from attachment because no

one can be attached to this nonsense, but you feel aversion to it, don't you? Nonsense is your pet aversion, right? I wonder what Krishna speaks about for hours on end.'

Wise men and women have no selfish aims or personal hopes, even if they're hungry and wish to marry someone at once to have a lot of children in nine months. They're not disturbed by the touches of outwards things, says Radhakrishnan or Krishnan or Vishnan. And he says they accept what happens without attachment or repulsion because they covet nothing and are jealous of none. They marry and their children die without being born, but they're not jealous of those whose children are born and prosper in the United States of America. They accept what happens without attachment, which surprises everyone, for miserable people are usually attached to death and commit suicide quite often. No, they accept what happens without repulsion: they're neither repulsed by the filthy conditions that accompany them wherever they go, nor do they throw everything into rubbish bins because they can eat anything down to rotten vegetables.

'And in that purity of spirit, there is produced for him an end of all sorrow; the intelligence of such a man of pure spirit is soon established (in the peace of the self).' 'The vegetables I eat are rotten, but my spirits, pure,' say those people and they dust their spirits every day – twice a day, if necessary. And they say to themselves, 'I'd better give my spirits a quick wipe before I slip on them.' How could they slip on their spirits? God knows. But they're afraid of every fall, especially of the Fall because they dislike Adam intensely – even more than Eve, strange as it may appear. They think that if they slip on the floor – on a banana skin, for instance – they'll just fall and nothing else will ever happen. But if they slip on their spirits, they will fall *forever* – from paradise, from God's grace, from cliffs and skyscrapers, because all is in the mind: at the back of your mind, at the top of your mind and so on and so forth. Something is even *at the bottom* of your mind as if your mind really had a bottom to speak of. So they say, 'The desire for money is at the bottom of much of the world's violence,' meaning that the bottom of your mind is covered with money – with dollars and euros.

Then they say, 'The desire for children is at the bottom of much of the world's violence,' and you realise it is paedophiles they have in mind. Paedophiles stalk young children for hours and hours, and after this discreet pursuit they offer them chocolate or e-cigarettes, saying, 'These cigarettes are sexy, rebellious and glamorous.' All children are born rebels; they smoke e-cigarettes and also w-cigarettes to rebel even more against the adults who tyrannise them. They rebel and rebel, and paedophiles watch them from afar or at close range – this depends on your angle of vision, on the perspective you create when enjoying the ritual. Well, it is too dangerous to rape children either in public or at home. It is no wonder that many paedophiles fall back on the child pornography they enjoyed a few years ago when they didn't dare stalk their victims in the streets and hold them captive in barns. According to many newspapers, Japan is the last OECD nation to criminalise possession of child pornography, although it outlawed production and distribution in 1999, and has long been considered a safe haven for those buying child pornography.

What can you do with a sheet of paper from which young children look at you, with broad smiles on their faces? You can't rape it, can you? Perhaps you can: you never can tell. And even if you can't rape sheets of paper, whatever they show you, you might get inspired by them to the point of going down and raping a child in the streets. 'By outlawing the possession of child pornography with the intent to satisfy sexual interest,' says KiyohikoToyama, 'we make it harder for people to trade in such material.' All right, you don't *trade* in this material, but you've got a few sheets of paper that excite your curiosity and awaken your libido. You go down and see a child who knows nothing about these sheets of paper and your libido because you're not this child's uncle, as far as you know. You don't trade in the material I touched upon a few minutes ago; nor do you trade in oil and therefore have no trading partners. You just wish to rape this child and you think you can do it safely in some no-man's-land or just an invisible garden. You are inside this garden, but no one sees you and no one calls the police in spite of the rules that forbid you to touch this child – even his or her hair shouldn't be touched.

'If he so much as harms a hair on her head I won't be responsible for my actions,' says a passer-by because he suspects foul play. Why? Because he always suspects foul play, even if he doesn't see anything, not even a wisp of smoke that might hint at a huge fire. The paedophile is an invisible man who shouldn't walk on the snow where his feet would leave vestiges of their presence; and feet do not usually walk without legs. Upon seeing these *pas sur la neige*, as Debussy usually puts it, any policeman, however stupid and lazy, says to himself, 'There's a paedophile in the neighbourhood.' So it's better not to walk on the snow, even if you're not a notorious paedophile, even if you're an ordinary citizen who goes shopping because he's got nothing either in the fridge or in the deep freezer.

'Become invisible!' is probably not Krishna's motto, but a few Taoists wouldn't say 'no' if someone attributed this paternal advice to *them*. I've no idea whether this particular paedophile reads Taoist scriptures but he goes unnoticed, as it were; nothing and nobody blocks the road that leads to a beautiful little girl or a handsome little boy. 'Halt!' calls the guard. 'You can't go any further without a permit,' but there are no guards around and anyway no paedophile would ever get a permit for his sinful actions. Incidentally, this kind of action has nothing to do with inaction; it is pointless to quote Krishna at this point of the narrative.

'We must fight against a tendency of looking at children as sexual objects, and allowing them to be taken advantage of, sexually and commercially, erotically and pornographically, sentimentally and egoistically.' Whatever you say, you quote somebody, for everything has been said already and whenever they say, 'The river was full but we managed to wade across,' they speak of words, wise sayings and pieces of information. So you just say that children aren't dolls and you shouldn't play with them to your heart's content, otherwise neither Krishna nor Vishnu will guide you along the right path. Well, children have their dolls and you have a few children with whom you can play, provided you neither give them lecherous looks nor touch those organs that are destined to future enjoyment in the domain of sex and eroticism. Nothing, nothing, nothing. You're weary of all that and of children

who continue to play with their computers without looking at you and the boxes of chocolate that await them on a chest of drawers.

Of course you don't say either to yourself or to others, 'To hell with children' because such a thing is not done in a civilised society which prepares the future and pampers its inhabitants. It's better not to talk about children if hell and its torments prey on your mind round the clock, but you can talk about pre-Neanderthals whose jaws were large, which allowed them to gnash meat and eat some parts of dinosaurs. These jaws could be used like a tool or a third hand, helping their owners adapt to their eating needs in a harsh, cold environment. Their brains, on the other hand, were small, for they read neither Kant nor Heidegger, and they didn't even listen to Beethoven's last quartets; nor did they ever fall in love with Schoenberg's *Moses and Aaron*.

Those ancestors of ours were young adults when they died and inevitably we fall back upon children because we always fall on them, whatever we do or think about. How did *those* children die, one wonders if one is prepared to take into consideration *those* days of yore which are as distant from one as any star? Apparently they were found at the base of an underground shaft in Spain. How did they get to this makeshift cemetery? *The Japan Times* suggests they were pitched into the pit by their conquerors – or by their parents, one might add, recalling how some parents treat their children. They lock them in basements into which they literally pitch them in spite of the children's screams and the fact that they always beg for mercy, even if you only open the door of your basement without touching your children. A few minutes later, you grow weary of their music and ceremoniously or unceremoniously throw them into your basement – or pitch them, or pinch them to death. Such parents should be hanged or put in front of a firing squad, for no prison term can redeem their doings, crimes and sadism. How did such monsters make their way into the human species, let alone into human society?

This question leads you to another question related to viruses and other parasites that spoil our fun and often murder us without our permission. 'In a skeleton more than 6,200 years old, scientists have found the earliest known evidence of infection by a parasitic flatworm, revealing how human advancement enabled a creature resembling a tiny slug to spread. Today it afflicts more than 200 million people.' There are so many parasitic flatworms around us that we don't even notice them; and they continue to prosper at our expense. Sometimes these parasites aren't flat; they're fat, have bloated stomachs, and their eyes are puffy with sleep, with sweet dreams. And they worm their way into our life as we advance on the path to paradise and absolute knowledge, perfect harmony, perfect matrimony.

At some point we spent a lot of time wading in warm water; this point is as distant as the Andromeda Galaxy, for nowadays we've got swimming pools where we spend a lot of time, hoping to outlive all our ancestors who were deprived of swimming pools. Our doctor says that swimming two hours a day prolongs human life beyond all limits known to science and old women. And of course you'd better swim with the tide, even if you swim in your private swimming pool where neither tides

nor waves will ever feel at home. But even your private swimming pool creates ideal conditions for the parasites to jump into humans – into you, under the circumstances. They jump into you and trigger outbreaks of the waterborne flatworm disease known as schistosomiasis or schizophrenia: we should avoid unintelligible words, otherwise no one will ever understand us, as some literary critics say. You shouldn't look for words in dictionaries or specialised newspapers: the lowest common denominator is the best dictionary one can chance upon in this world.

5

You're born with multiple mysterious syndromes that defy the laws of medicine and doctors who do their best to find out what you've been suffering from ever since you were born into this world. You can't speak, chew or walk on your own, but they say you shouldn't worry because you understand what they say to you. You can live in human society and even have a dog whose barking you'll always hear and understand. You even understand that initial genetic tests failed to provide a diagnosis; in other words or notes, your disease is as mysterious as Beethoven's last quartets. You analyse them, make a few tests, but they remain inaccessible, remote; and no remote control will ever control them, whoever happens to play their notes.

Well, your hopes are now pinned on a new test called exome...the protein-making genes...glitches that could explain your condition. You don't understand a word of what the doctors say to you and that only aggravates the condition in which you found yourself at your birth. Your hopes fade as you realise that you're now beyond this test and its efficiency. You must be on the threshold of death and this threshold dislikes both tests and doctors. In your efforts to understand what's going on, you consult your dictionary and read the following sentence: 'We expected a few glitches, but everything's gone remarkably smoothly.' You rejoice of course, all the more so since the word 'glitch' denotes a *small* problem, not a *big* one, and any small problem is no problem at all, if you have a renowned doctor at hand, not far from your bed. But then you read, 'The system has been plagued with glitches ever since its launch,' and you say to yourself that your system and also your nervous system have been plagued ever since your birth: you *can* talk to yourself. You can talk to yourself, you've got thoughts – therefore you are; that's what doctors say to you to guard your system against all sorts of suicidal impulses.

One doctor says to you, 'You're not deaf because you can hear me. And you understand the word "glitch", don't you?'

'Yes,' says another doctor. 'He understands this word perfectly, even better than we do – he reads dictionaries, you know.'

'Does he read newspapers?'

'I think he does.'

'You should hide them from him, especially *The Japan Times*.'

‘Insurers baulk as genetic tests reveal rare disease.’ You’d better not read this title, even if you suffer only from the common cold because insurers might think your common cold isn’t as common as all that. ‘It is an *uncommon* cold,’ says one insurer to another.

‘The tests pinpoint its genetic cause in up to half of all patients,’ says another insurer, ‘but only a fraction of those will be able to use that as guidance because treatments don’t exist yet.’

‘All this is investigational,’ says yet another insurer, ‘and so isn’t eligible for coverage.’

‘We need proof that the test would offer a benefit.’

‘No tests have ever offered a benefit.’

‘Of course they’ll hire an attorney and appeal, but they’re bound to lose.’

Their objections stem from a lack of evidence that the test can improve patient care. In their opinion, nothing can improve their clients’ bodies and souls, not even their dollars. They keep these dollars under their pillows and go on saying that tests are inconclusive; and the rest doesn’t convince them either, although they have no idea what rest they’re talking about on this occasion. Their patients remain on their deathbeds. They can neither speak nor eat nor breathe, and they survive only because nature doesn’t let them go, thinking they should spend some time on Earth and not under it. Accordingly they don’t go under the Earth and remain at their doctors’ beck and call, and the latter profit from the former’s patience and kindness, shouting, ‘Don’t die,’ ‘Another injection, ‘Pull yourself together,’ ‘Tear yourself apart.’ They’re torn to shreds but they cling to life, otherwise their doctors wouldn’t be happy; and these patients think the world should strive for happiness and harmony.

And then you read an article entitled, *In one gene, a path to fight heart attacks*, and you don’t even know whether it is a title or just a hopeful statement. One gene is enough to cure you of everything. You don’t believe your eyes which, according to many Platonists, lie to you very often, taking their cue from other senses; these lie every day, every hour and every second. ‘Discovery of mutation raises hopes for first new class of drugs in decades’ – that’s what you read and you wonder what the word ‘mutation’ means in this context. Do you have to become somebody or something else? What for? You have to survive at all cost, even if you’re doomed to travel from one hospital to another instead of going on an interstellar journey, on a Space Odyssey one can catch a fleeting glimpse of in science-fiction books – and elsewhere, as you always add, hoping there’s a world elsewhere.

‘Two major studies by leading research groups have independently identified mutations in a single gene that protect against heart attacks by keeping levels of trigycerides – a kind of fat in the blood – very low for a lifetime.’ What are trigycerides, you wonder? As you consult all your dictionaries you realise you don’t suffer from heart failure because your heart never lets you down, not even if you drink four bottles of wine in a row. Your heart speaks all the time; you can’t speak at all, even when you’re wide awake and wish to communicate with the whole world and extra-terrestrial warriors. And if your heart speaks either to you or to them, it is unlikely to fail you. Trigycerides have nothing to do with your health and illness. ‘Heart attacks are the leading killer in the United States,

and about 720,000 Americans a year have them.' You're not an American citizen; you have nothing to worry about except that you're on your deathbed and cannot say how miserable you are either to your doctors or nurses.

Of course you're longing to get away from all this and finally you realise that only your struggle with time and space can help you under the circumstances. But what is time, you ask yourself? You know that space is your room and also whatever lies outside your room, including the cosmos and its indefatigable stars which twinkle all the time, whether you look at them or not. What is time? The twinkling of the stars? They go on and on, which doesn't mean they know what time is about and how you can handle it to your advantage or disadvantage. You even wonder if you should handle it at all: you can't really handle it because it flows like an endless river and even the Aswan High Dam – the one that is on the River Nile in Egypt – will not modify its course, let alone stop it.

Time is your breath, your pulse and something that takes place in between two beats of whatever beats in your presence and probably in your absence. But that is none of your concern and you follow your own private time to the very end of the tunnel where your watch will never stop; you'll go on living forever. You consult your watch – your wristwatch mostly – and it tells you that your wrist is still alive and even capable of wearing a watch. You must be alive as well, for you wear your wrist and the numerous watches you buy almost every year to keep up with the times and the Joneses. You keep up with both and no wonder you grow tired rather quickly, even if you're very young; and *you* are no longer young, o my dear, o my dear. O, o, o, o, o, o, o. Is it time? Push, push, push, push, push, push, push. No 'wonderful' this time because time isn't always wonderful.

You repeat one word, one gesture and that is probably time because space has nothing to do with repetition, even if it's a no-man's-land you see in front of you, behind you. A plot of land can be sold, but if you say, 'Push, push, push, push, push, push,' you'll never sell it unless you put it in a song and add a drum, a drum, a drum. But how can one get out of this time or any other time? That is the question and even your suicide pales into insignificance beside this question and the non-existent answer – contrary to what Albert Camus thought when he wrote his immortal works where suicide and mothers have pride of place. You measure the motion of bodies and say to yourself, 'He's dragging his feet,' even if he doesn't; nor does *she* drag anything. Then you switch to *psychological* time about which St Augustine spoke at length as if he had known we would trust our watches to the detriment of our hearts. Well, he was mistaken: we mistrust our watches and trust our hearts that make us fly towards our distant wives, daughters and nieces who live in an adjacent area or perhaps next door; or in the same house.

We put our trousers on and go towards our niece whom we love so tenderly one wonders whether she is really our niece and not someone else. The time we spend on the way either doesn't exist, for we abolish it within our mind, or reaches for eternity on account of our waiting for this meeting which is utterly deprived of sexual overtones. (That's how we lie to ourselves.) If we wait for the meeting for more than an hour, a number of sexual overtones may appear, which doesn't mean

anything. (Another lie.) Sexual overtones, tones and moans come and go, and we're still eager to see our niece or rather her child unless we have nothing in common with paedophiles and their credo. Anyway, bodies move because they have the fidgets and you can't help measuring their times and spaces, even if you face the same number of heavenly bodies that constitute time and space. You measure everything and end up tracing a zero in the air which helps you understand space and also time – as long as you're engaged in tracing zero in mid-air. Actually you might be part of a team of scientists who are engaged upon cancer research, but you'd better stick to your zero, otherwise you'll be the laughing stock of your colleagues and journalists.

If they ask you what you're doing today, you say, 'Zero.'

'What about tomorrow?'

'Zero.'

'Did you go out?'

'Zero.'

'What did you do in the zoo?'

'Zero.'

'Didn't you wish to go to the zoo?'

'Zero.'

'Zoo, zoo, zoo, zoo.'

'Zero, zero, zero, zero.'

Another example of the bodhisattva, needless to say; or of sattva, of tattva, of mattva. Write a haiku, while you're at it. At what? At this, at that; at space, at face, at mess, at Mass, at fuss.

I am the face of the Moon.
I am the fuss of the Earth.
I am Brahman, Atman, Man.

I've got no nieces to speak of. That's why I never speak about them: there's no point in speaking about those you don't know at all, not even by hearsay. Last month I met a beautiful lady at the chemist's and I can speak about her fingers and some other parts of her body in spite of my ignorance related to these parts: after all, I saw her for two minutes and she was wearing neither a mini-skirt nor a close-fitting pair of trousers. Yet I can describe them, for space can be guessed at and pigeonholed even if you have no idea what it looks like and how it behaves in the presence of time. You have no idea whether it behaves or not, whether it is an unruly child or an old sage whose wise sayings everyone repeats before going to bed – to guard against nightmares. Time, on the other hand, is unpredictable and no amount of guesswork can penetrate its mind that probably hasn't yet made up its mind – time is in two minds about everything – as to what should take place tomorrow and the day after, let alone next month.

I can hope that, upon my return from Japan, I'll meet again the beautiful lady I've talked about for quite a while, for you become long-winded in the twinkling of an eye if you enlarge upon someone you don't know. You can say whatever you like about this person and you'll never question your own words, which can happen if you focus your attention upon a woman you know almost by heart. If you say, 'How kind she is,' you'll contradict yourself in the same breath because she isn't kind at all and you know that perfectly; what's more, you recall all the nasty things she has said to you and about you ever since you made her acquaintance. Anyway, I'm almost sure I'll meet her again on condition that I go to the same chemist's and buy the pills I bought last month: we should give a helping hand to our time, and space is one of the ingredients of what is known as 'space-time'.

Of course lots of events can stop me – anything from a change of mind to death and other catastrophes that always wait for us in the wings and even on the stage. If you look carefully, if you're a prophet in your own right, you'll spot them at once or after a while, as the case might be. Is our future on the stage, in the wings, backstage, in another theatre, in another city, country, on a distant star that makes us wonder and ask nonsensical questions: 'Who are you? Who are you? Are you the future? Are you the past?' You're the past because you might already have disappeared from the sky. But the light we have fallen in love with continues to fly towards the Earth because even light doesn't fly fast enough to offer us up-to-the-minute news on the universe.

Suppose I do go to the chemist's and buy the same pills, even though I no longer need them, which doesn't turn me into an immortal man, for I am a collection of diseases and may pass away at any moment, without waiting for my return to Belgium. Death is often impatient and we have no alternative but to put up with his – or its – concept of time which mostly stops whenever death takes the trouble to tackle the problem of time. It is true that, from time to time, death drags its feet and one says to others, 'I thought Peter was already dead.'

'He is not,' say the others. 'It's not over yet – not by a long chalk.'

'It took him a long while to recover after his heart operation, but he did recover, we can assure you.'

'But he's never really recovered from the shock of his wife dying,' you say to them.

'He no longer remembers her. He's got another wife now. She's nursed him back to health. The doctor says he can start stepping down his medication in a few days' time.'

Death has nothing to do with health, whether you recover it or not, because he thinks only in terms of ends and odds. If you drive a car all your life, the odds are you'll have an accident at some point, and death sees to it that the accident happens in the near future. Perhaps we should discard all odds and affirm that death deals only with ends as if following an industrialist's precious advice: 'Make sure you're dealing with a bona fide company.' Where could you find a better bona fide company than end and death? All good things must come to an end, as they say; and they do come to an end, both good things and those who say that about them. But no one says anything like that about *bad* things which are endless, and we're bound to come to this conclusion unless we avoid

conclusions, ends and death as we think about life and endeavour to unravel its mysteries. That is the difference between time and eternity.

Yesterday I played a concert in Tokyo and a few days ago I had dinner in a restaurant the name of which I always mispronounce; it is no use writing it down, for I'm sure to misspell it, even if I look it up in my numerous brochures. There was a woman in that restaurant and I even recognised her features because I had seen them previously, one year before. Of course I asked myself if I was talking to the same woman, but she answered this question without answering it – she just talked to me in French and I knew I was looking at the same woman; what's more, she was there in the flesh, not in a photograph. She is of Portuguese origin but was born in France. I still don't know whether she is beautiful or not, but her manners do not jar on my nerves and good manners as well as graceful movements make you overlook a few deficiencies such as a long nose or a short pair of legs. Her legs are by no means short – I can speak of her in the present tense – but that's not the point because, once again, the point aspires to pinpoint the nature of time. Incidentally, her nose may be likened to that of Cleopatra.

She recalled not only the wine I had been talking about in the course of my previous visit, but also my profession, asking if I would play a concert in Tokyo. I said I was to play four concerts and she smiled as if my triumphs or their absence might influence her life, mind, body and even her bank account. At that point in time I still thought she was living on her own: no husband, no children, no mother-in-law, no obstacles on my way to her body and heart. I asked a pertinent question and she gave an impertinent answer, 'I'm here with my husband.' She touched upon neither her sons nor her daughters, but I was already in another dimension where no amorous adventures were scheduled for the next few days or weeks. Even my return to Europe was somehow jeopardised by her answer and this phenomenon also belongs to the nature of time: the past often spoils the fun embedded in the future.

However, she said she would come to my concert – 'if you're playing next Sunday,' she added, for she was busy as a bee or a Japanese workman. I did have a concert on Sunday and I left a ticket for her at the reception desk of the hall: in Japan some concert halls look like hotels. I had her visiting card and knew I had to send an email to her instead of ringing her up and seizing a unique opportunity to talk to her husband or mother-in-law. Accordingly I sent her an email, saying my manager had only one ticket, which might have conveyed the impression I had no wish to see her husband: pianists shouldn't be consumed by jealousy when performing Beethoven's sonatas or Mozart's concerti. I also pointed out I would understand her refusal to attend my concert. I thanked her for the way she treated me in the restaurant, but didn't go so far as to wish her a lot of happiness in the years to come and even beyond those years, whatever their number.

She neither came to the hall nor answered my email, which might have appeared rude, if I had been sensitive to this kind of rudeness the day before yesterday and yesterday. I'm still insensitive to it and consequently I don't seem to have altered my attitude towards human existence in the space of

three days – at least in the domain of rudeness. Today my manager received an email from her and I must admit that at first I took the information it disclosed at face value. Now I wonder how I could have been taken in by that woman – if only for a few moments that did their best to make me believe she hadn't consulted her emails for more than two days.

She wrote something along these lines: 'What a pity! Dearie me, what a mess! I read your email only five minutes ago. Now you know why I didn't attend your concert. What a pity! I like classical music very much, especially Mozart and Beethoven. And you played Mozart's concerti, two of them. I never miss a single episode of my favourite soap opera, but I like Mozart's concerti more than any soap opera, however entertaining and profound. And this time I seem to have missed two concerti, not just one. What a pity! What a pity! Well, I can't change the situation so I'm going to have to learn to live with it. What a lesson! I hope you're not too angry with me. Next year I'll consult all newspapers and magazines to find out when you're coming – I wish to admire your art. I'm sure you play beautifully, but I'd like to *hear* your live performances. Of course you're a welcome and valuable guest in our restaurant – and in our concert halls, needless to say.'

At first I laughed as I thought about her negligence which is hardly explainable within the framework of her existence focused upon the restaurant where she has to work every day with the exception of Sundays. This restaurant is the centrepiece of her time and she shouldn't disregard her duties that are partly connected to her computer and the emails she may receive at any moment. She can't therefore afford to neglect this kind of communication with the outside world on which her livelihood depends – her livelihood and her very life. 'A scatterbrain, a scatterbrain,' I repeated as I walked with my manager towards the studio where I could practise for two hours at least. He also repeated this word several times and then we recalled D. T. Suzuki and sang in unison, 'Wonderful, wonderful, wonderful.' And 'push, push, push' wasn't far away from our song – it goes without saying. And then I stopped singing and laughing because gradually the truth about this woman and her email dawned on me, proving once again that time helps one to unmask both traitors and hypocrites.

A scatterbrain, a scatterbrain,
A hypocrite, a hypocrite,
A fraud, a fraud, a fraud, a fraud.

She was a charming lady who was later revealed to be a fraud – that's how I might describe her nature in a few years' time. Now I'm too close to her lie and actually have no wish to describe it, going into details that concern me no longer. I'm too close to her email and therefore cannot describe it objectively, from afar; on the other hand, I'm still affected by her hypocrisy, even if I pretend not to care either about her email or herself. She must have lied from the very start, for she had no intention of going to the concert hall on her own, without her dear husband on whose help she may count if they decide to kick her out of the restaurant. Suppose I write a letter to its owner to say she ill-treated me

during my last visit to this gourmet castle – to the extent of driving me to the brink of a nervous breakdown.

She thought she shouldn't waste her time on my interpretations, my use of the pedal and my old-fashioned sound which may remind one of a few great pianists of the past. But she had to be polite within the walls of her establishment: she said she would go to my concert and didn't even take the trouble to let me know she wasn't 'single', as they say so often in Japan. 'She is single, single, single. Today women don't marry. They like their freedom.' But then I asked her an appropriate question and for once she told the truth and nothing else, forgetting her lies, hypocrisy and opportunism. She didn't say she could attend this concert only in her husband's company because 'I never leave him alone except when I have to work. Actually he often comes to the restaurant and is even allowed to eat his sandwich in the kitchen while drinking a glass of coke.' And when I said I would do my best to get a ticket for him as well, she said, 'Don't worry. That doesn't really matter.'

Of course she consults her emails every two hours, and as I continued to ponder the intricacies of her email the curtains parted at last, revealing a darkened stage. Instead of bright rays associated with comedies and musicals, I saw the murky world of human deceit where simplicity and open hearts are as rare as rare birds. What really angered me was the dirty underhand way this young woman had deceived me, following the herd and not bothering to answer the question: 'Why follow the herd?' She didn't answer me after receiving my email – on the same day, within the same hour – because she was reluctant to say 'no', adopting instead the Japanese custom that irritates foreigners no end, especially if these foreigners come from Europe, the States or Argentina.

If you're asked, 'Did you go to the shops?' you may answer, 'No, I forgot' – in case you didn't go to the shops and played a game of cards with your friends and mistresses. But if you put this question to a Japanese, he says, 'Nothing.'

'Did you go to the shops, yes or no?'

'Everything.'

'Show me what you bought.'

'Nothing.'

'Why didn't you buy anything?'

'Because –'

'Because what? Because of what?'

'Nothing.'

'Do you mean it doesn't matter?'

'Yes.'

'So you can say "yes", can't you?'

'Yes.'

'And you can't say "no".'

'Yes.'

So the woman said, ‘Yes, I’ll come. Yes, I can.’ And then she didn’t answer me by return because she couldn’t bring herself to say, ‘I can*not*.’ (‘Not’ is also prohibited in Japan.) Two days later, however, she could say ‘yes’ several times in a row. ‘Yes, I received your email. Yes, what a pity. Yes, I like Mozart, Brahms, Schubert and many other classical composers. Yes, you’re a marvellous pianist. Yes, I’ll come to your concerts next year. Yes, I’ll read all newspapers and magazines next spring so as not to miss your performance of Chopin. Yes, I’ll greet you in our restaurant with open arms. Yes, you promised to come next year. You said “yes” when I asked you if you would come or not. Yes, that’s right and you’re right. Yes, see you soon. Yes, I’m sure you’ll be happy this afternoon. Yes, our restaurant is the best in Japan and also in the world. “Have you had enough to eat?” I asked you. “Yes, thank you,” you said. Yes, your answer was correct. If you say “yes” till doomsday, you’ll save a lot of trouble.’

Suppose the Portuguese woman’s email becomes a measure of time, which isn’t an absurd idea, given that a man who falls in love with a woman accepts her body and whatever she does as a measure of the universe, its yardstick and ideal. He reads this email slowly or fast and accordingly his time either flows or flies or stops altogether – when, for instance, he stops reading the email and just looks at it in admiration, paralysed by his own ecstasy. In such moments he takes it at its face value and merely looks at its face, so to speak, seeing her, only his beloved whose image hovers over the text and also overhead – like a hawk waiting to swoop down on its prey. But the lover sees an angel, not a hawk, and whispers romantically, ‘She’s brought me so much happiness over the years,’ although he has known her for two months only.

Suppose you read this text *normally*, whatever that means – not too slowly, not too fast, as if you were playing Schubert’s late sonatas, letting them express their beauty on their own. You don’t force yourself on them; you let the sounds come and go – as the whim takes them. One after another they settle in space and time that welcome them with open arms, for they both exist solely for the sake of these notes. Your beloved’s letter is not a Schubert sonata, but you think it is as melodious as the most beautiful tune and such a tune was composed by Schubert. Actually he composed many ideal tunes one cannot hear anywhere else: only in his works, in their space-time, are they available. Needless to say, you take the email at its face value and do not suspect foul play; nor do you feel a bit uneasy about the text. Do you? Anyway, you have no intention of getting to the bottom of it, for you see the surface, not the email’s space, let alone its bottom.

Suppose you receive this email from a woman who neither awakens your masculine power nor excites your interest in any other way. You read it more or less objectively, normally, without forcing yourself on its style. An affected style, you say to yourself, but you don’t go any further, being out of this woman’s reach: her beauty and grace do not affect every aspect of your life. But you’re a born psychologist, a novelist; you begin to unravel the mysteries of the email without getting emotionally involved in the process. You realise it is not as straightforward as it appears at first glance. The layers

of meaning in a poem. You cross the layers and eventually get to the bottom of it, and your journey to the bottom is the variety of time I spoke about some time ago.

Of course I don't remember the wording of the email which is hidden in my manager's iPod or computer: I'm still unaware of what they don't have in common. When writing my parody, I exaggerated the whole event to make it sound rather more dramatic than it actually was. She did write, 'What a pity!' if my memory serves me right. But 'Dearie me, what a mess!' is my contribution to her epistolary heritage. Nor did she write, 'Well, I can't change the situation so I'm going to have to learn to live with it. What a lesson!' Nor did she speak of classical music, of Mozart's concerti and the soap operas she knew by heart on account of their profundity. In a few hours I'll see my manager and ask him to show me the original of the email, which is rather unaffected, not to say simple. But time is a succession of moods, false ideas, right ideas, investigations, suppositions and conclusions – a series of jumps and leaps, to use Kierkegaard's terminology. (Mao Zedong also thought about life in these terms.) It is high time I got dressed and went down to the breakfast room which welcomes the hotel's clients – and their guests – at 7 a.m., according to the brochure I found on the writing desk last night. After breakfast I'll sleep five hours, check out and go to the concert hall where I'm supposed to record and play Schubert's last piano works.

I slept three hours and am now waiting for my manager who is supposed to come at 1.50 p.m. unless I'm mistaken; and I must be mistaken, otherwise he would already have knocked on my door. What time am I living through now? It is an additional time that reminds me of football matches at the end of which both teams are allowed to continue their struggle for victory and life. What am I struggling for now as I wait for my manager's knocks? For the *mots justes*? Hardly. Suppose you have an important meeting – in an hour or so. (This dash is a messenger of time.) You don't know what to do in the interval and head for a library to fill in the hour that must elapse between your present state of mind and the meeting.

In the library you chance upon Leibniz's letters in which he says that time and space are unreal. You cannot speak of their substances, quantities and qualities such as aromas, colours, tastes and so on. Time is not different from the things that inhabit it to some extent, and you constantly come across these things and study them one by one. At 6:30, everyone gathers for drinks and appetizers in the lounge of the hotel where you've been staying for almost a week. At 7:00, everyone goes to the greenhouse and smells the flowers exposed in it – another appetizer that affects and inspires your olfactory nerves. At 7:30, everyone waits for dinner in the Italian restaurant situated on the second floor of the hotel, near a huge bamboo tree. Time is not different from the bamboo tree and it is this tree that symbolises time as long as you look at it or climb it like Tarzan.

Out of the world, both time and space are imaginary, for they exist insofar as they allow things to settle in them – if only for a few seconds and within a three-yard radius of your writing desk. But if you have nothing to do and someone must knock on your door in an hour or so, you face both space and time, their emptiness and uselessness; and the onus is on you to ensure they're inhabited,

otherwise they might vanish into thin air. So you begin to fill them with words and the objects you have near at hand. You pick up a box of matches, open it and turn it upside down; a number of matches fall on the carpet they put in the centre of your room last night. You raise your leg and kick these matches because you wish to play a game of football, excited as you are by the World Cup they show on TV every morning. Then you realise that space you're facing and dealing with hasn't been filled to the brim yet; what's more, time is even emptier than space. And your manager is far away, doing shopping in the city where rice is more lucrative than cars and electronic gizmos. You scatter the matches over your room and sing your favourite song:

A scatterbrain, a scatterbrain,
A hypocrite, a hypocrite,
A fraud, a fraud, a fraud, a fraud.

Eventually your manager arrives and you read the Portuguese woman's email, its original version:

What's a pity! I just saw your email when I arrived at work today.
Anyway, thank you so much for your generosity.
I look forward to your visit next year and I will surely check your program in advance to come admire your performance.
Best regards

A pack of lies. She got my email on Saturday, at 3.25 p.m. She was working last Saturday – until midnight. I've got only her restaurant's email address. Does no one ever consult computers in this restaurant? After 3.25 p.m.?

6

You wish to get away from all this and you walk as far as you can walk, looking neither right nor left because even in the middle of the road a nasty email awaits you or rather lies in wait for you. They all lie and lie and lie; and they wait for you to give a gullible answer to all their questions. And if they ask no questions, they tell so many lies you can't cope with them, and you just leave several countries in search of an asylum where you can sleep to your heart's content without a score of sleeping pills. You forget nothing and for once your memory unfolds a panorama of what you've gone through ever since your childhood when your mother used to leave you alone in the middle of some street or other. Now you also stand alone in the middle of the same streets, but cars don't take notice of your body they might run over either today or tomorrow at the latest. They don't do that and you wonder why they don't spare you the trouble of going from one world to another as if they had no idea what you're going through in this world, in the middle of these squares and boulevards.

Time and space are elsewhere unless there are objects and subjects that succeed each other as they appear before you as if you needed them badly. Or they just stay where they are, for they think in terms of space, ignoring time that is part of eternity where you can lie on a beach forever, fearing neither the sun nor sharks and crocodiles. You go through the space created by these objects and wonder if all of them could disappear if you waved your magic wand over them. If you wave this wand over the cabbages, they turn into horses, but you're not eager to see a multitude of horses either in front of your house or in your garden where you're trying to fall asleep, hoping that any sleep, however shallow and short, can obliterate painful memories and joyful demons. Your sleep comes and another sleep comes as well, but you're wide-awake and still remember everything down to your former lives.

What do you care about the nature of time that eludes you anyway, whatever snares you put in the streets where you have your walks in the evenings and in the mornings? You see no difference between an evening and a morning, between this hour and that second. Neither time nor space exist on their own; nor do *you* exist unless there are many people around you and even above you: pilots, Ariels, supermen. They say to you and your colleagues, 'We are time and space. We are one mile, ten minutes, two centuries, one millennium. We are Dante and Plato. If it weren't for our presence, neither you nor the world would see the light of day.'

Many writers are asked why they write and they answer, 'I never thought about writing anything except letters and emails. Literature chose me and I must obey its call.' I'm more modest than these writers, for I'm neither Dante nor Plato. Poetry chose *them*; I had no alternative but to choose literature. And to write nonsense of course, something along the lines of, 'Push, push, push,' or 'Bush, bush, bush.' Bush is nonsense, isn't it? Bush, push, bush, push. There are perhaps other words I could add to this poem, but I don't know them. I repeat whatever I know until I forget even what I know by heart or by soul, as they say when they wish to emphasise the importance of the soul and its immortality. It is important, even if its immortality is questionable – at least until the further notice, and you know that any further notice can come tomorrow or even in an hour unless you do your best to resist further notices and chase them away whenever they get too close to you. No news is good news. That's what you say to yourself, and you may be right unless something unpredictable happens and someone comes out of the blue; and this someone is not an angel, contrary to what you may think. Well, you don't think this someone is an angel or a god; you just know it is someone and you bear his presence for a while unless it becomes unbearable.

Grow tired/old/calm, etc. Old – yes, tired – yes, calm – no. You have to say 'no' from time to time, even if you're Japanese or Korean or Chinese or just a human being who says 'no, no' whenever someone pushes a needle under his nail. He says, 'No, no, no.' He screams, 'No, no, no.' He just screams; she just screams. He faints; she faints. A multitude of needles are in their bodies now, inside them, as if they were their hearts and livers, souls and minds. These needles are in their minds today; and they'll be in their minds tomorrow and next week. That's what they call the 'human condition'.

Pins and needles, say their torturers or life itself: sometimes you don't really know who speaks and what problem is under discussion. Pins and needles, pins and needles. 'Where are the pins?' you ask, bewildered.

'We have to insert a pin into your knee joint,' they say.

'Why do you speak about this pin in the plural?'

'Because you've got two knee joints.'

'How many pins do you have?'

'As many as the number of joints you've got.'

'I've got only two knees.'

'You've got many joints in your brain. Otherwise your brain wouldn't work properly.'

'You mean one thought should be linked to another thought?'

'That's right.'

'Could you please remove your needles from my nails?'

'It's a Chinese remedy, you know.'

'I'm not Chinese, am I?'

'Don't you wish to have the best of both worlds?'

'The world of the dead –'

'And that of the quick.'

Quick, quick, quick, said the bird. You no longer say anything; you're neither a bird nor a human, although you walk now and then and also fly between clouds and raindrops. You wish to be neither on Earth nor anywhere else, but you're damned to fame, as someone said about Beckett; in your case, however, fame is replaced by life and you go on living as if you couldn't do anything either with your space or your time that clings on to you as if you were its baby. You cling together, shivering with cold, time and you, you and time. It's cold outside and inside, in between; it's cold in heaven. No point in flying up to distant stars because they know no answers to our questions and mysteries. A chemical has been discovered that may be the key to unlocking the mysteries of Parkinson's disease. Is that the key you've been looking for ever since you began to look for it? You turn it in the lock, but Parkinson's doesn't open its door, for all your turning and knocking. So it isn't the key you've been looking for ever since you began to look for something, not necessarily Parkinson's. It is another key that may permit you to spend a wonderful night at a five-star hotel, but Parkinson's will remain out of your reach except that your muscles are stiff and your body shakes. Babies like toys that make a noise when they're shaken; you make noise when shaken by Parkinson's. Your children like this noise. You've come to like your private Parkinson's. My own, you say to it from time; not every day, though.

Krishna comes again and says you're in the wrong because you can neither die nor fall ill because no virus will ever kill you. And then he strips his clothes off in your presence and you see the cosmos and its nakedness; and you realise that no women has ever been as beautiful as the cosmos and

naked Krishna. Because Krishna is the truth in spite of the fact that he lies very often and doesn't take the trouble to apologise to those who die at his feet, having being stricken either in the legs or in the most private parts of their bodies. And he continues to talk, for no one can silence him, not even Vishnu who must be his superior, according to some epics that speak mostly of Vishnu and forget both Krishna and his protégés.

'Whatsoever a great man does, the same is done by others as well. Whatever standards he sets, the world follows.' Of course you can't hear this nonsense without voicing your objections: you know that others have never done what great men might do, if they're on top form. Great men are on top of the world and whatever is small is at the bottom, wherever this bottom can be located – either under the world or under the Earth morally supported by three whales. Small creatures look up and see the shadows of great men who do something great on top of the world and also on top of the cosmos. Small creatures can't see exactly what those great men do, for they're too far away: both great men and small ones are far away from each other. Great men don't care about small men and women; they never look down, but dwarfs look up constantly and see nothing, however much they strain their eyes and nerves. They can't imitate the greatness of great men, whatever Krishna might say on the subject.

'If I should cease to work,' says Krishna, 'these worlds would fall in ruin and I should be the creator of disordered life and destroy these people.' So Krishna works, does he? What kind of work does he do? We know what kind of advice he can give to his protégés who strike everybody below the belt; whenever they speak, their remarks are also below the belt. That's how great men behave in everyday life and also on a battlefield: they focus their thoughts and the rest of their substances on whatever lies below the belts they spot around them. They never look at bosoms, shoulders and shoulder blades, for all their upward tendencies that drive them towards the sky where Krishna and Vishnu await them impatiently. 'You should look down and up,' says Krishna whose field of vision is immeasurable; no one really knows where it begins and ends. That's why everyone says, 'You're without beginnings, without ends, without middles, without sides, without minds. Yet you're everything, otherwise we wouldn't exist and all the worlds would go down the drain or to hell, to Satan's jaws.'

'As the unlearned act from attachment to their work, so should the learned also act, but without any attachment, with the desire to maintain the world-order.' All right, no strings attached. There are strings everywhere, but they're not attached to anything, not even to life, to breath, to love and friendship where absolute truth is usually born. Suppose you're alone; your wife left you and so did your children who went to another country where they earn a lot of money and sleep with everybody every day. You put on your trousers, your jacket and go somewhere, taking orders from your eyes that see now one-way street, now two-way street. You enter a building where the lights seem to be on and you're not mistaken for once: the lights are on in spite of the late hour and armed hooligans. Being on your own, you attach yourself to a noisy group at the bar, but Krishna whispers into your ear, 'No attachments, no attachments. You should maintain the world-order.' So you detach yourself from the

noisy group, go out and kill the hooligans who have already set fire to a few cars and broken many windows. Krishna smiles and Buddhists like his smile, for it reminds them of the Buddha's smile and his numerous arms that seem to smile as well, whenever you look at them closely. His whole body – you're still talking about the Buddha – seems to smile and say, 'Wonderful, wonderful, wonderful, wonderful, wonderful.' You also say it, from time to time.

All of a sudden Vishnu told Krishna that he had the right to remain silent and Krishna stopped talking, thinking that the world would fall apart in the near future. But the future came and the worlds were still where they were – rooted to the spot, in other words and worlds. And even in this world of ours they were rooted to the spot and still, still, still. In the still of the night nothing moved, not even the worlds, let alone Krishna, Arjuna and all their cousins who, only a few hours ago, were prepared to destroy everything and everybody. The whole episode left them fuming at the injustice of it all and there were many episodes like that: injustice is everywhere and therefore space is filled with injustice. If you wish to endow space with a substance, you just put a lot of injustice in it and space will become a material body, a real body – like Adam Kadmon, for instance.

And what about time? To feel it – or to fill it – you have to get outside it and that is actually what you're aspiring to do: you aspire to get out, out, out and also away, away, away from nonsense, lies, hypocrisies and dolls who repeat the same words and make the same gestures. You do get away, hoping to transcend both time and space, coming into another dimension, as they say; the point is they don't know what they say. There are no other dimensions and even the third dimension may not exist, as far as we know or, as we say now, 'As far as I don't know,' taking our cue from a contemporary physicist or Socrates or some other sage who pontificated many centuries ago, speaking mainly about virtue and human intellect. What can we say today about virtue? You should take care of children and provide enough food for them – both physically and spiritually. I mean, they must have enough spiritual food as well as a number of Big Macs to nourish their bodies till doomsday, assuming that any such thing will take place some day or other.

What are we supposed to do to nourish our children and forbid them to starve to death either in our presence or in our absence? We should take care of the economy and not of spirituality, for thoughts can nourish our brain, not our body inside which our stomach always complains about the lack of food. So they say on the radio and in newspapers that the lowering of interest rates will give a much-needed boost to the economy. We've heard this sentence so many times we dismiss it wholeheartedly because they lower everything, not only interest rates; they also lower standards and the huge coffin where we're lying. Needless to say, they lower this coffin into the grave and we don't even try to get out of both the grave and the coffin because we're now in another dimension – probably in the dimension we've been looking for ever since our birth. In some respects, this grave is even better than our mothers' wombs; we sit in the back row of this new cinema kissing and cuddling. And on a huge screen we can see whatever happens on Earth where many other measures have been taken: energy-saving measures, preventive measures and some measures designed to reduce pollution.

All right, you can go under the Earth, if you wish, and you're allowed to believe that you live in another dimension because every house is situated *elsewhere* in relation to another house, to all next doors and distant doors. And if you happen to live under the Earth, you may feel safe to some extent, for it *is* another dimension, even if you're not dead yet, according to the instruments used by doctors and other scientists. Actually this new life of yours has nothing in common with any underground movement or dwelling: it is *another* dimension and every Krishna will confirm this hypothesis.

'To action alone hast thou a right and never at all to its fruits; let not the fruits of action be thy motive; neither let there be in thee any attachment to inaction.' That's what he means when he talks like that and Arjuna listens to him as well as the two armies that have already forgotten the fight scheduled for 6 a.m. You cuddle and kiss *inside* the Earth. You're not really *under* the Earth, are you? Are you the three whales they talked about in days of yore? You are not; you must be a multitude of human beings who decided to leave the Earth for some reason or other. Well and good. You cuddle and kiss and that is the action to which you have a right, as Krishna put it. Cuddling and kissing, extramarital and premarital sex, casual sex – you have a right to these actions but never at all to their fruits. You have no children, for they would be the only fruits of these actions and you repeat day and night, 'No fruits, no fruits' so as not to forget this maxim.

Inside the Earth it is easier not to succumb to this temptation and consequently renounce all fruits, given that no fruits grow in the bowels of the Earth, let alone in her heart of hearts – until further notice. And what if scientists say to us, 'There are lots of hanging gardens in the intestines of the Earth which digests their fruits day and night'? Stuff and nonsense, as they used to say in days of yore or just a century ago. There are only vegetables inside the Earth – carrots, for instance: you may drink carrot juice every morning as soon as you open your eyes and see the Earth around you. Your conscience should tell you the difference between right and wrong; you listen to your conscience and go on eating carrots because you're not forbidden to seek the *vegetables* of your action.

Another piece of nonsense. You go from one nonsense to another, whatever dimension and space you may find yourself in. You'd better go from a *no*-nonsense manner to, say, a no-nonsense approach to child-rearing, for you seem content to sit on your hands whenever children turn up in the neighbourhood of your room. You sit on your hands, in your rocking chair, and children play all around you as if you were their father or Uncle Joe. Actually they do call you Uncle Joe and you answer them because you think you should talk whenever you're spoken to, especially if you play with children who always ask questions or give elusive answers. 'Uncle Joe, Uncle Joe! Tell us what is life.'

'Life is hard, my dear children.'

'Is it a hard nut to crack?'

'Yes, yes.'

'Don't talk nonsense, Uncle Joe. We love nuts and we'll crack all of them, if necessary. And we'll eat them, without going nuts.'

‘My dear children! You should read Kant instead of playing with your computers. Child-rearing is my hobby and duty. Maybe someday I’ll take you to the North Georgia Mountains where I was reared.’

‘We don’t care about these mountains and fountains. And about whoever you wish to talk to us.’

‘Kant said, “Time is nothing but the form of inner sense, that is, of the intuition of ourselves and of our inner state.” Do you understand what that means?’

‘Nothing, nothing, nothing.’

‘It means *everything*, my dear children.’

‘How so?’

‘This means that time is inside you.’

‘Where? In the stomach?’

‘Everywhere. It is your inner state, your mind. So is space, contrary to what Kant maintains. He thinks that space is nothing but the form of all appearances of *outer* sense. I beg to differ – your space-time is in your mind, provided you don’t scatter it all over your rooms. You can create both space and time, going away from this obnoxious world where they speak only of growth strategies and fiscal policies.’

Anyway, whatever you do, you should keep up with the times because the times – or just time, for that matter – can chuck you overboard and you’ll be lost forever, even if you think in terms of inner spaces and infinite possibilities implanted in your brain and unconscious. You read newspapers because they update your information, if any, and bring you up to speed with the latest developments of the world’s substances and psyches, to put it poetically. And everyone has poetry in his or her soul, as they say – even a tough businessman has it in some nook or cranny of his soul. And yet his mind doesn’t record anything that has no connection with profits stigmatised by Marx and communists in general – even if they live in Italy or France, not necessarily in the Soviet Union.

In other words, you have to keep your feet on the ground and say to yourself that the growth strategy aims to reform the tightly regulated employment, agriculture and healthcare sectors. What else does it aim at? This strategy makes a promise to you and intends to keep it because it knows that voters are bound to be mistrustful of a government which breaks promises, even if there are only two promises to break. It promises to reduce the 35 percent corporate income tax rate to below 30 percent within a few years of fiscal 2015. And what if you don’t live so long and therefore take no advantage of these 25 percent or 20 percent – of any percent that might make your life more bearable, less strenuous and miserable? There are so many percents and presents around you that your mind hesitates before choosing this percent or that percent; and you invariably choose the present your government gives you, even if today is not your birthday.

The government – and the president – wish to stay in power. They shower you with promises, presents and percents – not with champagne, oddly enough. You feel like a glass of champagne but they give you a promise instead; and also 10 percent or 20 percent, as the case might be. You take

these 20 percent and fiddle with them, not knowing where to put them and how to handle them properly so as not to lose too much money. You handle them improperly and lose a lot of money. You turn to a specialist who knows everything and can handle any percent, however small or big. He handles 15 percent and you get 20 percent. He has done a lot for you and you're supposed to reward his efforts and goodwill. You give him 10 percent and he smiles as he puts these 10 percent into his wallet that contains only percents, not a single banknote. Everyone knows that percents are far more valuable than any money and sometimes they're even better than gold and diamonds that ladies are so keen on – to the point of singing about them.

The growth strategy knows that voters like pledges: they mistrust promises and the word 'pledge' has a ring of truth – much more so than the word 'promise'. The strategy pledges to change rules on maids and nursing carers to enable more foreigners to enter the sector. You're not a maid – neither a pretty maid nor a plain one – but you appreciate this pledge because you're a foreigner and therefore need to enter this sector or any other sector, otherwise you may find yourself in the streets. You enter the 11th sector and say you're a foreigner and wish to become part and parcel of the system that presides over the sector and its employees' lives. But they say to you, 'The company has a complex organisational structure.'

'All right. I don't mind.'

'We have a differential salary structure based on employees' experience. What kind of experience do you have?'

'Nothing, nothing, nothing.'

'This is not the bodhisattva sector, you know.'

'I don't mind.'

'We have a pyramid structure.'

'I like pyramids.'

'We have a very old-fashioned management structure.'

'I like old fashions and hate new ones.'

It is perhaps easier to speak to Krishna – at least that's what you say to yourself, but you say to yourself too many things and some of them are bound to lie to you viciously. So, at some point, you said to yourself, 'I'd better not talk to myself any more,' and you were right; but you couldn't resist the temptation and once again engaged yourself in conversation and told a lot of lies. Anyway, Krishna says, 'He is uncleavable, He cannot be burnt. He can be neither wetted nor dried. He is eternal, all-pervading, unchanging and immovable. He is the same forever.' Is he talking about Spinoza's God or any other god? 'All right,' you say to yourself, 'I've heard this oratorio many, many times and I admire its dimensions. I'm not God. I'm neither all-pervading nor immovable. You can move me from this sofa to a distant country and while doing so, you push me to accept your terms, and I have no alternative but to accept them, otherwise I'll be kicked out or murdered. And if you're a

woman, you're likely to push me into marrying you, but I will not marry you, whatever you do with your words and hands.'

The woman in question says to you, 'You're not unchanging either so you might have a change of heart tomorrow or next month at the latest.'

'No,' you say to her.' 'I'll never change my mind.'

'You might have a change of *heart*. Your heart is far more precious than your mind.'

'Nothing, nothing, nothing.'

'Now you have a bad heart, but you might get a good heart in the near future.'

'Where would it come from?'

'From me, of course. We'll exchange our hearts, as metaphysical poets used to do.'

'Nothing, nothing, nothing.'

Yes, you'd rather talk to Krishna, even if he talks nonsense from time to time, boring you with eternal truths and immovable gods. You'd like to bring these gods closer to you, to your heart and soul, but they do not move because they're immovable and remain out of your reach. On a clear day you can see them in the distance and you should be grateful for this vision or revelation. As for Krishna and yourself, you can exchange commonplaces about the weather over cups of tea unless he is determined to say something useful. No use hoping for Vishnu's coming and paternal advice: Vishnu is in charge, but for all practical purposes, his assistant – Krishna, of course – runs the office.

'Weapons do not cleave this self, fire does not burn him; waters do not make him wet; nor does the wind make him dry,' says Krishna, whereupon you realise it is the self he had in mind when talking about the immovable and eternal substance – probably *your*self or your self, otherwise he would have talked to someone else about the substance that can neither burn nor dry. Now you seem to be aware of the fact that if your self is burnt at the stake, like Giordano Bruno, it will not be burnt, whatever the temperature and ferocity of the flames. The rest will go to hell; your self will remain on Earth or go to heaven, to the moon, like Schopenhauer's will that survives everybody, even those who are renowned and worshipped for their will to power.

You know what is 'yours' because you've got your room, your TV set, your glass of vodka, your glass of water, your pipe, Magritte's pipe – in one of your books – and many other things that are really yours, whatever they say about ownership and the utopias where no one owns anything, not even his own wife, let alone his children. But, for the life of you, you have no idea what 'self' means, which is quite understandable and even logical, given that you know only what you come across once in a while – or have in your mind all the time. Your worries, for instance: health worries, financial worries and also a sort of angst that comes from nowhere and relates to nothing in particular, not even to money. Luckily for you, you don't have a son, otherwise you would be nearly demented with worry if tonight he didn't come home.

This self is yours, but you have no idea where you keep it and if you really are responsible for its upkeep: someone else might take care of it. God and your guardian angel *might* take care of it,

thinking you're so unreliable in spiritual matters – and in all other matters – that your self shouldn't be within your reach, otherwise you're sure to lose or damage it.

How could you lose your own self? You lose money, objects and also subjects, although you're neither a king nor an emperor; the subjects you may talk about are just human beings – your friends, for instance. You lose them now and then, but new friends come and replace them in your heart and your time that you may devote to your friends, provided you're in no mood for other objects or subjects.

As to your self, your guardian angel, who is your second self, might keep it in a safe because your self – and any other self – is more important than money that can be lost, stolen or spent on trifles. So, after all, money isn't as precious as all that; at least it's not as precious as so-called self which might be identical to 'ego' or 'superego' or 'underego'. You just hope you're not dealing with an underdog, although you're prepared to help any underdog on condition that he or she is not your self.

According to Radhakrishnan, this self of yours is 'beyond the range of form or thought and the changes that affect mind, life and body do not touch him. Even when it is applied to the Supreme Self, which is one in all, it is the unthinkable and immutable Self that is meant'. Everything is topsy-turvy in your mind at the moment, but your self remains pure, chaste and untouchable, and neither thoughts nor emotions affect him. If you call it 'it', you may accept this truth without hesitation, for objects do not respond to your emotions unless you break them or throw them out of the window which, incidentally, should be open round the clock in case you decide to blow off steam. But if your self is a subject and not a mere object, you can be charged with malicious wounding unless you really pamper this subject of yours and do not treat him like an object you can sell or kick or sit down on, if there are no chairs in the neighbourhood. Why not pamper your self after a hard day with a hot bath scented with oils?

And what about the Supreme Self? Does he have anything in common with supermen and superwomen? Are only *they* permitted to enjoy his company? To the exclusion of ordinary people? To the exclusion of those whose selves deserve no promotion? As we all know, the Indian government has promised to uphold the principles of democracy, but no one knows whether the Supreme Self will be distributed free to all those who hold Indian citizenship. And what about others, about so-called foreigners and strangers? Camus likes them very much, especially if their mothers are more important to them than justice and suicide.

Of course you can apply for Indian citizenship after five years' residency, but no one knows what you're supposed to do in the course of these five years. Could you live without the Supreme Self? You might *already* have him alongside your ordinary self, mind you, but you're very modest about your achievements, and whenever selves and their owners are under discussion, you say, 'I've got an ordinary self – nothing to write home about.' But they might say you're *extraordinary* and you'll have to acknowledge this fact, saying, 'Yes, I am extraordinary,' but you should add looking

sideways, ‘My self is really ordinary, I can assure you.’ And they believe you because an extraordinary being cannot lie, for fear of becoming ordinary and even ridiculous, as are all those people who pretend they’re supermen in spite of their inability to fly.

Forms may change and we know they seize every opportunity that awaits them on the path of metamorphoses because forms as well as things are bored to death unless they become what they are not. But the Supreme Self is left behind – at the beginning of the path which leads to other forms, natures and moods. We find it where it was three months ago as if three months were zero seconds, zero minutes. In other words, time doesn’t exist for the ever-lasting Self which is called supreme for the sake of clarity; and the Hindus are aware of the subject matter to which they devote so much time, for they say that neither this subject nor that matter change, provided they belong to the Supreme Self. Actually they don’t even have to say ‘Supreme’ and even ‘Self’ is excluded from their conversations: whatever you say refers to it *implicitly*. You say, for instance, ‘The weather is fine,’ and you know that both the ‘weather’ and ‘fine’ belong to the Supreme Self, even though the weather may change in a few minutes, being under the influence of a few clouds. But there’s something *beyond* the clouds and the weather, and this something is called the Supreme Self which is far more significant that any cloud, let alone raindrops and dewdrops.

You can’t explore the world without some kind of apparatus unless you’re a prophet who receives his information from above and not from microscopes. He looks at the clouds and sees the future that looks at him from afar as if to imply a lack of confidence in the management of the country. The future doesn’t trust the government of the country to which the prophet belongs and a flash of lightning confirms the hypothesis suggested by the prophet’s mind and also by his sixth sense.

The government says to him, ‘I’ll promote a merit-based pay system.’

‘What do you know about merit?’ says the prophet.

‘The prime minister claims he wants to create a classless meritocracy.’

‘The prime minister is a moron,’ says the prophet.

‘Is he?’ asks the government.

‘He is,’ says the prophet. ‘Do you hear this thunderclap?’

‘Yes,’ says the government.

‘Do you know what it says?’

‘No,’ says the government.

‘It says, “The prime minister is a moron.”’

‘Why are you so morose these days?’ asks the government.

‘Because I’m about to prophesy two wars.’

‘What else?’

‘Two wars and three floods. You should learn to live underwater.’

‘All right. Our people will take a few underwater lessons.’

‘You should learn to live in the air.’

‘All right. We’ll fly to Sirius. But first we’d like to ease restrictions on ownership of agricultural corporations by private companies.’

‘No time for that,’ says the prophet.

But you can neither live underwater nor fly wherever your thoughts may push you as they continue to twirl in your brain in spite of a multitude of floods. Time hasn’t stopped yet, whatever they say about floods and the annihilation of the cosmos either by the second law of thermodynamics or a multitude of atom bombs. Time carries on, whatever it has to carry on, and the government still has a multitude of problems, from homelessness to drugs and murder; and all these problems are on both its hands and back. How to finish time off? All our disasters come from it and from Noah whose Ark has experience of saving a multitude of males and females. These copulate once more and replenish the Earth and thus set the ball or time rolling. And no one says, ‘I’m not really on the ball today’: they’re all on the ball and also on time. They’re both in time and on time: the world disregards the second law and also the third one, let alone the fourth that no one takes seriously. And the government pledges to boost spending to reverse the fall in population, aiming at maintaining 100 million people in 50 years; and 1000 million people in 500 years. Yet the voters say, ‘The whole government is riddled with graft, bribery and corruption.’

How to finish time off? You pour some water on it, but time knows how to live underwater and it swims under it and even above it as if it was a dolphin, not our time. You speak to it about the second law of thermodynamics and even show it to it, but time looks neither at you nor at the law; it looks at nothing. It just goes everywhere and you follow it as if you were time’s favourite dog or wife or little daughter who must follow someone or something so as not to get lost forever. Time goes, flies, swims and you ask it to stop from time to time, for you’re in bed with the woman you love more than yourself, your mother and Camus’ justice. Time complies with your wishes and stops under your bed and over it. You spend two hundred years in this woman’s company, saying to yourself, ‘Wonderful.’ If time was alive, you would say, ‘Wonderful, wonderful, wonderful,’ but time is dead so you say, ‘W’ and do not even repeat this solitary letter.

Two hundred years later you say to time, ‘All right. Now you stop instead of running yourself into the ground. But let me utter the word “wonderful” before you stop for three hundred years. I’m longing to sing a hymn to Creation.’ You sing, ‘Wonderful’ and time stops once again; this time it doesn’t budge for *four* hundred years that you spend in the same bed, with the same woman. Upon awakening – you haven’t really slept all these years – you say to time, ‘I was always getting in trouble for misbehaving at school. You remind me of my school years, of my low marks. Why didn’t you listen to what I was saying to you four hundred years ago? I asked you to stop for *three* hundred years. Now I’m fed up with this woman. She’s horrible – I really hope I’ve seen the last of her.’

‘No change will ever take place without time,’ says time. ‘In the course of these years your love has turned into hate. I didn’t stop four hundred years ago. All this time I’ve been running on the spot.’

‘What for? To warm up before playing football?’

‘I don’t play games. I play the piano.’

‘Can you run on the spot and play the piano? At the same time?’

‘Yes, I can. All these years I’ve been playing Schubert’s last sonata.’

‘So that’s why I hate this woman now. I hate life as well, you know.’

‘I don’t know anything. I just play the piano.’

7

You go your way and perhaps some other way, and you wonder whether you live in one world or two worlds or three worlds at once. They’re not worlds, you say to yourself, reducing them to a pile of books, to a bottle of wine you’ll drink tonight and also to the football match shown on TV at some ungodly hour. You’re watching TV and say to yourself – as usual, you’re very talkative tonight – that the film unfolding on the screen like a series of events and misadventures was hailed as a masterpiece in its day. But what was the day when it was hailed and watched by teenagers and adults alike? You don’t remember that day and even the film doesn’t strike many chords in your substance that is growing weary of itself. And you’re growing weary of many selves deposited inside your brain, mind and muscles, for there are many treasure houses inside you and you’ll never succeed in opening them.

You don’t remember the day when you frayed the edges of your jeans as that was the fashion in those days. In what days? Even if I switch to the first person – to myself and my self – I’m not likely to remember it, for neither those days nor those nights have anything in common with Hamlet’s father whom everyone is supposed to remember. Even those nights are different from the night when Hamlet talked to the ghost and learnt a few things about his uncle’s behaviour. But all this seems to be far away – those nights and ghosts, and Hamlets, and Ophelias who float and drown, drown and float, as the whim takes them. The whim takes them down and they sink like the Titanic; the whim takes them up and they fly like Ariel or any superwoman.

I liked many writers in those days which are no longer either on the horizon or below it – at the spot where the sun spends its daily holidays. Holy days, holy days – where are they now? I used to like Nabokov very much and I would go on a pilgrimage to the Montreux Palace almost every year as if to pay tribute to the writer who had switched from Russian to English, proving thereby it could done. Now I’m not sure I was really paying tribute to him and not to the hotel I still like very much in spite of my ever-growing knowledge of luxury hotels and restaurants. And I adore Switzerland, needless to say, because I can’t bear sunbeams, especially if I happen to lie on a beach, waiting for a wave to touch my toes.

Nowadays I disagree with Nabokov on many issues and his zigzags, his private conquest of space, do not impress me to the point of making me re-read his works over and over again – in search of yet another zigzag or niche, as it were. He used to say that one had to *re*-read literary works, not just to *read* them, and I still subscribe to this opinion, for my own works prohibit the following barbaric approach: ‘I enjoyed the book so much I read it all in one sitting.’ A hundred sittings suit me much

more, although I don't know exactly how many paragraphs there are in this book of mine. And it is the number of paragraphs that counts because the uncommon reader should enjoy every paragraph on its own, disregarding any suspense and whatever cliffs and hangers may go with it.

I think Goethe said about *Faust*: 'A serious joke,' and I wonder why Nabokov understood neither this joke and nor its foul mood. In his commentary on *Eugene Onegin*, he seems to say to Goethe, 'Oh, just stop it Wolfgang, I'm really not in the mood for your jokes. Anyway Pushkin grasped the main points of Faust's discomfiture much better, although the piece he devoted to him is very short, especially in comparison with your gargantuan mumbo jumbo.' This remark reveals Nabokov's allergy to deconstruction; his attitude towards it might stem from his ignorance of Nietzsche and Heidegger, let alone of Derrida. Actually Goethe had a go at deconstructing archangels and the Blessed Virgin. Yet Mahler took him seriously, discarding the word 'joke' – otherwise he wouldn't have composed the second movement of the *Eighth Symphony*. And he might have dropped the first one, after carefully re-reading the second part of *Faust* at the end of which they fly and sing to no purpose, for saving Faust is something of an anticlimax – a non-event in its own right.

The whole story is pathetic and actually you need neither Mephistopheles nor his cousins to grow young again: it is all in your mind and not in your body that continues to rot, getting closer and closer to its own tomb. It used to visit other bodies' tombs, putting flowers on them, whispering words that no one and nothing heard, not even tombstones, stray dogs and stray cats. You thought your own tomb was far away, in another country, beyond so many horizons that no mathematician was able to count them, let alone cut them into pieces. I, for one, thought my grave was nowhere to be found – not even amidst the stars where some of my friends wished to be buried; perhaps on account of the word 'stardust'. Stardust to stardust, starashes to starashes – sounds better than the traditional formula you hear over and over again, even if no one dies. Priests are keen to remind you that you come from the Earth and go to the Earth, and that you're a sort of powder: talcum powder, chilli powder. Sooner or later you'll be consumed by an earthling and become his substance and nonsense, and that's why Krishna says you'll never die. But Nabokov wasn't fond of Krishna and other deities of whom he knew nothing except that some of his students talked about them after his lectures.

Another point on which I disagree with Nabokov is related to what he used to call the 'overhearing device', unless I'm mistaken. I'm still in Japan and, needless to say, I don't travel over the world with Nabokov's lectures on literature: my suitcase is rather small and only Krishna and his wise sayings fit into it apart from my socks, underpants and so on. Plato's *Meno* begins with the question, 'Can you tell me, Socrates, is virtue to be taught?' Socrates' answer is centred upon 'recollection', which seems to imply that your memory may and indeed should lead you towards virtue. Of course I can't remember the day when I was virtuous for the last time and consequently no effort on my part can render my soul virtuous again: Proustian efforts are now out of date, as far as I'm concerned. But if I overhear Krishna say, 'That in which thought is at rest, restrained by the

practice of concentration, that in which he beholds the Self through the self and rejoices in the Self,' I know he speaks about virtue.

Don't you always overhear the books you read? Krishna speaks to Arjuna in private: even the latter's cousins don't hear Krishna's words. You hear them all; you can't help overhearing them unless you decide to shut the book and put it back on the shelf where it belongs. No, you don't shut it because you need Krishna's consolatory remarks: 'no one dies', 'no one gets killed', 'he finds this supreme delight', 'he no longer falls away from the truth', 'you no longer fall away from the truth'.

Turgenev's hero and heroine are talking to each other in an arbour; they're so absorbed in their conversation they don't hear another hero's footsteps which, in Nabokov's mind, are linked to the overhearing device. He thinks that the second hero's appearance should be prepared, for nothing comes out of the blue and a writer's characters are his galley slaves. Accordingly, Nabokov goes to great lengths to make his heroes' whereabouts plausible and almost inevitable. But he doesn't seem to take into consideration Heisenberg's uncertainty principle: what you gain on the swings you lose on the roundabouts. If you know a subatomic particle's whereabouts, you have no idea at what speed it travels. In other words, Nabokov's protagonists are always in the right place, but his novels lose momentum, for he strives to explain every move of his galley slaves to account for their being within someone's earshot or out of it.

Well, Turgenev's hero and heroine don't say to each other, 'Wait till he is out of earshot before you say anything.' They say a lot of things and the other hero can't help overhearing them. So what? He might have pursued a bird or a rabbit. All of a sudden he hears two voices: 'I love you.'

'So do I. I mean, I love *you*.'

'But I don't love *him*.'

'You're right. He is an old fogey.'

'He may be old hat among the trendy younger generation, but his manners appeal to many women.'

'Not to you, I gather.'

'No, not at all.'

'I'm happy.'

'So am I.'

The old fogey listens to this dialogue and realises he hasn't got a ghost of a chance of winning this lady's heart. Turgenev strives to create a network of veins along which his protagonists' blood flows and stops now and then to reflect a shock, a lifelong sadness, a suicidal mood. Nabokov's hero has a splinter of wood in his toe. He can't walk very fast and that accounts for his being near the arbour where the crucial dialogue resounds with gay abandon. Moreover, this hero or galley slave wants to urinate – he drank too much kvass at dinner – but he walks so slowly he can't hope to reach his house and the lavatory he constructed two years ago in time to relieve himself in full accordance

with aristocratic rules. So he directs his steps towards the arbour and *logically* overhears the dialogue that may or may not change his life.

Tolstoy arranges Napoleon's encounter with Prince Andrey whose body is lying on the grass or just on the humid Earth, as the Russians say. Napoleon says, '*Quelle belle mort*,' which adds another finishing touch to his portrait as painted by Tolstoy: one always gets the feeling that Tolstoy adds only *finishing* touches to his portraits, descriptions and networks of veins. A theatrical gesture, a sentence one may utter for the sake of one's biography. Napoleon was an actor and did all he could for the sake of his biographies which were to dominate at least one and a half centuries, creating a cult of heroes and Nietzsche's overman – at least in part. Tolstoy, on the other hand, makes fun of Napoleon by mocking his pomposity, theatricals and *belles phrases* that may sound right in a poem but not on a battlefield strewn with corpses. And if you're bent on mocking someone, you'd better make him appear in the flesh, for even his flesh – Napoleon's flabby thighs – can become an object of ridicule.

Nabokov protests because, unlike Jung, he isn't fond of coincidences and synchronicity; he thinks that life is logical and can't deviate from its pattern – at least in his works. At the end of *Lolita*, however, he says something to the effect that we don't always know what will happen to our friends and idols. The patterns we create as we hobnob with them don't always correspond to those created and worked upon by destiny. But Nabokov knows *everything* about his galley slaves, scoring points over God and even Pushkin who was surprised at how Tatiana treated him during his work on *Eugene Onegin*.

Nabokov's partial departure from my life may mean I'm no longer what I used to be in my thirties and forties. Yet our scientists assure us we cannot change whatever we do unless we really fall ill and walk only as far as the lavatory and back – back to barracks, back to bed. Then we may grow furious at any time and acquire bad habits, telling our brothers and sisters off, screaming with pain and begging for anaesthetic even when we feel no pain either in our body or our psyche. I'm losing Nabokov and my attachment to him is now a thing of the past as if the past was still somewhere, keeping a few things, a few keepsakes without which I might be deprived of the future, but not of time. Several years ago I went to his house in Petersburg and was moved to some extent as I looked at the walls that might have seen him, if only for a short time: his family went abroad rather often, if I'm not mistaken.

I saw his butterflies and a documentary devoted to an interview he gave to an English journalist who might have thought he couldn't write in English. Once, in London, I opened at random a sort of dictionary where a number of writers were analysed by two hack journalists who wrote, 'Nabokov couldn't write in English and he knew it.' I'm not sure he knew it despite the number of dictionaries he used when working on a novel and even on a short story. I also use dictionaries because I don't see why I should refuse their offers of cooperation, but the number of dictionaries I touch during my work is negligible in comparison with Nabokov's dictionary-oriented library. I never look for exotic words or exotic birds; nor did Musil who stands head and shoulders above Nabokov, in my opinion. Actually

the world could be expressed by means of a dozen words. The only problem is we don't know them and no dictionary will ever get us off the hook.

I no longer go to the Montreux Palace – perhaps because of my gradual departure from Switzerland which I used to adore to the point of yearning to live there if not forever – only Clementines live forever – at least until my untimely demise. That's how space behaves in my presence now: everything goes or floats away as if there were only roads and rivers in the neighbourhood, in the entire universe. And yet there are bogs in it so I could say to all these objects and subjects, 'Let us stay in this bog which is almost immobile, like Krishna. We'll listen to frogs instead of nightingales. I hope you don't mind.' They do mind and continue to explore the part of space to which I have no access as if I was cut off from other people by heavy snow, by a flood, by a lot of mud.

'It is, therefore, solely from the human standpoint that we can speak of space, of extended things, etc.' says Kant. All right, I think in terms of space because I am human; and yet many human and humane things are utterly foreign to me, whatever others say about themselves. Perhaps both Nabokov and Switzerland are in my room and I don't have to go anywhere to find them and embrace them heartily. Time interferes once more and my body says I don't need them any longer because only the other worlds remain and Nabokov was dealing with this world, paying more attention to how Gradus of *Pale Fire* fame urinated than to metaphysical and physical problems. He dismissed Einstein's 'sleek formula' – he might have thought that the universe was far more complex – but touched upon two fingers that Gradus washed after peeing on his way to Shade's cottage instead of washing both hands. Why not take a shower while you're at it? Or a bath. Actually, Nabokov makes things easier for those who wish to know how he judges his characters. If they take baths every night and every morning, they're goodies. If they limit their relationship with their baths to so-called weekly ablutions, they're baddies.

Nabokov has remarkable powers of observation and so notices that Gradus washes only two fingers. Here's a true novelist for you, as they say, but I don't say that: I couldn't care less about Gradus and his fingers, whereas Einstein's 'sleek' formula excites my curiosity on account of its utmost primitivism. (Like Nabokov, I don't like the word 'simplicity' – even in the domain of science.) Incidentally, I should check all these cottages and fingers upon my return to Belgium, to my library where they await me, hoping I would love Nabokov again. I'll do my best to come up to their expectations, but I don't promise anything; nor does my body, let alone my mind.

Sometimes I receive letters from the people I know nothing about; they're not Martians for whom I'm writing this book because the envelopes protecting their letters come from 'the stationer's down the road', as they say when speaking of envelopes and suchlike. I recognise the envelopes and ask myself if I should open them or not because the only good news I can get today is the absence of envelopes, letters, information, persuasions and whatever is associated with people's intrusions into your life. They intrude upon your leisure hours, inactions, actions, asking you to answer their

questions that may sound like non-questions, for usually people know answers to all their questions and merely send you their answers. And if their answers sound like questions, you realise they don't like the word 'one-upmanship' and do their best to avoid it in their dealing with their colleagues.

This time I got a letter from someone who was genuinely interested in my literary works, and the questions I found inside the envelope purchased down the street didn't sound like answers. I was asked to describe my fiction and non-fiction in a few words, and I complied with this request, although I don't remember now if I was really *asked* to describe anything. I might have been eager to acquaint a stranger with my works, if only superficially, and I seized this opportunity: the longer I live the more I'm convinced that every opportunity should be seized and kept as long as necessary, otherwise you're heading for disaster and for once nothing can stop you on your way.

So I sent this lady – she is of Russian origin – a few excerpts from my works and I took advantage of her being a *Nab* specialist and fan to voice my opinion on his style and even outline our one-way relationship marked by the distance I touched upon in the previous paragraphs. Nabokov didn't know me and even if he had welcomed my stiff body in the hotel restaurant, he wouldn't have taken the trouble to read my books. (My body is no longer stiff in the presence of stars.) Here is an excerpt from my letter:

> *I'm sending you a few samples of my creative output, as Nabokov put it once. Today, I'm less enthusiastic about his own creative output and even about the way he handles the English language,* stuffing *his sentences with images and thereby losing the rhythm which is much more important in the domain of English literature than within its French counterpart. Besides, if compared with Musil and Proust, he lacks a few dimensions and at my age one begins to care about these dimensions and their absence. Of course he is eager to talk about an otherworldly element which, according to him, wanders through his works and permeates them. But it is not enough to* talk *about this element. What came naturally to Musil and Kafka didn't seem to obey his call.*

When speaking about Nabokov's otherworldly inclination or claim, I always enlarge upon a pathetic figure one comes across in *The Gift*. A man is awaiting his death in a room where he might have spent a few years, but I'm not sure this room belongs to him, for very few of Nabokov's characters – expatriates mostly – own houses and castles. They usually rent a morsel of space where they play chess, drink and die of heart attacks or some other calamity which descends upon them either slowly or very fast. One such character is dying in his room, for I don't remember any hospital in relation to this episode where Nabokov pictures the other world or rather his character's attitude towards it. The man I'm talking about says to himself as he continues to follow his train of thought, 'There's no other world and that is as certain as the fact that it's raining this afternoon' – or something along these lines.

His train of thought rolls along these lines that lead to another pain, not to paradise where one may dance, sing and play chess round the clock.

Then we're allowed to experience one of the switches for which Nabokov is justly renowned – a quirk of space, as he puts it somewhere. In the space where, according to the hero, the rain lords it over the sun we encounter a woman who waters her flowers; the drops resounding in the hero's brain come from a watering can, not from heaven. Actually the sun is shining and we can't even say, 'The clouds finally parted and the sun came out,' for the happy inhabitants of Berlin took advantage of a sunny morning and were enjoying the most beautiful afternoon in their lives. Let's not forget that all this happens before the Second World War.

I think this quirk of space is too simple and someone who doesn't like simplicity in art shouldn't permit himself to play with the weather so awkwardly, all the more so as the hero's or rather *our* immortality is at stake. Of course Nabokov wrote in *Pale Fire* that immortality and other worlds might depend on a misprint – fountain, mountain – but this is too easy and typographical, for neither immortality nor Spinoza-cherished eternity are due to a game of chance. What if there are no misprints in the world of supercomputers? They're sure to handle letters and commas appropriately, leaving nothing to chance or imagination which, bereft of this mechanical support, will be stranded in this world, in its overpopulated cities where people make their way through crowds without hope and revelations. We can't rely on misprints and watering cans, however efficient they may appear to the Nabs and nabobs.

The Russian lady I answered is staying in Finland. Here is an excerpt from her second letter:

> *Dear Valery Pavlovich, Sir! Thank you so much for your prompt answer and kind words about my book, dated as it is. My special thanks for the excerpts from your prose and poetry – now I have at least a general idea about your literary oeuvre. The sample I've read is too small for serious conclusions but, at a first glance, one cannot help noticing some striking parallels between you and Nabokov, which I do not discuss here to save your time.*
>
> *I had no idea that we share admiration for Nabokov until I saw his books shelved in your abode in the documentary "Le silence des spheres." What we also share is a slight disillusion as regards the merits of his literary output, but this seems to be inevitable whenever one comes closer to anything or anybody, does it not? I've been studying VN since 1996, and my present interest lies in his style – I wish I could prove that one's style remains unchanged when the language changes (de Buffon: Style is the man) – but I'm reluctant to follow the well-trodden paths of stylistics. One of the topics I pursue will be reported at the 15th Bakhtin conference in Stockholm this summer – the time-space interplay in Nabokov's nine Russian and nine English novels.*
>
> *Another topic I'm genuinely interested in is mentioned in your letter – rhythm. I suspect a successful monitoring of this literary parameter might be based on the rules of a music score,*

which are far beyond my grasp. I cannot imagine how people manage to score music at all and how performers manage to remember the score. In one of my conference reports I attempted to use the notion of an interval (diastema) as one of the seven interconnecting elements between style and music discovered by others, but I'm afraid I'm still poorly equipped for such an endeavor. I suspect I could have learnt a lot from your writings on music provided they had been in English. I hope you realize, Maestro, that millions of people write prose and poetry but only a lucky few can write about music at the level of a philosophical fiction, like you do.

By way of concluding, I'd like to inform you that I belong to a tight informal group of people who call themselves the 'Nabs': the same books on the shelves in any part of the world, Nabokov's three languages. All his post-adolescent life VN was homeless, and his late son Dimitry left this world not only homeless but also penniless. The only place directly associated with VN is his parental home in SPb, and every year, in the first week of July, we do our best to come to this crumbling inhospitable building for what we call "Nabokov's Readings". In between these 'family' gatherings, we get together to talk about Nabokov's writings wherever we find possible – Kyoto, Nice, Auckland, etc., often at our own expense. Just in case you might be interested: this year the Nabs celebrate Nabokov's 115th birthday in Paris.

Thank you again for your time.

I didn't answer her at once because I seldom adhere to the rule which might introduce a few wrong notes into my life that has its own score and sounds more like a piece of music than daily routine. At least that's how I feel my life and my feelings must count in the domain that belongs only to myself insofar as I keep everything to myself and do not sexually harass young women and children. And this score of mine excludes any regular exchange of letters, emails and views that human beings relate to so-called social life and its derivatives such as small talk, a game of dominoes in some courtyard or other and so on. In Moscow they used to play chess on the boulevards; the game of dominoes was mostly confined to courtyards where middle-aged men swore like troopers and drank beer before switching to vodka in their communal flats.

I took my time but to tell the truth I'm not sure I was taking – let alone giving – anything because I thought neither about Nabokov nor about the Nabs who went from Kyoto to Auckland as they discussed Van Veen's journeys through space and time, but not through any space-time: Nabokov wouldn't have approved of it. And then I recalled them all of a sudden and I don't even know what prompted me to go back in this direction and not towards my youth which, however, offers a far more appropriate space to my nostalgia-stricken ego. On the other hand Nabokov is part of my youth at the end of which I read *The Gift* in the park adjacent to the house where I spent more than 20 years.

Dear Liuba

Thank you very much for your email.

I'm sorry I didn't answer you by return. But first I was in Germany for a few concerts. And then I began a work in French that I had to finish at all cost before losing interest in it. When I write, I am mute and dumb, as the Russians say.

Anyway now I'm on the point of leaving for Japan. Oddly enough, last night I re-read some parts of Nabokov's late novels – Ada*,* The Transparent Things*. Here are a few remarks related to one page from* Ada*. An Australian told me last year, 'No native of Britain or America would ever have written what Nabokov wrote. Of course it is magnificent, but it's not English.' Nabokov used to say he had his own English, but sometimes this homemade medium jars on one's nerves.*

Let us return to this page from Ada, from the legendary Part Four devoted to Time. (... we shall presently dispose of 'flowing' time, water-clock time, water-closet time). Water-clock time, water-closet time. This mechanical wordplay is one of Nabokov's pets and it gets on my nerves whenever I come across it. 'Space, the impostor, has been already denounced in these notes...' 'Has already been denounced in these notes' is a better order and any native speaker would adopt this order to the detriment of Nabokov's brand of English. 'We are so used to that mythical spectacle, so keen upon liquefying every lap of life, that we end up by being unable to speak of Time...' We end up being unable to... 'By' is a mistake. I'm almost sure one can't use Nabokov's English in this case unless one translates one's thoughts from the French. Of course Proust says that a good writer always writes in a foreign language. Not to this extent, I'm afraid.

Actually the rhythm I spoke about in my previous email has nothing to do with music. It is the organic rhythm of the English language that Nabokov doesn't respect, being wholly taken by his intricate texture I used to admire. Needless to say I learnt a lot from Nabokov – 30 years ago.

Just a few negative remarks about a writer I respect and whose works I still read whenever I'm about to write in English again. After all, Tolstoy used to read Trollope when about to embark upon a new novel.

Besides, when reading Part Four, one realises that Nabokov wasn't well-versed in philosophy and that is quite objectionable. Of course the Russians have the knack of 'discovering the wheel'. But one shouldn't do it too often.

I was in Brussels when you had your meeting in Paris. Next time I'll do my best to attend this homage to Nabokov.

I think my style changes a little when I switch from one language to another. But, after all, I am a multi-faceted individual. Nabokov thought he was always the same. I am not Nabokov.

I wonder how Dimitri managed to squander his father's fortune. I met him once, in St Petersburg. A rather disagreeable character, I thought. Homer said that children were always inferior to their parents. Perhaps he was right.

I would be delighted to meet you. You and your husband are always welcome in my house at Bierges.

Her answer came on the same day and I would be tempted to call it *The Sound and the Fury*, if Nabokov didn't dislike Faulkner to the point of trying to bracket him with local-colour folklore-oriented writers imbued with deep, religious feelings. But Nabokov worshipped Shakespeare. I may say that my opponent's email didn't signify much, although I can't say it signified nothing at all. She wrote that my invitation was more akin to an insult than to a genuine invitation – in the light of what had preceded it. What, I wonder? My appraisal of Dimitri's character and capacities? Apparently he wished to write a book or many books, using a pen name so as not to dishonour his father. Whenever they talk about Haruki Murakami – I am still in Japan – I can't help thinking that Dimitri Nabokov could use this pen name to make a name for himself not in Europe or in the States where he wasn't completely unknown and might be unfavourably compared with Vladimir Vladimirovich, but in a remote Asian country. But why did he die homeless and penniless? Murakami is a well-known writer and he has villas in several countries; my hypothesis doesn't seem to hold water. But I'm not sure Nabokov would have liked Murakami's works and his son may be afraid of his father's verdict, as Kafka would have put it. My hypothesis does hold water. The only snag is that Dimitri died and Murakami is still in the land of the living – or in the land of the dying, as Vladimir Nabokov might have put it.

What else could unleash my correspondent's unsound fury? It is true that I don't pull any punches when analysing Nabokov's deficiencies, if any, but I don't think I deserve the treatment inflicted on my poor self by this *furie* who says that, whatever I've done so far, deserves no attention unless the book entitled *The Biography* supplies a lot of evidence to the contrary. Alas, this book speaks mainly of Kierkegaard and I remain even more obscure than Nabokov – before *Lolita*'s spectacular explosion, as one of his biographers put it.

At the end of her email, my correspondent says she no longer lives with her two husbands, for Nabokov is dearer to her than anybody. (I suppose she's got no children.) In a way Nabokov is her third husband and I seem to understand this point of view, being married to at least five dead women: Helen of Troy, Cleopatra, Laura, Marlene Dietrich and Audrey Hepburn. It is much easier to marry a dead woman. You don't have to follow hard on her heels; nor do you need to send her poems in three languages. She comes and sits down by your side, and everything happens, everything, everything. Yet nothing moves, nothing sounds like a Haydn quartet.

8

You receive letters, parcels, and in some of them you find bombs, poison and other unpleasant substances which can either destroy you completely or wound you psychologically. These wounds go straight to your unconscious and settle in it, determined to play havoc with your life at the earliest

opportunity. And soon you notice a lot of opportunities which are meant for your unconscious and not for you and your virtual success, triumph and eternity. They dig into your unconscious and find your childhood and the poisons you swallowed in your youth – along with a number of bombs that exploded under your feet and even in your stomach: sometimes you swallow a bomb without knowing it. Your unconscious has got a wonderful memory on which it can rely whenever it feels like annoying you and spoiling your evening and appetite. You read in a newspaper, 'The oil spill has spoilt the whole beautiful coastline,' and you compare your evening or afternoon to this coastline spoilt by your unconscious which is as black as the oil they talk about in Brittany whenever their beaches grow black overnight.

Last night I played in Matsumoto and my consciousness was astonished to find that some people recalled my previous recital and also the one I gave almost 20 years ago. As for *my* memory, I recalled the castle I had seen on those occasions and I paid it another visit, resolved to refresh my memory and bring it up to speed with the speed of time.

In my backstage room I found a basket of flowers and the organiser explained that the basket had been deposited at the hall by a French couple whose conjugal happiness was somehow linked to Matsumoto. 'I'm sure I don't know these people,' I said.

'They don't know you either,' said the organiser.

'Why did they offer me these flowers?'

'Nothing, nothing, nothing.'

Of course he didn't say 'nothing'; he just shrugged his shoulders, which is tantamount to saying 'nothing' or saying nothing at all. Actually he didn't say anything and even after this short exchange of views on the subject of presents he didn't speak for some time as if realising that no other subject was worthy of our attention. He probably didn't think about our short dialogue in terms of subjects, matters and themes, but I was so surprised I had to devote at least half-an-hour to this enigma which, in my opinion, might have shed light on parcels, anonymity, strangers and other mysteries of our otherworldly existence. These flowers seemed to have originated in another world and I recalled Nabokov's watering can that might have come in handy, had I been staying in Matsumoto for a week.

After the recital I met these people backstage and even talked to them for a few minutes, looking almost exclusively at the Japanese lady who had married a young Frenchman. They both live in Matsumoto now and I thought about their meals and walks as I listened to this lady's soft, inimitable voice which matched perfectly her gestures and the ever-changing expression of her face. I still don't know what is the source of her self – her manners or voice. 'Why?' I asked looking at the flowers.

'We thought it would make you happy, if only for a few moments.'

'You don't know me. You've never heard me, I suppose.'

'No.'

'I'm embarrassed. I don't know what to say.'

‘It is as natural as your recital.’

A basket of flowers in your room.
Where do they come from?
Non-local connections.

The same people left a candle for me at the hotel, a candle made of honey. I wish I could be their neighbour for a year at least, having dinners with them, drinking red and white Burgundy. I’m not their son and not even their cousin or nephew, but I feel I might live with them to find out what the human condition means and how one human being can communicate with another. Up to now, however, the words ‘human condition’ and ‘human communication’ have made me laugh hysterically because one is liable to go into hysterics upon hearing all this talk about our inability to communicate with our neighbours, elders and betters and other human beings. And *la condition humaine* makes me double up with laughter to such an extent I don’t know if I’ll ever be able to walk like a human and not like an animal – like my cat. It’s easier to crawl on all fours when you hear such nonsense, otherwise you’re likely to suffer from rheumatism till doomsday – the one they talked about two years ago in relation to the Mexican calendar.

During the Japanese tour I had another experience of this kind, but this time I didn’t meet the woman who had left an envelope in my backstage room. In the envelope I found a handkerchief – I found many handkerchiefs, and yet I’m no Cassio – and also 11 thousand yen. What does *that* mean, I wonder? I wonder a lot nowadays and I’m reassured by my wanderings because they concern our world, our vale of tears: the dying are curious to find out what awaits them *beyond* the border, as it were. And I’m still on this side of the universe, of the coin or whatever you talk about when taking sides, looking at sides, their brightness and gloominess.

This is supposedly another non-local connection which can be described more or less accurately by the idiom ‘out of the blue’. You can attribute any colour to this connection and I’m tempted to enlarge upon brownish and yellowish tints as I continue to speak about the yen I found in that proverbial envelope. You find a few banknotes and create a proverb such as, ‘If you like money, open envelopes.’ Actually I was about to throw this envelope away – I had already got the handkerchief – but my manager opened it and found the yen I’m turning into a proverb to account for their presence. Perhaps that lady was longing for another book of mine and couldn’t wait for its long-postponed appearance on the market. So she put this money into the envelope, hoping I might create a few proverbs for the sake of humanity that always needs money and looks for the ways to get it.

Are you an artist? You’ll always find some money in your backstage room.

You should play the piano, otherwise you won’t find anything.

Instead of your room, have a backstage room.

Look for money everywhere, even backstage.

Don’t look for money on the stage.

Jot your name down on the back of an envelope, if you love money.

Look for your tennis racket at the back of the cupboard, if you love money.

It’s been at the back of your mind. Now it’s by your side.

You have no idea when the past can come to you and open its arms or whatever it can open to show you a few aspects of your youth when you weren’t as happy as you may think because no one has ever been happy, if we believe Goethe and other people whose life-long happiness is beyond a shadow of a doubt. I was talking to the organiser of the concert I gave in Matsumoto, not far from the castle, as if the medieval warriors could hear anything in their suits of armour. We were talking about those warriors and the wars which go on in spite of our manifestos, and suddenly he asked me if I had ever known a woman whose name was Temptalueva. I said, ‘Of course, I’ve known her for many years. We studied together at the Moscow Conservatoire.’

Apparently Temptalueva came to Matsumoto five years ago to play a recital. Two years afterwards, she was back because she had asked the organiser to invite her husband as well, saying, ‘My husband likes hot springs.’ She was back and her husband stood by her side as if the organiser could deprive him of a few pleasures he was entitled to, being his wife’s lawful sex therapist. But, frankly speaking, she needed no protection and was moreover unlikely to succumb to any temptation: she adored her husband. If she did have any problems with sex, they concerned her tendency to go over the top.

I recall our meetings at the Conservatoire and elsewhere; she was so beautiful that all the male students wished to marry her, although there were some homosexuals among those students I would recollect if shown a few photographs. They were probably bisexual, but even if I managed to find them in my memory, I wouldn’t know what happened to many of them after my final departure from the Soviet Union in 1974. They might have gone to Holland and married two or three young men. Banish a woman from your life and invite a young man, as the saying goes, although I’m not sure it really goes, for there’s no such saying within my memory and entourage; at least I’m not aware of its existence. And whatever I’m not aware of, doesn’t exist, says Berkeley or someone else. But Berkeley adds that such a saying may exist in the mind of God. And I think that everything exists in the mind of God: absurdities, non-events, non-facts, non-information and even non, non, non.

In the early Nineties, I met Temptalueva at Charles de Gaulle airport and immediately looked at her legs as if I could spend a few hours with her in some bed or other. Sometimes you just look at women’s legs and arms without hoping for anything, however small, insignificant and ridiculous. You look at them and for once you don’t say anything to yourself because there’s nothing apart from a few home truths you’re not very keen on, for they remind you of your age and a few details that everyone skips; for once, you’re not alone in the world. But no one forbids you to look at legs and backs, and I’m no exception to this rule: I neither forbid myself to stare at whatever arouses my desire nor deprive my organs of such a pleasure.

She said, ‘My mother wanted me to marry you. Do you remember my mother?’

‘I do, but I don’t remember our marriage.’

‘I wonder why it fell through.’

‘Did you really love me?’

‘I don’t know. I don’t love anyone now. I don’t remember what it is.’

‘What?’

‘Love.’

‘I looked at you all the time. Everybody did.’

‘I’m no longer young.’

‘Yeats loved Maud Gonne all his life.’

Of course I didn’t utter the last sentence: I wasn’t careless enough to spoil that *temps retrouvé* by any verse, however sublime. And when I look at Maud Gonne’s last photograph, I’m tempted to compose a parody on Yeats’ heroic determination:

You’re ugly now, but I’m still in love with you.
Others may think you’re ugly. I know you’re beautiful,
Whatever teenagers think and say.
You’re as gorgeous as the woman I knew
Forty years ago. You burnt Troy, Moscow and many
Other cities. You also burnt the sun and the moon.

In my last hotel – I’m staying at Narita Airport – there are only two channels devoted to adult movies and you have no control over them: you can neither stop the projection nor fast-forward it. You have no alternative but to attend interminable talks in the course of which you don’t see anything except smiles and fingers that either point at something or receive a quantity of sperm. Young women – they’re Lolitas in their own right – look at a mature man who demonstrates his capacities without so much as touching their bodies. This ritual may last for half-an-hour and as you watch the Lolitas’ smiles and listen to their giggles you realise that in Japanese porn movies psychology takes precedence over the Kama Sutra. What are you doing, dear film directors? Do you think we are happy with our lot? Show us life instead of teaching middle-aged men how to seduce young girls who don’t need old men’s eagle minds unless these old men buy them everything, not only Guerlain perfumes.

Two hours ago I drank three small bottles of sake in my manager’s company and now I’m in a dilemma about how to spend the rest of the night. I may go down and buy two bottles of sake which are bound to put me to sleep even if my self decides to suffer from insomnia. But why not have another go at the problem of time? (An alternative to the sake.) How to spend the rest of the night is a problem related to time and I’m sure I would reach a decision if I made another effort, trying to isolate time and its self from other phenomena that always get in the way, whatever you think about.

Newspapers remind you that last night roadworks caused traffic jams throughout the city centre, but time isn't involved in these roadworks or any other work and pastime. Even an alarm clock stakes its claim as it wakes you up in the middle of your midsummer night's dream and once again you miss an opportunity to recall what love is about.

When you watch a porn movie, you feel time acutely on account of many flaws that you can hardly tolerate, especially if you have no control over what you're watching in anticipation of a stark naked body or a whimsical posture. Any striptease is a measure of time, but habitually words spoil the show if someone declares, 'It's not so much the experience itself as the anticipation that is enjoyable.' Not at all. Nothing, nothing, nothing: every stage counts – not only the stage where the show takes place – and so many moments stop as you witness your favourite body unveil itself under your very eyes that you lose time, Faust and even Mephistopheles who forgets to whisk you off to the Inferno. But we shouldn't confuse a live striptease with a porn movie: they're quite different as far as time is concerned.

Time flows organically when you sit in a nightclub where a number of women throw their seven veils either in the air or towards the members of the club. Never does time flow so organically, naturally and obediently, as if Bergson's duration could really coincide with utilitarian time indicated by alarm clocks and wristwatches. But if you happen to watch a porn movie, you get angry and impatient whenever the same movement is repeated over and over again to no avail: you just don't *feel* anything. And if that bloody cameraman shows you part of your favourite woman's body, he omits to show you other parts; in other words, you get stuck in a no-space's-land.

And what about time? You can't fast-forward it; nor can you stop it altogether, losing thereby to Faust. He could stop everything and everybody down to Mephistopheles who failed to snatch him from an angel's grasp. For the first time you feel the supremacy of time that makes you watch clumsy lovemaking for half-an-hour, an hour; it depends on the film maker's inspiration. But those makers are never inspired: they're neither involved in the process themselves – at least not in front of the cameras – nor do they get enough money for their hard work. They don't work at all, saying to their dolls and machines, alias their actors, their male actor, 'You'll have sex with Natasha for an hour. I'll have a cup of coffee. Enjoy yourselves! Enjoy your sex! Do what you wish, but don't forget to *enjoy* it.' They do not, alas; you can see and hear it. And their lassitude extends your time that reaches breaking point. Your time breaks and you fall asleep, for want of anything better. Isn't it the best remedy for insomnia? A dainty dish to set before a king? Shouldn't every insomniac break time, not always into pieces? We heard the sound of breaking time – a happy ending of *A la recherché du temps perdu*.

You lose this private channel or whatever it is called: you have to pay for it and perhaps it's called 'pay channel' or 'depravity channel' or 'prison channel'. Anyway, you can't watch it any more because you tampered with the TV set, hoping to watch the end of a football match, but you lost everything as a result of your search: football matches, naked bodies, naked lunches and dinners. What is left doesn't really inspire you, although you do your best to get inspired, otherwise your life isn't

worth living: you have to write something every second. What did you write about last second? You don't have to write *about* anything: you just write whatever comes into your head and you'll never be damned like Faust because he *lived* his adventures, whereas you *write them down*.

What is not is always there or everywhere, but you no longer listen to Krishna who folds our space like a napkin and says, 'You shoot an arrow, but this arrows does not fly if you catch it and hold it firmly. I am space and also time. If you watch a porn movie, I take hold of the body you watch and cherish it. And I do not let it strip its clothes off because I want you to suppress your desires. You look at this body and realise it will never strip its clothes off because you should not see its nakedness. If you see its nakedness, you are lost, and I do not want to lose you. I can lose many of your cousins, but you should remain with me because I love you. You and your brothers are my chosen people and I will do whatever I can to prolong your lives beyond murders and births, beyond yourselves and destiny. You are immortal and nothing counts in the world except this knowledge and your awareness of the good luck you have always had in spite of your worries. Your setbacks are nothing, nothing, nothing. You are prosperous and in a class of your own, even if this class is not as unique as all that: all beings are immortal, as immortal as I am.'

You don't listen to him, for you can't hear him and your angst at the same time, in the same space. So you sacrifice Krishna for the sake of your angst and it talks to you about something that might happen in the future and even in the past. You're likely to discover another truth about your childhood, youth and mature years, for time hides a lot of secrets in its folds. You unfold time, find another source of suffering and realise that suffering is endless, whatever the quantity of pills you swallow day in day out. But the Buddha was wrong: not everyone suffers in this world, for there are pace-setters everywhere and we should follow them because there's only one game in the world: follow-my-leader. I follow myself and I don't lead anywhere; that is the problem I'm facing whenever I have to face something.

A 19-year-old student comes to her professor and says, 'Let's start a company,' and now her company is worth more than $9 billion. And I write whatever comes into my head instead of saying to professors, students and bankers, 'Let's start a company,' 'Let's start two or three companies.' It's better to start three companies at the same time, for one of them is bound to succeed, although the odds against you winning such a competition – in the domain of business – are enormous. I didn't say anything of the kind either at the age of 19 or two months ago when I was in a buoyant mood and could say anything to anybody. Now I can't say anything, not even to myself; and yet I'm patient and can bear with myself for a long time, perhaps for eternity.

I am at Narita Airport, in a lounge I don't know, and I wait for my flight which has been delayed several times as if Vienna had suddenly disappeared from maps and computers. I'm supposed to fly to Brussels via Vienna and they're reluctant to announce that Vienna doesn't exist any more, which is the worst piece of news in years. They're prepared to convey our bodies to any European

capital. And what does it matter where your body is, provided your soul returns to the fold and sleeps until further notice, until another world conflagration.

I am in the star alliance lounge and I think about the people who are waiting at the gate in the hope that sooner or later they'll fly away instead of standing there, doing nothing, waiting for another announcement. I'm also waiting for this flight, my own flight, as I read newspapers and magazines, but other people start companies, sell their companies and fly first class to other continents that open their arms upon seeing them in the sky, below the moon. And if the continents have no arms, a few engineers produce a quantity of arms and go so far as to open them. Our pace-setters are happy as usual and, gaining further momentum, they set other paces and places where one can join them, provided one sells one's company for at least $4 billion. If the company in question is sold for $2 billion, no club will welcome one either with open arms or other arms.

Space continues to grow and time shrinks – probably because one's company's profits have shrunk from £5.5 million to £1.25 million. (Non-local connections.) 'I'm going to close my eyes, and when I open them I want to see skyscrapers,' shouts a pace-setter or a peace-maker or whoever is within shouting distance. Human space grows upwards and time continues to shrink because you don't keep your eyes shut for days and years. If you open them a few years later, you'll be regarded as a dead man and even compared to the one in Jim Jarmush's movie. You open them eight hours later, after having your beauty sleep, and see skyscrapers all around and mostly overhead.

'We take you to Orlando, where an innovative residential and medical complex is rising amid Florida's sprawl, and to Lagos, which is forging a model for Africa's urban future.' Please, don't take me anywhere. And if you do wish to take me somewhere, take me to Brussels where skyscrapers are few and far between. I adore Japan, but I don't wish to spend eternity at Narita Airport which doesn't offer me anything except a few glasses of beer that I drink because it is drinkable. But the wines I see on a table where two hours ago I found some tomato juice are undrinkable. I don't drink them; I don't even look at them any more.

My flight has been cancelled. I'm stranded in space and time, and I don't know whether it's a sort of space-time or time-space; or just pace or ace. Certainly not ace, judging from how I'm treated under this government, this sun and that group of people who are in charge of other people, other circumstances. Santa Monica says it has already seen a 67% increase in walking and biking across the city, but there'll be no 68% increase because I've no intention of going to Santa Monica either on foot or otherwise. But if they ask me to undergo reconstructive surgery to rebuild my face, I'll say 'yes' because I want them to reconstruct my face, legs, shoulders and destiny. And also my liver.

Time is not as pliable as Dali's watches and you won't achieve anything if you order a watch like that, hoping your time will obey your whims that never stay on a flat surface. They jump up and down, climb quickly to a height of 30,000 feet and fall down as if eager to resume their places in everyday life. Time is none of your concern unless it understands the ins and outs of how you live and what you're striving for; otherwise you may discard it forever. You'd better *communicate* with time

because it doesn't have a sixth sense and consequently has no inkling of your inclinations. You may pray to it, for time is an idol and you may pray to any idol on condition that Moses doesn't hear you. You shouldn't ask it to stop the sun – the feat it accomplished once with the help of God: you need just the opposite, as a matter of fact. You'd rather see the sun turn round the Earth in no time at all, striking one day out of the calendar.

Two days, three days.

Strike out, strike out, strike out.

Strike a match.

Easy.

Sun.

ON THE BOOK ENTITLED *LAST LOVE, LOVE LOST*

In English Nabokov wrote a number of forewords designed to shed light on his Russian books, on their contents and surroundings. For *Lolita* he wrote an afterword entitled *On the Book Entitled* Lolita. In this book of mine there are a few allusions to Nabokov which testify to my former infatuation with his style. And the title of this afterword is another allusion – a straightforward one, this time.

As I seem to be in my second youth, I often think about the authors I have not read for many years: Nabokov, Borges, Beckett. And I realise that, in the course of these years, only Beckett has lost none of his lustre or rather *anti*-lustre. (And Proust, and Musil, and Kafka.) Both Nabokov and Borges continue to recede into distance as if to prove that old age cannot be compared to youth and childhood – for all our idioms.

I hit upon the idea of writing about my lost and found loves last year, but what really triggered off my inspiration – Nabokov always put great emphasis on this phenomenon – was an email I received from Finland. I enlarged upon it in the book and so it is pointless to go back to the first stage of my epistolary relationship with a scholar who has devoted no less than 18 years to Nabokov's literary output.

A fortnight ago I sent her the present book announced by the following text:

> *Dear L.,*
> *I hope you're well. I feel I'm duty bound to send you my latest work because I quoted your emails in it. Too all appearances it is just another insult, but it is not. In my opinion, I'm paying homage to Nabokov. I won't give you any clue – after all, you're a Nab and certainly know your idol's works better than I do. But I can assure you that even the word 'key' I use at some point is inspired by Vladimir Vladimirovich. And the way I enlarge upon time is also homage to him, although my treatment of this convoluted subject is quite different.*
> *I would be delighted if you could read the whole thing. But I'm quite aware that you have no time to spare for my inspiration. Anyway, the mere existence of this work may mean something to you.*
> *Please don't be angry with me; I learnt a lot from Nabokov. I don't think I would have written anything in English, but for his 'American metamorphosis', as he put it in his French interview.*
> *Kindest regards*

A few days later I got a reply that seems to have triggered off this afterword as well: I have never written afterwords before. I admire those who are ready to sacrifice their lives for the sake of the artists they worship. I am a fanatic myself, but as a rule I do not forget my manners, even when criticising this day and age, its heroes and their doings. The lady I am writing about must have lost her manners a long time ago so that now one may even detect a few nuances of madness in her conduct.

Indeed her email is rude and vulgar, and I would rather put this down to her unbalanced mind than to the laxity on the part of her parents. She seems to belong to the group of individuals who are in the habit of going to moral extremes: either they are courteous to a fault or unbearably rude. I have no idea how this lady behaves with her colleagues and other Nabs, but she seems to stop at nothing to get her revenge, even if the imaginary insult does not concern her personally.

She keeps slinging mud at me, outraged by my treatment of her idol. Of course she does her best to make me realise that my English is so poor I cannot use it as a creative tool. Besides, my style and subject matter are beneath any scholar's contempt; and any reader's contempt, for that matter. I wonder why she does not suggest I should burn the whole thing and throw its ashes into a rubbish bin. Perhaps she thinks I am not gifted enough to imitate Nabokov – even in this matter. At some point he wished to dispose of *Lolita*'s manuscript; luckily for him and all of us, his wife put her foot down and prevented this literary disaster. No one is likely to prevent me from erasing this book from my files; that is why I shall not attempt to do it.

She points out two errors and her indignation reveals her unawareness of some intricate aspects of English grammar. She goes so far as to accuse me of plagiarism. The text she chooses for yet another outburst of her anger is confined to one sentence only: 'Time is your breath, your pulse and something that takes place in between two beats of whatever beats in your presence and probably in your absence.' Sure enough, this is a parody on a rather elaborate paragraph in *Ada*. Nabokov calls this something the 'Tender Interval'. I wonder why he thinks it is tender. Can't this interval be rough, horrible, cruel? Be that as it may, I don't think I am entitled only to self-parody. After all, now and then Nabokov himself makes use of this stylistic feature. 'My amiable little imitations of *Madame Bovary*, which good readers will not fail to distinguish,' he writes in the foreword to *King, Queen, Knave*, 'represent a deliberate tribute to Flaubert.'

In the email I sent to the Russian lady I say I am paying homage to Nabokov. Let it be 'a deliberate tribute' – I do not mind. But I am surprised to find that a scholar is unable to distinguish plagiarists from stylists. At the end of her missive, my unfair lady says that she will not mention my name in her new book devoted to bilingual (and trilingual) writers. 'That is what one gets when one dares attack a myth,' she adds.

Let me attack this myth once again – for the last time. Here is a selection of Nabokov's remarks which need no comment. I suppose one can quote him without being invited to a beheading.

> *The eccentric Jew Weinstock, the pacifist woman doctor Marianna Nikolaevna, and the classless narrator himself are representatives of the many-faceted Russian intelligentsia. These tips should make things a little easier for the kind of reader who (like myself) is wary of novels that deal with spectral characters in unfamiliar surroundings, such as translations from the Magyar or the Chinese.*
>
> *The Eye*

I can only explain God's popularity by an atheist's panic.
Strong Opinions

Unfortunately I cannot resist the urge to comment on this statement: 'Nowadays, when Freudism is discredited –' This was written in 1970. (The foreword to *Glory*.) I am not a big fan of Freud, but I must admit that even in 2014 Freudism is far from being discredited. And in the Seventies he was at the very pick of its popularity due to Jack Lacan's labours and authority. He was a staunch defender of Freud's theories and did all he could to freshen them up.

I often share Nabokov's literary likes and dislikes but his admiration for Rob Grillet is all the more questionable since he denigrates Celine – not only on account of his ferocious anti-Semitism. On the other hand, I might agree with his assessment of Borges: 'At first, Véra and I were delighted by reading him. We felt we were on a portico, but we have learnt there was no house.' Borges is another lost love of mine; yet I do find him and Nabokov once in a while, here and there. A wave of nostalgia, I suppose. Anyway, they are wonderful writers and no future author will ever hold a candle to them. And today we do not even own candles.

I disagree with Nabokov's disparaging remark directed against Henry James' short stories – 'miserable stuff, a complete fake' – which, in my opinion, are only rivalled by their Chekov's and Kafka's counterparts. In this instance I agree with Borges: '...the sad, labyrinthine Henry James'. And I would not pick up a hammer to take 'a good crack at Balzac and Mann', although they are not among my favourite writers. Nor do I hate Dostoevsky.

Nabokov said once that both the paucity of dialogues and their profusion are prejudicial to books. He even touched upon a close bond between such books and his garbage can. And what about Proust and Joyce? Didn't they often go to these extremes? It appears that, late in the day, he did manage to get through *Finnegans Wake*.

For all my disagreements with the Russian scholar, I admire her sincerely. I betray my idols; she fights tooth and nail to protect Nabokov from good-natured tributes, let alone bad-natured ones. The end justifies the means. Don't I sound violent and offensive when talking about contemporary literature? Today, very few people defend what may and must be called *real art*. The unreality of our works is sinister; I hope that no one will read them in the next century. But Proust, Kafka, Musil, Nabokov, Borges and Beckett will survive, defying the second law of thermodynamics.

THE WOOD

> *Soon after Johnson's return to the metropolis, both the asthma and dropsy became more violent and distressful. He had for some time kept a journal in Latin of the state of his illness, and the remedies which he used, under the title of* Ægri Ephemeris*, which he began on the 6th of July, but continued it no longer than the 8th of November; finding, I suppose, that it was a mournful and unavailing register.*
>
> James Boswell, *Life of Johnson*

To beguile time look like time.

No longer do I have anything in my head except the fact I have nothing inside it; and yet there are a great many things and thoughts *outside* it and my modest abode: the world goes on thinking and moving towards either the stars hanging overhead or the ones who walk in our midst or rather around our TV and computer screens. According to this data – I also see all sorts of stars – I am not in the grave yet and even my feet, both of them, are still on the surface of the Earth, judging from the *number* of stars I see: if one of your feet is in the grave, you are allowed to see only a limited number of stars – because of your posture and the angle of vision it offers you. Besides, a portion of the Earth might get in the way too, blocking out this or that nook or cranny you would admire, but for your ridiculous, half-corpse-like posture. The same goes for me or rather my thoughts: I can no longer contemplate the entire beauty of human mentality and its creative, active inside-out life. But I read about Samuel Johnson, saying to myself it is a pity I never talked to him, for all my numerous former lives and incarnations.

To some extent, Johnson was Boswell's prosthesis without which the latter could hardly walk – at least within the bounds of his outstanding masterpiece. How and in what direction could I walk with the crutches I quoted at the beginning of the book which might have been entitled *Crutches*? Well, the title *Prosthesis* has more in common with prosperity, even though the link is whimsical, not to say fragile in the extreme. But this word sounds more or less like 'process' and in English the latter has no gloomy overtones imparted to any process by Kafka's *The Trial*, provided you read it in German. Be that as it may, I am not likely to get anywhere if I pay too much attention to the excerpt quoted above – except to my grave, I suppose. At least I might fall ill, catch or get dropsy and asthma and begin to describe them in detail every morning, before or after breakfast. Of course with the passing of time

they would become more and more violent and, being a great admirer of Gandhi and Tolstoy, I abhor violence, especially if it concerns my body and state of mind. So I had better not dwell too much upon this mournful excerpt, which would be all the more incongruous since I do not write in Latin. An unavailing register indeed.

A few days ago I went to St Petersburg after putting into my suitcase the book I quoted above, which in no way prevents me from quoting it below or even far below – at the end of this book, for instance, when my aches reach fever pitch, sticking out like a sore thumb. I am back in my study and the book is on the nearest chair next to an issue of *Newsweek* that predicts the end of our species or rather of our intelligence. In my opinion, this intelligence of ours has been at the end of its tether for quite a long time; but never mind, never mind, as optimists say when finishing a half-full bottle. Stephen Hawking said last year that artificial intelligence could end the human race and he was probably right: the human race has always been at its end; and also at its very beginning. We had better confuse beginnings with ends in order to live eternally like Shakespeare's characters, for all their misfortunes and insufferable suffering. Alternative technology may exist through our design but it could soon design us out of existence, out of our loves, hopes and noble gestures. Stalin's followers believe they are fighting for a noble cause and we do our best to persuade them their cause is ignoble. Why not get rid of all this rigmarole once and for all? Our computers are Alan Turing's followers and they may believe they have been fighting for a noble cause ever since his death.

Are you conscious? Are you unconscious? I put the *Newsweek* down and pick up *Life of Johnson*: after all, I am a bookkeeper, a zookeeper; and if I had a brother, I would be his keeper too. Samuel Johnson thinks that death is 'kind Nature's signal for retreat'; and yet he knew nothing about our machines, Stephen Hawking and Alan Turing. Our machines say to us, 'Beep, beep, beep, beep,' and we push a few buttons to find out what they mean by their ostentatious beeping. 'What's the meaning of your beep?' we ask them, pushing yet another button.

'Kind Nature's signal for retreat,' they answer, producing two beeps.

'What do you mean by "retreat"?'

'Death.'

'Why should I die?'

'The entire content of a human brain, every dusting of brainfluff and binload of thought-spam, can be uploaded on to a separate hard drive.'

'But you're not Nature, are you?'

'I am as natural as any flower. Once upon a time, God created me out of nothing.'

Of course you cannot tolerate this kind of unkind talk in the midst of which machines and humans meet on an equal footing; and yet machines have no feet, as far as I know, and consequently no one can say that such and such machine has one foot in the grave. Of course that does not mean our machines are immortal because they are bound to die, however skilful our technicians are and whatever instruments they use when dealing with the problems related to machines. Actually, to

murder a machine – and you might and should have this urge from time to time – you should murder first these technicians who are unable to swallow their pride and so continue to repair broken machines and even make new ones, either of the same type or altogether different. And you cannot persuade them not to spend too much time on these representatives of what some call ‘artificial intelligence’, paying instead more attention to their human wives and children. No way – they are all Alan Turings except that they are not interested in human bodies at all, be they of male or female origin. (These bodies.) They are solely preoccupied by artificial, electricity-nourished brains and we should kill them in order to save our race and naturalness.

We kill them outright and begin to murder their machines that might resist our onslaughts for some time, being protected from knives and bullets by metals and general insensitivity. We murder them in stages so as not to bungle the whole business, getting killed instead of killing and saving humankind from robots and the morons who design and build them. We dig a grave and unscrew this or that part of the machine that we are determined to murder in spite of its so-called usefulness and symbolism: it is yet another sign of the technological progress we are involved in either willy-nilly or willy-willy. We detach this part and put it into the grave, saying, ‘This machine has one part in the grave already.’ The point is any human has two legs unless she is a one-legged woman; whereas our machines own many parts, outstripping in this respect the insect called ‘forty-legged creature’ – at least in Russian. I, for one, have never taken the trouble to count these miniscule legs, but I suppose any robot has more legs or parts and therefore it is not easy to bury all of them to prove that machines die alongside humans and therefore are not immortal gods.

One may ask why we cannot bury the entire machine, even if (to do so logically and with utter impunity) we should alter the saying to make it fit the deed. But, after all, the saying ‘he has one foot in the grave’ is not immortal either, assuming it is a saying and not just an expression of sorts, so that we are allowed to say, ‘He has his entire body in the grave,’ which is even closer to Absolute Truth, given that the number of the dead is certainly superior to that of the dying. All we have to do is dig a bigger grave and fling the machine in it – without further ado, as it were, for technological burials require neither requiems nor religious services: machines do not believe in God unless we store God’s name and address on a microchip and implant it in our computers’ bodies. And, according to some specialists, we had better not do that, otherwise a detached observer – a god of sorts – might say to someone, ‘There’s a clear family resemblance between machines and humans.’

Of course we are partly machines and that is why we build them, relying on their technical and even psychological know-how. Don’t they provide our psyches with a generous quantity of solace? In a moment of distress? The point is machines are unable to embody a damsel in distress or even a melancholy young man, let alone Samuel Johnson, renowned for his melancholy and sloth. Yet they are surely acquainted with the stresses and strains of the job; and also with stress-related illnesses, according to some studies. And they are often lazy, needless to say, and we need no studies, no urine tests, to realise they break down only to have what humans call a ‘coffee break’ – despite their allergy

to coffee. Indeed a cup of coffee might wound and even kill them in no time at all, and I wonder why we do not knock over all our cups and cover *their* keyboards with *our* cups' contents. One cup of coffee is mighty enough to put all those parts and feet in one grave, even if there are no graves in the neighbourhood of our offices. But we are too humane and do not act on the spur of the moment, waiting for our moral standards to catch up with the situations we get involved in. Of course there is a way out of the situation in question – of the situation related to the demise of such and such a computer or machine or automaton. The humane way of dealing with a suffering animal is to kill it quickly and consequently we might spill a *tiny* quantity of coffee on the keyboard that is accustomed to our fingers and thoughts. Your computer is wounded – not even fatally, come to think of it – and you give it a few looks of commiseration, saying to yourself, 'The humane way of dealing with a suffering robot is to kill it quickly.'

Actually we do not have to bother about our affinities with machines and suchlike – in the light of what a recent study of our habits and genes reveals to those who buy the *Daily Mail* every Saturday. Apparently humans daydream every day and spend just under two hours on average doing so, thereby putting barriers up to stop machines from getting too close to human mentality, behaviour and psychology. Indeed no machine is addicted to daydreaming because a machine need not fantasise about being super rich or moving to a new home, let alone to a foreign country. But many observers believe that our machines' incapacity to daydream is an ill omen: unlike humans, they are *not* constantly pressed for time. And time is not only money: it is a guarantee of commercial and psychological success or, in other words, of the final triumph of machines over humans. But I couldn't care less. I've bigger fish to fry.

You are allowed to read and you read a lot of nonsense and sense, and both make a lot of sense so you have no idea what to do with all these nons and senses and nonces and nunces.

I have no idea why and what I am writing, and I am certainly what they call a 'graphomaniac', assuming they do call this habit of mine anything at all; unless they call it into question. They do not because they probably do not exist, but I do exist because I write and think I should not write or indeed do anything either today or tomorrow. The only purpose of my life may be defined as a search for harmony, and I know that Shakespeare embarked upon the same search a few centuries ago, relying on humans, their states of minds, their bad and good whims, on the inherent boredom that governs humankind and its members. Dante achieved the same harmony with the help of St Thomas and God Himself Who provided the basis upon which the *Comedy* or rather its Tower of Babel was built once and for all. I have no humans within my reach, with the exception of myself, provided I am entitled to this title about which either Chekhov or Gorky said one century ago, 'Man, this sounds proud.'

Anyway, to cut a long story short and my Tower of Babel down to size, I skip Dante's *Hell* where no graphomaniac traces can be found: scholastic philosophy does not allow us to handle our free will too freely, playing tricks on logic and determinism. Shakespeare, on the other hand, displays his graphomanic tendency rather often because boredom is important, according to Auden who labours the point in his lecture on *Much Ado About Nothing*: 'In any first-class work of art, you can find passages that in themselves are extremely boring, but try to cut them out, as they are in an abridged edition, and you lose the life of the work. Don't think that art that is alive can remain on the same level of interest throughout – and the same is true of life.'

My life is alive on account of boredom and in the light of it, as Lord Byron and Pushkin might have said; and they probably did, although I have no wish to consult their works to find out if they speak about boredom either directly or in a roundabout way – by being partly boring. Actually, I disagree with Auden on this point and many other points: Shakespeare is boring only if you take into consideration the overall structures of his works, their plots, subplots, and so on. What counts is his quantum poetry, his non-local connections that sound like local ones, being brothers and sisters; and distant cousins. You should read him line by line, day by day or rather minute by minute in the light of what he writes and does not mean: there is no meaning, there are no ideas in his works from which you cannot extract a truth, however minuscule and non-absolute. 'Except my life, except my life, except my life,' as Hamlet puts it; except our life in general and the harmony I touched upon some time ago. Shakespeare is keenly alive to the fact that there is nothing beyond this minute or instant and consequently we do not even have to stop it; it stops by itself and remains where it is almost automatically, perhaps by virtue of what they call 'determinism' or 'predestination'. And then you realise that the moment you are living through and looking at is not the same; its looks are slightly different from what you grew accustomed to in the course of the previous moment or instant. There are so many ors and synonyms around you that you do not know what to choose and so choose nothing at all, letting everything stay on the same page, within the same field of vision. And then you go to another field and call it 'Elysian' – out of sheer or unsheer boredom; or out of '*dom*' which means either 'cathedral' or 'house'. All this hangs on the language you are speaking in the course of this particular moment; or on your mood that is apt to leave an imprint on any language.

Suppose I quote an excerpt from Dante's *Purgatory* the author of which should be named, whenever one feels like saying something about it: there are many other purgatories in the world; that of Goff, for instance. Well, I am about to quote it in the famous verse (Laurence Binyon's) translation which is even further from Dante's Absolute Truth than any other translation: as usual, rhymes are to blame, as Nabokov might have put it. (He put so many things in the domain of literature I do not know where to put them all.) Yet it is pointless to ask what truth is and with what one can eat it, as the Russians put it: even the original is not faithful to the original. It is high time I asked myself: 'Am I faithful to myself'?

She should have died hereafter:
There would have been a time for such a word. –
To-morrow, and to-morrow, and to-morrow,
Creeps in this petty pace from day to day,
To the last syllable of recorded time

You quote Shakespeare instead of Dante as if they were interchangeable, as if you could swap Dante's time for that you come across in Shakespeare's plays where you may, if need be, switch to another time altogether. Shakespeare's time depends on human moods and visions, and Lady Macbeth moves in another time where tomorrows are yesterdays. Actually, they are no tomorrows at all and what Macbeth tries to legalise is another time within whose bounds one might live with a lot of blood on one's hands without bothering about it, without opening all the taps in one's castle so as not to grow even more allergic to one's own fingers and arms. Both the theory of relativity and what they call 'quantum mechanics' are to be found in Shakespeare's tool shed, whereas Dante sticks to Ptolemy and the rigid, finite structure of the pre-quantum, pre-relative world. *Tout est relatif*, say the French, speaking no doubt about Shakespeare, even when they have no intention of speaking about him or his works. Nothing is relative in Dante's *Comedy* which is a clockwork-like forbidden fruit or a clockwork-like rose; and even when time gets lost in the four last cantos, the clock still executes its tick-tack-toe and noughts and crosses – with the same dial and hands.

According to Murry, the Queen is caught in the network of 'infinite sameness' made up of the same tomorrows; and yesterdays. But Macbeth lives in another time, contrary to what Virgil and Dante do within the framework of the *Comedy* where they have to accomplish the task more or less unheard-of even in the times when people thought about Hell and Paradise much more intensely than today or tomorrow. And a task of such magnitude cannot be born on the spur of the moment unless we refer to the mind of God where everything has been classified from time immemorial. Shakespeare's mind, on the other hand, allows its creations to wreak havoc on time and space, straying from them on a whim, on the spur of an inch, and that accounts for a disorder we struggle with as we plough through his plays in the hope of finding a final harmony akin to Dante's celestial rose. But there are no celestial roses in Shakespeare's plays and only thorns salute us as we make our way either to Birnam Wood or another tomorrow that has nothing to do with *their* tomorrow, whoever they are.

There are other times in *Macbeth* and other clocks around which a wood may turn like a minute or an hour hand. The same goes for space or spaces: our wood does not seem to be rooted to the spot as it does in another play and also in everyday life; whereas Dante's itinerary is unmovable in spite of the journey from Hell to Paradise. Within the bounds of the *Comedy*, everything and everybody are rooted to the spot – to a huge spot made up of a myriad of spots. Whatever Swinburne might say, when in a structure-oriented mood, Shakespeare's plays continually branch off from the main road or branch out; and sometimes the author makes an attempt to bring all these branches together, which

results in a series of switches that make princes and dukes behave like unmitigated cads and soccer-excited hooligans. 'For absolute power of composition, for faultless balance and blameless rectitude of design, there is unquestionably no creation of his hand that will beat comparison with *Much Ado About Nothing*' (Swinburne). Only by means of an unrealistic tour de force does Shakespeare achieve a precarious and ludicrous harmony: when left to their own devices, human beings cannot produce any other effect. Dante, on the other hand, does not even have to achieve anything: his harmony is pre-established and he just needs to write it down or say in all sincerity, 'I can't describe what I saw.' That is quite enough because everything has been described, depicted and accounted for already.

That is the feeling one might and must have when listening to a piece of music which does not move in spite of its itinerary and themes, recapitulations and developments. On this Earth, in the world where tomorrow is tomorrow and nothing else, whatever Macbeth may dream about in the wake of his spouse's death, we enjoy our free will to the utmost; even if we are submitted to the strictest discipline or while away our eternity in a desert, sucking stones and chasing naked women away, as St Antony did every day, day in, day out. We can kick a door open to get into a room unless there is a large notice on the wall in front of us, warning numberless visitors, 'No admittance to unauthorized personnel'. But we can tear this notice from the wall, shouting, 'I'm one of the *authorized* personnel. What's more, I'm on the board of directors.' We can also kick a ball as hard as we like and, in our embryonic days, kick our mother's body to our heart's content, which is sure to make her content – fairly content with her life. It is true we are not allowed to kick a man or a woman or a baby *in the face*, even if we say while doing so, 'Free country, isn't it?' But as long as we are alive and kicking, we can do almost everything on this Earth of ours – and even on any other earth, provided it may be called 'ours'.

I understand neither Michelangelo nor any other conscience-stricken artist who thinks he should not trespass on God's property; on His creative urge, in other words. 'Everything has already being created,' say these artists as they throw their paintbrushes and pianos out of the window. 'Don't we criticise God when daring to add an installation or a canvas to His Work of Art? Churchgoers are always right because they think that any criticism of God and His ways is blasphemy.' It is pointless to remind all these people – churchgoers included – that we are created in God's image and therefore are permitted to create as much rubbish as we can, provided we do not kick anyone in the face; in the process. Actually, that is what we are supposed to do so as not to mar and betray God's humanity-oriented scheme launched right after the Big Bang or in the course of this gigantic explosion. We are permitted and even encouraged to use the material bounteously supplied by the Almighty and Alcrafty, otherwise one might reach the following conclusion: 'Whatever surrounds us on this Earth is part of the universal rubbish dump.'

On the other hand, God did *not* put into His gift-wrapped parcel – the universe, in other words – the so-called domain of music, for all the birds we hear in both summertime and the spring; let alone in the autumn. (Sometimes they even sing in wintertime unless our country houses are cut off by

heavy snow.) And a churchgoer – the one who is a churchgoer to their fingertips, touching a prayer book – may rightfully say to us, 'Why do you insert all these harmonies and cacophonies into God's Immaculate Creation and Recreation? Aren't you overjoyed upon listening to birds, drops of rain and Shakespearian winds?' Only the oratorios one hears in Paradise are legal and God-sanctioned; and God-composed, in point of fact.

Bacchus nor Paean did their chanting sound,
But three persons in the divine nature
And it and the human in one person found.

Obviously Dante speaks of the Holy Trinity and the music that goes with Creativity Itself, not with our petty inspirations and orchestrations. One can also *see* this music because the 24 theologians depicted by Dante dance as they move and sing in two concentric circles:

And he will have as in a shadow traced
The real constellations, the two rings,
Dancing around the point where I was placed.

We also dance, and our numbers are far more imposing than those of the theologians depicted or mentioned by Dante whose competence in the domain of dance can be questioned rather easily. Probably he knew much more about Paradise than about the art to which Terpsichore devoted her life. But what really counts is our response to God's creativity and the prohibition we might feel whenever yielding to the urge that results in a few masterpieces one does not find in the world and our daily rounds. We find landscapes, oceans and also stars that might correspond to God's diverse facets and His overall capacity to multiply Himself in order to replenish the Earth. He does replenish the Earth and also the heavens, but we still have no idea what we are allowed to do or not, being created in the image of God and also within His mind. But are we also created *outside* His mind? If we are, we can compose symphonies to our mind's content; otherwise we had better limit our creative excursions to woods, lakes and picnics: any piece of music lies outside nature's nature. Yet we are allowed to dance without fearing a lot of punishments on the part of the devils whose services our Lord appreciates a lot in the light of what might happen, if no punishments were administered to our sins and their wakes.

Be that as it might may – one of my happiest turns of phrase – we can dance because we obtained permission to move; otherwise we would not be able to till any piece of land until the cows come home; and to milk these or other cows. Well, we do milk these cows and get plenty of milk that allows us to dance till dawn, let alone doomsday that is always beyond the horizon. And if it is *on* the horizon, we say to each other, 'The only cloud on the horizon is our doomsday. Let us postpone it.' And we do postpone it, needless to say, for what is called a real godsend – our free will, in other gods

and sends – allows us to misplace whatever we lay our hands or feet on. We lay anything on everything and it works; or it does not because their or His weather does not permit it. Be that as it may – another turn of phrase I am proud of – we dance in the rain or outside it, thinking that one may dance either inside or outside; or even in the middle of nowhere. And we often dance in the middle of anywhere, saying to ourselves we do not blaspheme, contrary to what Michelangelo thought about arts and their fundamental nonchalance; and their gross indecency. You are born; you are allowed to move, given that without movements you will never get enough of the milk of human kindness; or enough of money, in other words. You move and go somewhere; and get something; sometimes out of nothing. That is what they call life or dance. And if God's emissaries say to you, 'What are you doing out there?' you may answer, 'I'm allowed to move and till whatever land and earth I come across. That's what I do, so to speak – I'm moving and tilling, you know. I'm tilling everything and telling off everybody. And the sweat of my brow is on my brow and all over my limbs.'

The point is we dance *our* dances, our *earthly* dances; and whatever we chance upon in Dante's *Paradise* have nothing in common with our movements, gestures and *fouillétés*, or whatever they call it. Another point is – it is perhaps the same point – we do not know the first point about Paradise so that Dante was right when he pointed out on many occasions, 'I can't describe anything.' Suppose we are anxious to reach Paradise in no time at all – thanks to the dances described in the *Comedy* in more or less detail. Of course we can recite St Bernard's discourse either in translation or even in the original, but many philosophers are likely to point out that the body is as important as the mind where our memory lodges and enjoys itself. They might also point out that if our body is ill like that of Nietzsche, we shall speak of supermen and eternal recurrence. If, on the other hand and on the other foot, our body is the picture of health and innocence – as far as diseases go and stay – we might and should perform a dance akin to what is daily performed in the *Paradise*, especially in Canto XIII:

To have made themselves two constellations, like
What Minos' daughter hung in heaven to blaze
When she felt death's cold frost upon her strike;
And one within the other to have its rays,
And both in such a manner to spin past
That they should circle upon opposing ways

You do all that and consequently circle upon opposing ways until you drop dead or alive; and if you *are* alive, you might say to yourself you have not really spun past anything except your own furniture.

You lay your hands on the material you find as you go through woods and tool sheds strewn all over your earthly itineraries, and you tamper with whatever you find and pick up, for God seems to have supplied you with these scraps to enable you to indulge in the procedure called '*bricolage*'. This Lévi-Straussian term does not concern, however, our love for music for the reason exposed somewhere above: you find no notes in the course of your travels or walks in the woods. And your birds always sing out of tune, whatever Messiaen and St Francis might have thought about them and their own birds and notes. Music must be forbidden for many reasons and we must admit it is unreasonable to enjoy a piece of music either by listening to it or taking part in its performance: we can*not* enjoy it. When dealing with it in some way or other, we inevitably find ourselves behind bars and amidst them, utterly deprived of free will and our freewheeling lifestyle, whatever Epictetus says about our capacity to thwart our torturers' schemes. These put us in chains but our thoughts go on a spree and play havoc with chains, bars, whips, flees, bugs in general, typhus and even death. In the story, the cunning fox outwits the hunters, and the story goes on neverendingly and rather boringly, smartly, untruthfully. Anyway, you cannot outsmart music that puts you behind its bars and also in their midst; and you are continually hurt by these bars as you squeeze through them in search of your lost paradise named 'freedom'; or 'desire', considering that desire is one of the uppermost items of freedom.

Music is a symbol of determinism and therefore it or she (but not he) seems to say or sing to us the following lullaby:

You are to die,
You are to die,
Whoever you are,
Whatever you are,
You are a man,
And so was Socrates,
You are a woman
And so was Helen
And so was Troy
Aïe aïe, aïe aïe,
Oïe oïe, oïe oïe.
And so must die,
And so must die.

One needs a prosthesis, even if one has no intention of going somewhere, let alone climbing over a ten-foot wall to get into the garden which on no account deserves the name of Eden. If one stays in bed, relying on one's wife who usually brings everything to this bed and puts those things on the blanket and also into one's mouth, one however needs a prosthesis or a pair of crutches, emotional or

otherwise, to live until the advent of sleep and a satisfactory number of sweet dreams. Tolstoy thinks one should not own either Yasnaya Poliana or any other estate because what one really needs without giving any thought to this need is a coffin and a space required by the size of this coffin – first in a church and then underground. And we do not even have to reach this coffin and lie down in it, for these gymnastics can be accomplished by our friends and undertakers whose prostheses, if any, are of no interest to corpses and also to their relatives. Again one is sure to realise that everything is relative in our earthly and underearthly existence. You may need emotional crutches and mechanical prostheses in your lifetime. And then both crutches and prostheses sink without a trace and also without a space so that what one is left with amounts only to one's grave and to a mount on which one's picture proudly stands to remind the quick of one's features, fits, deeds and needs.

One might suppose – although one does not always, not *automatically* anyway – that emotional crutches can be found anywhere, provided the human in question is emotional and does not think and feel like a stone. You see something, a flower, a bird – not to stray too far from our previous examples – and say to yourself, 'Life is wonderful and I should reject all thoughts related to suicide.' You reject a dozen thoughts, pick up the flower you admire to the point of giving up your project that is indissolubly linked to the Hereafter and begin enjoying life in earnest. You admit rather sincerely that you do not resort to your olfactory nerves all the time, doing it rather exceptionally – when in doubt about hygienic problems. You are modest enough not to claim you are an anti-bug symbol and an indomitable virus-fighter, but you never eat food that has been on the floor. And you sniff your socks to see if they need washing or rather deserve a burial inside the nearest rubbish bin or chute. This morning you sniff a flower and life goes on, even if you have no alternative but to put on a pair of old, hole-embellished socks.

All artists hanker after glory and muses whose missions may be described as a poetic crutch, for only by means of this crutch can you confront a blank page, a canvas or an empty room where your installation must see the light of day; otherwise you might be written off and forgotten in your lifetime. So you count on your muse's visit, and if she lets you down instead of hoisting you onto her shoulders, you look at God and do your best to model your behaviour upon His ways and the days when He created not only the Big Bang but also whatever goes and stays with it – our universe, good and evil and so on. According to Jacob Boehme (Boheme, Bohemia, Bohme, Böhm), God had to go through a farewell, undergoing a sort of operation as a result of which a part of Him got out – in a way it *God* out – and what we justifiably call 'evil' made its appearance in the world, accompanied by trials and errors. Jacob adds that only through wroth could the Almighty produce such a result and artists do not fail to ape this procedure, beating their wives and breaking mirrors in the process. Some of these browbeaten, body-and-soul-beaten wives inquire into the origins of their bruises and their husbands answer thus, 'Don't you recall what happened three years ago?'

'I don't.'

'I found his hair on your dress.'

‘Whose hair?’

‘*His* hair. Anyway, in the course of our wedding night I realised you’re a whore.’

‘Don’t talk rot! You’re just short of ideas.’

‘I’m not. A true artist doesn’t care about muses. Picasso, for instance.’

‘Why don’t you take your inspiration from African art?’

‘What?’

‘Andrew draws much inspiration from art produced by children and primitive cultures.’

‘It is *his* hair I found on your miniskirt.’

The beating goes on and if the beaten-to-death spouse persistently denies her liaison with Andrew and Peter, her husband talks to her about God and His wroth – His way of creating masterpieces. The artist ends up in Moscow where he puts his wife’s corpse in the Pushkin Museum, in the centre of the room devoted to modern art. Crowds of people flock to see the installation entitled *The Prosthesis*.

I can wake up, which does happen in my life in spite of all the thoughts concentrated upon death and also upon the fact that I am dead already in every sense of the term. You are supposed to die in this life, without waiting for another life and the Hereafter, as they say, in order to start afresh or to look afresh at your old life. However, you should not confuse this old life of yours with what they call ‘one’s former lives’ because it is the same life through which you go and dance until you drop to allow your friends and colleagues to carry you towards your grave, be it a mass grave or your family vault. (I typed ‘family fault’.) It is the same life, but there are new elements in this version of the old life; just one new thought perhaps; or an old thought viewed from a different angle, a different morning. Yet you are staying in the same bed as if you were in love with it; as if it were the bed of your life instead of being the woman of your life, the man of your life. This is your promised bed, so to speak, and you are betrothed to it. Determinists even go so far as to maintain you were betrothed to this bed of yours at an early age. The same individuals affirm you have never left your mother’s womb which is your grave in other words, in other circumstances and ages.

All right, all right – you agree to whatever they say and even think because you are weary of both old and new lives, of their number. Besides, you know that one thought is sufficient for your purpose, if any; anyway, you are in your bed and you can even declare you are wide awake, which is probably not entirely true. But one thought is silhouetted against the snow and also against the horizon you can see from where you are lying and thinking. And the thought you are thinking belongs to you, according to Descartes and all the Cartesians you have read about ever since your birth.

All right, all right, you say to yourself as you cling to this thought and watch a procession of thoughts that march through your head as if to intimate it is a funeral march you must hear at this

particular moment. You do not hear anything, for all your efforts and ears, but your eyes, either inner or outer, do their best to contemplate these thoughts so as not to fall asleep once and for all. And your will succeeds in propelling them across your mind so that, at some point, they come together: an agglomeration of various religious and philosophical groupings. Suddenly you hear a scream of pain/rage/joy/laughter, although neither this scream or these screams or anything else will ever be sudden. Your thoughts cling together in terror as the screams grow louder, and the updated version of your old life ends up in a scream.

I am watching a film where some people kill others – as usually happens in films and also in everyday life – and hear the following monologue, 'When my son was born, I held him in one hand. He looked up into my face and smiled. I smiled too and I thought, "This is what I was born for. To be this boy's father!"' Whatever the number of thoughts I notice inside my head, I am not likely to stumble upon such a piece of nonsense, as far as I am concerned. I mean that within the framework of my life – and its frame is rather large, it seems to me – this thought is out of tune and also of the question: I was not born to be either this boy's father or any other boy's or girl's father, mother and so on. Joyce hoped and even believed that *Finnegans Wake* would be read by children whose eagerness to identify the rivers touched upon in the Livia Plurabel chapter would know no bounds. I was born to create a lot of rivers both conscious and unconscious (subconscious, subterranean); and all these rivers are finding their way into the sea.

The wise think that death is part of life and vice versa, which does not make them behave differently from those who analyse death in terms of death and in terms of life. These people say, 'Death is just the opposite of life,' and add that, in this case, opposites never meet, whatever you do and however strongly you push them towards each other. The opposite group of sages even compares life to a coat that has a special surface; and they confidently explain the properties of this surface, saying it repels and repulses death and fatal diseases such as cancer. Whatever their credos, the members of both groups behave quite normally when confronted with death in any shape or form; they scream and thrash about on the floor after quitting their deathbeds on which they cannot stay for long, on account of their struggle for life. And even if they used to deny the existence of God in any form or shape, hairless or with a beard, they begin to pray fanatically, lifting their arms so high one gets the feeling they wish to vie (or die) with the Tower of Babel or the skyscraper they are about to build in Dubai.

By the way, the latest tally from the highly specialised Council on Tall Buildings and Urban Habitat puts the number of skyscrapers due for completion this year (2016) at a record 135. Each will be more than 200 metres tall and in their midst one is likely to come across supertall paradisescrapers – at more than 600 metres, if you please (or not, as the case may be). Doctors approve of this skyward, paradise-oriented, hell-disoriented tendency because obesity levels show an inverse correlation with

the height of buildings: you walk and ride bikes more often than those who live in the urban sprawl. Clergymen do not mind this hysterical tendency either, saying that people often model their attitudes upon technological progress and therefore raise their arms higher and higher as they look out of their windows or consult the Internet. And there are more and more arms (armpits) in between the Earth and heaven, given that by the end of the century there will be ten billion humans around us.

Of course no one prevents you from staying in your lifebed, even if one of its legs is already in your grave, under your tombstone. But if you continue to struggle for life, saying to your relatives, 'Death is not part of anything I've gone through so far,' you have to do what God did many years ago: you have to estrange one self of yours from another. In the language of mystics, this procedure is called 'Separation' and it is said to originate in wrath – or in adrenalin, to put it scientifically and mildly. The first self we are talking about is determined to stay in bed, even if this horizontal sojourn leads to a cremation and a burial without military honours. The second self wrenches itself free and turns over a new leaf, embarking upon yet another adventure somewhat akin to Huckleberry Finn's voyage down the river. (Is that how they spell his first name in films and books? What river is it? The Hudson? The Hudsonberry River?) You always float *down* the river – not necessarily out to sea, whatever they say when enlarging upon rivers, voyages, initiations and revelations. The sea of knowledge and light does not always greet you at the end of the road or of the river because you neither walk nor float *up* unless you are a mystic certified as fit for Paradise.

You are God to some extent, although this extent may not correspond to what is meant by the notion 'created in God's image'. But you do have to create something, if not a world, upon awakening and opening your eyes which might remain closed forever, if you chose to keep them shut – wide shut, as the saying goes. Why would you do that? Your eyes are wide because they are attuned to the tunes of your inner world that you must both hear and see in order to live appropriately and globally. The point is, inside the world of your self, you hear with your eyes and see with your ears – the paradox you had better take advantage of because it is only by turning everything upside down that you may successfully penetrate the secrets of God, Satan and the demiurge whose zeal we have to thank for the abominable material world we have been living in as chimpanzees, as humans, as Christian martyrs, as Giordano Brunos.

Anyway, you create something or say something along the lines of, 'Moving to London is certainly a possibility – I wouldn't dismiss it out of hand.' Such an idea triggers off a movement inside your body – a sort of turmoil that you cannot pacify, for all your good intentions and desire for peace. Never mind – it is a good starting point, even if you have no intention of going to London either tomorrow or in the 22nd century. What counts is a movement, an idea that stirs blood vessels, otherwise neither you nor anyone could see why anything should be done at all: the world is as it is and nothing will ever change it, whatever something does on the spur of the moment, of the hour, and so on. If, however, you think in terms of creation, you cannot fail to stumble upon God and even collapse at His feet, yearning for a piece of advice or just a small portion of psychological help: only

the Almighty is likely to get you off the hook in these matters. As Plato puts it, ‘If you wish to become a tailor, you have to pay a visit to the best tailor you can think of because only this tailor knows his metier inside out. And only those who know everything inside out and upside down are in a position to make you understand the universe.’ So you go to God and ask Him how to create another day, another minute and another thought because it is not enough to think about God, leaving aside the rest – His creation, in other words. You stay in your bed, count your thoughts and their objects and fall asleep once again, exhausted and frustrated, saying to yourself, ‘I wish the end of the world could come today. Come Jesus, come! Where *are* You?’

Then you remember God’s wrath and your adrenaline on which you confidently rely to get the job done. One of the good things about wrath is that you can always rely on its unfailing enthusiasm, even if your wife is far away and therefore you are prevented from beating her belly to a jelly or at least to a jam, a marmalade. So you ask your wrath, ‘Where are you?’ You asked the same question a few minutes ago, addressing the same words and also the same question mark to Jesus Who did not take the trouble to answer you, for you deserve no answers, no explanations – nothing at all. Only your wrath may talk to you now and then, if in need of throwing a tantrum. You begin by asking your wrath, ‘Do you feel like flying into a rage?’

‘I’ve no wish to fly,’ answers the wrath.

A few centuries ago, both Bruno and Erasmus were fond of dialogues in which they let their imagination run away with them: they thought they could hear their sentiments talking to each other. On the page you peruse as you strive for another piece of knowledge and wisdom, you meet love and hate who talk about their relationship, engaging in a battle of wits; not in the Battle of the Somme. Today, no bloody battles are fought in your neighbourhood and anyway you are not prepared to sacrifice your life either for your country or for your religious convictions. So you talk to your wrath, thereby killing time, instead of killing the wrath you are talking to so as to become a pacifist, a peacemaker, a new pope, a new Saint Theresa or Francis.

How are you today, my dear brother wrath?
Are you wrathful today? Are you not at all?
Do I really have to kill you for the sake of my mind,
Of its eternal peace, quiet and harmony?
I hope not, I hope not. Calm down, my dear.
Aren’t you a baby after all?
Shall I throw you out with the bath-water?
I’ll try to calm my screaming baby,
Alias you, my dear wrath,
By rocking you back and forth.
By rocking you back and forth.

But we should take into consideration our genes that do not listen to our prayers and seldom if ever comply with our wishes. And these genes of ours get in the way, wherever we go – unless we follow *their* itinerary – and consequently wrath is as ever our companion in misfortune of whose presence we cannot liberate our peaceful inclinations. To understand their (our companions') purposes and meanings, we are supposed to go back as far as primeval forests where we had to defend ourselves against monsters or other half- or sub-humans. To some extent our cities look like those forests. And the monsters we are talking about when falling back upon our former lives are still on the surface of the Earth instead of sleeping eternally under our feet, under our buildings and underground stations. And the genes that were coddling us in days of yore continue to protect our interests from tycoons, typhoons and other calamities we are likely to encounter on our way to eternity where dinosaurs are lying in wait for our bones.

Once your war-attuned genes engage you in conversation, you are stuck with them for half an hour at least. 'We are your guardian angels,' they declare point-blank.

'We don't need you any longer, you know,' you answer. 'Even in the Soviet Union we would have been protected, according to Mayakovski who wrote in 1922, if we're not mistaken, "My police take care of me. They raise their sticks to intimate I should go right. And if I go right, Lenin says I should go left. So I go left. But Stalin says I should go straight on – towards the communism built in one country, in my and our country. So I go straight on.'

'And they arrest you,' our genes point out. 'That's why you've got a lot of adrenaline in your body.'

'Why?'

'Because you should run away – it's the only way out of the situation and the Soviet Union.'

'And what about the borders?'

'With the help of the same adrenaline, you'll easily jump over the barbed wire.'

'We're no longer in the Soviet Union,' you answer, allowing your face to show a big/broad smile. 'So we no longer need your help and assistance.'

'What about migrants?'

'What *about* them?'

'In Cologne they raped a lot of women and men. Some of those migrants are queers, you know. And fairy queens.'

At this point, you switch to Purcell and his opera that is revered by your genes, nerves and mind, and another portion of sweet dreams welcomes you cordially, putting yet another pillow under your head. So now you look like Louis XIV or any other king: most of them did not sleep horizontally, opting for a right-angle position – for the sake of their protective genes, I suppose. At any time they might be attacked by revolutionaries or an officer whose sex-imbued genes were aimed at the queen's sex appeal and dress-highlighted beauty.

Be that as it may, our wrath is still on the agenda because we need to create masterpieces, even if we are reluctant to quit our quilts and join the crowd and also the common denominator. Suppose we go to a restaurant, sit down, order a few dishes and wait for them to appear in front of us on an immaculate, snow-white tablecloth. A waitress comes in, puts an old bottle of wine on the table, knocks it over and says, 'You'd better wipe up that red wine I've spilt before it soaks into your trousers.' Of course you can complain about the waitress's behaviour to the owner whose self-conceit has always rubbed you up the wrong way. You cannot complain: thanks to this misplaced self-confidence you have written a dozen masterpieces, but this time you do not feel like writing anything; not even a nursery rhyme, in point of fact. You have come to this restaurant in search of comfort and quiet instead of which you feel an almost icy wine on your leg and its sensitive skin. Well, you just say to the waitress, 'You shouldn't chill Montrachet before serving,' and go out, leaving a few drops of wine on the floor. A few individuals burst into laughter which contributes to the quantity of wrath accumulated in your chest and also in your legs entirely chilled by the wine. You kick your legs in the air and feel a few drops of wine on your cheeks and even on your nose.

Suppose you do need a slice of wrath this morning despite your unwillingness to write a masterpiece, thereby reversing the decline in literature's fortunes: there are only run-of-the-mill authors today. And given that their offspring are even worse than their progenitors, you are not likely to come across a literary masterpiece either tomorrow or even on the Day of Judgment. But you have no wife, no mistresses; no one spills coffee either on your blanket or on your ears, let alone your eyes and nerves. So you pick up a newspaper from last week and begin to look at it absent-mindedly as if hoping that an absent mind is better equipped for finding an appropriate piece of news than a present one, provided the former leaves the field clear for your intuition.

It does and you light upon the following piece of news:

> *Charlotte Rampling has provoked anger by denouncing calls to boycott the Oscars because no black actors have been nominated. To do so was racist against whites, she suggested.*
> *The British actress appeared to suggest that discrimination no longer existed in the West and that if no black actors had been nominated for the second year running, it was simply because they were not good enough.*
>
> *The Times*, Saturday January 23 2016

One might say this piece of news is an inexhaustible source of wrath because one can look at it from two angles; and each angle offers a rich variety of feelings and anti-feelings. You can say to your opponents, 'Ms Rampling doesn't understand that human nature is rooted in what they call "classes" or "races" and that any human, whatever colour one may spot as one studies this human, is either rich or poor or white or yellow or black. And if this human falls in love and another human begins to talk about Romeo and Juliet, the former human blushes and almost immediately goes red, which adds yet

another colour to our palette, even if we forget about redskins and their contribution to our human rainbow.' You can also point out that there is a photographer who is trying to classify all human skin colours using the Pantone chart.

In this connection – I am talking about the Oscars – one can say that Ms Rampling does not understand ethnic minority actors who claim to suffer discrimination, for she does not suffer; at least in this domain. And Ms Rampling may retort that she suffers from what she calls 'anti-white racism'. And she may add that now she suffers from a sort of anti-Rampling racism: there are concerns that her controversial comments may scupper her chances of victory. Actually, I have forgotten to point out – everyone knows it anyway – that, as far as the nominees are concerned, she is of their number. In other words, Ms Rampling described her Oscar nomination as a victory; and she is likely to comment upon her defeat in the following terms, 'I'm white, therefore I suffer.'

As a result of this piece of news – there are several pieces, to be exact – you may write a masterpiece, being inspired by the wrath you gathered or gleaned as you read all this stuff. And your wrath is all the more effective since you read about it in two newspapers instead of focusing your attention on *The Times* only. You added to it an issue of the *Daily Mail* where moreover you found the following exclamation: 'Oh, do stop whingeing about the Oscars being too white.' One wonders why Ms Rampling did not add: 'For heaven's sake!' which does not really matter because she will not get the Oscar unless her skin becomes black or red overnight or in the twinkling of an eye. In this case everyone will say there is no shortage of black and red nominees at this year's Oscars. What is more, when uttering the word 'red', no one will think about communists and the Soviet Union whose demise was celebrated 25 years ago.

Your wrath is not eternal, for nothing is eternal in the universe unless you happen to live in a parallel world or rather in a series of worlds, walking from one world to another along a rainbow – as the gods do in Wagner's *Das Rheingold*. Anyway, whatever the path you put your feet on as you go from one minute to another, you no longer count upon your wrath or anger: you cannot think about the Oscars forever. After all, you are neither an actor nor a film director nor even a composer whose works stay alive only in the realm of cinema.

The point is you also have other things to do – apart from creating your masterpieces in the domain of the arts to which you devote your undivided attention as you open your eyes and immediately spot either your bed's canopy or the ceiling. Suppose you work somewhere and consequently have a number of colleagues who can get on your nerves and under your skin in no time at all – as soon as you see them within your office and its poster-decorated walls. But first you see your ceiling, every morning, which always happens when you open your eyes; unless you fall asleep in a brothel. And this kind of thing does not occur every week, let alone every night.

So you see and even hear your colleagues, and they do their best to get under your skin, weaving through your tendons and bones as they make for your liver that the Russians designate as the 'seat of annoyance'. So if you suffer from a disease and this disease includes an enlarged spleen or

liver, you realise your colleagues have overstepped the mark and also the boundaries of what is acceptable in any traditional relationship. But how can you define this relationship and its traditions? Of course you can always speak of the Roman Empire and also touch upon the Greeks in whose bosom both Plato and Aristotle saw the light of day and the darkness of night, as some people point out almost mechanically. (The darkness of night has become automatic over the last 80 years.) Well, you do not have to define anything and therefore can get away with the following remark: 'The state of things as they are, rather than as they are imagined to be.'

What are you supposed to do under the circumstances, under stress? In this mess? People under a lot of stress may experience headaches, minor pains and sleeping difficulties, and therefore all depends upon the amount of stress our doctors talk about. Well, to avoid any stress, any quantity of it, you should not disagree with your colleagues, whatever they say, do and stand for. And if you do disagree with them, saying to yourself you are on the verge of collapse/tears/death/disaster/war, you start using a few tricks from behavioural economics, psychology and neuroscience – according to *Time* (and *Space*). Your colleagues often say something, for they cannot rein in their excitement, inspiration and outspokenness that annoy you and your liver beyond measure, needless to say. So you have no alternative but to repeat 'their side of argument back to them affirmatively', as the saying goes; and they 'will feel appreciated, even if they don't win the battle'.

For instance, you still concentrate upon the Oscars and Ms Rampling's interview that appeared in a French magazine – in spite of your wish to go on, whatever this 'on' may mean in the context or out of it. Apparently Sir Michael Caine weighed into the debate yesterday – wherever and whenever this yesterday is located – saying the following words, 'You can't vote for an actor because he's black – and you can't just say "I'm going to vote for him, he's not very good, but he's black. I'll vote for him". You have got to give a good performance.' (He means the actor you concentrate your thoughts and ideas upon should give a good performance.) The point is you too have got to give a good performance *everywhere* and *all* the time because our life, world and hopes are a stage on which there are trees and other actors, our colleagues and enemies.

But the day you are living through is not over yet, and you have to say to yourself you have just enough energy to get through this day; otherwise you might stop somewhere in the middle, miles and hours away from any other day, and die. Another day, another die, as they say to emphasise the number of deaths you receive as you go on opening your eyes instead of keeping them shut, wide or otherwise. And since this day and suffering about which our Buddhists talk in their scriptures are not over yet, you must use a few tricks to hold out until midnight. And you fall back upon anger, wrath and even hatred that plays an important role in the Cabbala and probably everywhere: it contains and displays more energy than love, than your head you put on the lap or shoulder of the human being you

are in love with. Of course it is better to sleep on the body of this beloved and cherished being than spend a sleepless night in a cold, solitary bed; in a hotel located on the outskirts of a large city where no one is aware of your daily survival. And you do not even mind dying on the shoulder of your beloved, after crying on it for an hour or so or throughout another night. But there are people whose adamant behaviour in the so-called life-death domain is so energetic that, for all Buddhist precepts and warnings, they continue to attach themselves to life, to its ingredients and components: to humans, flowers, cityscapes and the sun.

These people re-read Charlotte Rampling's interview and say to their colleagues, 'We can't vote for someone because he's black or because he's just lost his son. We should look at how he acts – not in life, mind you. Under the circumstances we think only in terms of screens and films, of art and human mythology.' And then you remember you are still alive if not exactly kicking; and yet you would like to kick almost everything, right down to faces and souls. So you listen to what your colleagues and enemies say to you, and they speak to you thus, 'The Academy Awards ceremony is not where the "real" battle is. It's in the executive office of the Hollywood studios and TV and cable networks. This is where the gatekeepers decide what gets made.' You are determined to have a good day and so use the same trick borrowed from behavioural economics and neuroscience: you repeat *their* side of the argument back to them affirmatively. You say, 'This is where the gatekeepers decide what gets made!' putting a few exclamation marks at the end of your reply (or replay). You can even put 3 (three) exclamation marks at the end of it to make it and him sound even more affirmative and uncompromising. Your colleague in question feels appreciated and therefore does not kill you either before midnight or even after it, although no one can predict what this colleague of yours will do tomorrow which is another day, as they put it, nodding their heads.

Well, you no longer count on your colleagues' goodwill, good conduct and goodness in general; and you fall back upon yourself, as you habitually do when you have neither shoulders nor laps at your disposal. In a way, you put your head on your own lap and say to yourself, 'I use my lap instead of crying for help because *on n'est jamais si bien servi que par soi-même*, according to the French and to some Belgian and Swiss citizens. If you want something doing, do it yourself, as some dictionaries put it and even affirm 'to some extent'. To avoid stress from procrastination, promise yourself a small reward like a snack, for every complete assignment. And if you complete no assignment, promise yourself a sandwich washed down with a bottle of beer. And if you fail in your attempt to break any record, however infinitesimal and non-existent, you might promise yourself a chewing gum.

> *As their noise fell upon Adam's ear, he awoke from his slumber and lifted his eyes to the place of the light. He called his helpers, called the mild faithful Uthras. He spoke to Hibil-Uthra, the man who had made him hear his voice: 'What has happened in the home, that the sound of the*

din rises up to heaven?' As Adam spoke thus, a tear gathered itself together in his eye. I came near him, took him by his right hand, and made his heart rest again on its support.

If you read such a text – and you did read it – you might think you are undergoing a sort of test or examination, especially if you recall what happens in Dante's *Commedia* where, in Canto XXIV of the *Paradiso*, the author is questioned by St Peter on the subject of Faith. And of course St Peter is well content with the poet's answers, otherwise the *Commedia* would not have been written, I suppose. Anyway, no one can say about Dante, 'He did worse than he was expecting in the exam': he had expected to triumph in Beatrice's presence, before her very eyes and ears – during his journey through Hell and Purgatory – and he did triumph over appalling adversity, as they say, because they persistently think about Satan Who has a knack of interfering in our works – even in Paradise, in our afterlives and afterdeaths. But for all his knowledge of Christianity and its heresies, Dante Alighieri would have failed and lost heart, if questioned about the above-quoted excerpt from a Gnostic opus.

And yet the very first affirmation does not unduly perturb either scholars or laymen: they know what kind of noise we are subjected to in the streets and also in our offices where everyone talks until they are blue in the face, and Shakespeare whose addiction to words and their shades is universally appreciated might have said that in any office on Earth there are only blue faces and that therefore the Earth looks like a winter's tale: I remember that in Russia, in the dead of winter, passers-by looked blue. (Or red.) In point of fact, all our newspapers are blue; and so is the sky where angels talk to each other and to the saints we provide them with almost every week, even when popes and their encyclicals do not come up to our expectations. Anyway, the above article where black actors are criticised and extolled caused quite a stir in our world that looks like a chessboard – not only because the Almighty seems to be playing an interminable game, using humans as pawns and kings. There are black and white humans on the chessboard, and we say from time to time, 'The black bishops are better than the white ones because they are black,' whereupon the white king accuses us of anti-white racism, saying that all depends on the outcome of the game. But the game is eternal, as some optimists or pessimists point out, and so no one can say who is likely to win in the end. It is little wonder that many of us declare incontrovertibly, 'No one will ever win – we've already lost everything because of global warming, because we're impervious to any global warning and the Kyoto meeting.'

Be that as it may, let us pass on to the second half of the first sentence, otherwise we may drag this exegesis out until the Sea of Azov begins to boil and evaporate. So Adam hears our negotiations and awakes from his slumber, worried about the Oscars and the role played during the final ceremony by black and white and yellow actors. He opens his eyes and spots the blackness of our moods and theories; and also the black holes that we dig for ourselves, resolved to fling into them our adversaries and life-long enemies. He calls his helpers as all of us do when in need of a cup of coffee and a few Parisian or Belgian biscuits. Sometimes, instead of biscuits and green tea, we are brought a sheet of paper we are to sign, even if our signature may not lower the temperature from which our brothers and

sisters – our earthlings, in other words – have been suffering ever since someone said, 'The destruction of the rainforests is contributing to global warming. Scientists fear that global warming has gone beyond the point of no return.' We sign this sheet of paper, even though our signature will not help anyone return, go back to the beginning of the 20th century when no one spoke about such tragedies: there were too many tragedies on the agenda and, contrary to what many individuals believe and say, sometimes our history is crammed with disasters and so there is no room for any *other* disasters – at least not within the *same* history.

As for Adam, he calls the mild faithful Uthras about whom we do not know anything, for all the books we have perused so far, eager to find out what happened to Adam and Eve in the course of their stay in Paradise. Perhaps we ought to have consulted other books – the ones devoted to the *aftermath* of the paradisiacal couple's adventure, for Adam informs the reader that the 'sound of the din rises up to heaven' and consequently both Adam and the din may be found on the surface of the Earth, not in the bosom (or at the core) of Paradise. What is more, Adam seems to be accustomed to his new (terrestrial) abode, otherwise he would not have uttered the word 'home' when putting his question to Hibil-Uthra whose identity will escape our comprehension forever unless we open other books where one may chance upon an impressive number of commentaries related to Uthras (and not to Ultras).

Well, we can satisfactorily answer the question put by Adam to his helpers and well-wishers: we read enough to bring our minds and decisions up to speed with what is going on around us, although the papers we unfold every morning before laying them down on our laps or desks talk exclusively about migrants, rapes, and skyscrapers from which one jumps with a view to reaching the Hereafter in no time at all and almost painlessly (if one believes what Nabokov says about this variety of suicide in *Pale Fire*). One Russian kills another Russian and, upon reading *The Times*, one learns that all this happened ten years ago so that one cannot help thinking about worms and the state of the corpse exposed to their greediness. Actually, the corpse in question is also exposed to the greediness of the judges who yearn to eat it alive – well, let us say to examine it with a series of autopsies – to discover the whole truth about the assassination. The prime suspect in the murder of Alexander Litvinenko happens to bear the name of Lugovoy, and we come across this name several times as we continue to read the account of his doings and undoings.

'I've seen the nonsense conclusions of your judge who has clearly gone mad. I saw nothing new there. I am very sorry that ten years on nothing new has been presented, only invention, supposition, rumours.' According to Adam, the sound of these rumours rises up to heaven and I, for one, lift my eyes to the place of the light: after all, we are Adam's offspring; all of us, even migrants and rapists. Apparently Lugovoy said there was more chance of the moon joining the Earth than of his country (Russia) forcing him – through an ordinary, commonplace extradition – to face the Metropolitan police for questioning and answering. Nowadays many people lift their eyes to the place where the moon might join the Earth in the wake of Lugovoy's remark.

What counts, however, is neither his remark nor even the Earth's encounter with the moon which might be fatal for both, but for our yearning for light; at least Adam strove for it and we cannot get too far from Adam, his longings and genes. Of course no one would question the intensity of light produced by the Earth's explosion of love and the moon's answer to it: they have been in love since time immemorial, and if Lugovoy's remark and his presumed assassination of Litvinenko could give rise to such an unexpected display of luminosity, we might be only grateful to crimes, London and Russian citizens who go on killing each other for the sake of a handful of rubies, diamonds and other precious stones. Only light counts, judging from Adam's uplifted eyes, and we set out with the aim of discovering the source and nature of this light.

When ploughing through the Gnostics' odds and ends – Gnostic sods, as the Christians used to put it and them – some of our fellow creatures might conclude that the light they (the Gnostics) enlarged upon, making it bigger and bigger, is the light of God; but even these fellow creatures whose knowledge of literature and sacred books is beyond all suspicion have no idea what or which God is analysed at length in the writings found some time ago in Egypt. We are monotheists to such a point that some of us – some of our fellow citizens – maintain, 'Plurality doesn't exist in the kingdom of God and also in the universe which is identical to God, being its imprint, reflection or signature.' So when asked, 'What's the plural of "tooth"? they answer, "Tooth."

'Do you have only one tooth?' we ask them.

'Yes,' they answer.

'How do you manage to chew your meals?'

'We don't chew anything,' they answer. 'There's only one meal in our lives and we've already eaten it. Words like "sheep" stay the same in the plural, don't they? The same goes for everything and everybody. Everything is both singular and plural. The same goes for God and the Holy Trinity.'

Never mind, never mind – you can have only one tooth, like Ludwig II of Bavaria, which does not prevent you eating puréed carrots and two tablespoonsful of tomato purée. Once the ritual is over, purée the strawberries in the liquidizer and add the lightly whipped cream; and eat your concoction with a smile. And while doing so, you should think only about light and in terms of it, otherwise nothing has really any meaning on Earth because, as Malebranche put it, whatever we contemplate and think about is located in God, within His mind and body. And God is associated with light – He is the sun to some extent – to the point of turning up in the presence of those who content themselves with looking at a chandelier. They do not even take the trouble to look at the heavens and its components that talk to us about individual destinies and the history of the world. They just sit at a round table and play cards, listening to the din about which our Adam inquired, asking his servant or butler, 'What is it?'

'A din,' answered the butler.

'What kind of din is this ding-dong?'

'It's the sound of a bell, Your Excellency.'

‘What’s this din-din-din?’

‘It’s the din of the traffic, Your Honour.’

‘I have to shout to make myself heard above the din.’

‘And also beneath it, my Colonel.’

‘And what’s this nid-nid-nid?’

‘A “*nid*” means “a bird’s nest” in French. By the way, our birds are making a terrible nid.’

The Russians, too, make a lot of din during their five-course dinners: they drink vodka and raise their voices. You are invited to dinner and suddenly realise your hosts are of Russian origin, and this is linked in your mind with din and also ding-dong. You say to yourself that the Russians are deeply religious and go to church three or even four times a week. And you say pensively, ‘I wish they could make less din, don and what not.’ But neither leopards nor Russians can change their spots and you cannot help seeing and hearing these spots whenever the Russians barge into your restaurant and also into other people, shouting, ‘Vodka, vodka, vodka!’ And Gnostic books do not let this noise go unnoticed as their scribes bend over a great many papyri and write something along the lines of, ‘No line can reflect the noise we hear because this noise is due to the space-time crammed with Russian officers. Apparently they’re taking part in the Hollywood movie entitled *Anna Karenina*, but this phenomenon doesn’t explain anything. So we just lift our eyes, raise them and see the light that was switched on at God’s command, if we remember rightly or wrongly. (At this point, this difference and that discrepancy – between right and wrong – do not really count. You’re *beyond*, as it were.) Or was it our and their Demiurge? A bad God – a Baddy, in other words? Satan in disguise? Anyway, there has been bad blood between Him and our communities for many centuries, let alone a great deal of eternities. And there’s no such thing as *good* blood. And blue blood means you do your utmost to persuade yourself to tidy your room – until you are blue in the face – but you don’t do it; and yet you’re already blue in the face. And in the veins, mind you.’

Be that as it may, after a while you realise the Russians are not the only specimens in the presence of whom we expect to hear a lot of din, ding-dong and bang-big. It is true they also shout, ‘Well, whoop-de-doo, they’re offering us two bottles of vodka and marinated herring!’ There are other dins, Dinas and donnas in the world you frequent and rub all your material and metaphorical shoulders with as you go through the maze (and amazement), looking for the end of the world; or for doomsday, if you wish. You wish for doomsday and you get it because your servant says, ‘Your wishes are our commands.’ Your commands, if any, are carried out, down, left, right and underground where you sometimes spend a few afternoons in a row – a romantic or an exotic touch, you know. And then you hear the following discourse, ‘She’s the dumped fiancée having the last laugh after touring the world and landing a book deal. But her ex says she’s not told the full story.’ That is what Adam used to call a ‘din’, a ‘dingo’, a ‘dongo’ and Congo, going back to the days when Lumumba was assassinated shouting, ‘I’ve come too early. I should have come in the 29th century. I didn’t. I wonder what’ll become of them in the 31st century. Without me!’

You see a lot of blood on Lumumba's face as you watch a film devoted to his democratic, egalitarian and virtuous visions. Of course you say to yourself that neither the actor nor Lumumba himself *artistically* deserve any Oscar because they are as black as the actors who did not get anything this year. It is true they deserve all Oscars *humanly* and also *humanely*, but this aspect of the problem and that nuance have been utterly disregarded by the members of the jury at whom the whole world has been looking for months and weeks, watching the various episodes of the evolution of the species designed as 'nominees'; and then as 'laureates'. They are all designed, designated, nominated, fêted and sent home in a few limousines the Russians usually borrow for their weddings and other ceremonies of note. And if there are no limousines in the streets of Moscow, a number of readers note down in their diaries, 'There was nothing of note in the latest issue of our favourite newspaper. Only a few downs.'

How to cure our brains? Let us go back to the same sentences which may sound like a huge sentence of death – our brains' deaths, no less – unless we disentangle the useful from the useless and the ludicrous. We speak about the Oscars and say that the winners are fêted and sent home in limousines, which contradicts neither hard facts nor what we arrogantly define as 'nothing but the truth'. And then, for no reason at all, we switch to the Russians and their weddings where one might see a limousine decorated with laurel wreaths and other flowers. Why should we recall the Russians on this or any other occasion? There are enough limousines in the West; at least their number is not inferior to that of the Oscar winners who need to go home and celebrate their triumphs with caviar and champagne. Instead, we speak about a few downs, and one wonders if we are not the very downs we speak of; unless we say, after much brain-searching, 'Sorry, I'm rambling on – let me get back to the point.' The point is we do not know where this point is and this crass ignorance justifies, if only in part, our rambling, ranting, raving and missing the point.

Sages inform us that life is made up of points and we are duty bound to reach all of them, taking advantage of every opportunity designated by such and such a point. They (the sages) also say the number of these points is infinite, although the length of line or life they form is finite and rather short – in comparison with the endless night of William Blake fame. Needless to say, we cannot deal with all these points that would lead us to immortality, if we *were* able to deal with them appropriately, fully using our skills. Besides, we are not permitted to *see* them and consequently their whereabouts are hidden in the thick twilight about which St Augustine poetically speaks in his *City of God*.

> *For a while we identify with Adam – we should stop before the Fall – and find we are surrounded by darkness, being in the very middle of it, in the thick of the twilight's thickness. So we lift our eyes and look at the heavens where there is a lot of light on condition that no cloud spoils our party and mystical, mythical ascension. In those moments we are likely to conclude that darkness, wherever we might plunge into it headlong and headfirst, is an evil power for the simple reason that it cannot be a good power as shown partly in Star Wars and other myth-*

adjusted movies. And in those films – and also in our brains which are affected by them – the evil power is in perpetual struggle with the goodness of goodies controlled and inspired by God. We call those movies Wars and put a number of words before the wars: star, planet, the Milky Way, comet, and so on. In some of our movies a lot of falling and rising stars are engaged in hand-to-hand combat; or foot-to-foot combat, for one can hardly distinguish a star-leg from a star-arm or a star-shoulder. And these wars of ours go on for ages and centuries, otherwise we would not have in our DVD-libraries Jedis and the Empires that strike back. To strike back, you need first to strike forward, and you watch this strike for two hours at least. And you meet Jeudi and Vendredi; and the struggle goes on as if we were back in the USSR where they struggled throughout their lives and afterlives: their overall struggle was as perpetual as any perpetuum mobile and our Samedies.

We have no idea who is talking in the above excerpt, but we also say and maintain that God is light and we cannot see what is wrong with this statement into which we put our hearts and souls. Yes, yes and yes – God is light and might, and we are prepared to sing this hymn as many times as is necessary to assert God's prerogatives; even if we may be condemned for this heresy. So we say and sing that God is light and the power raising its hand and foot against God is darkness, for light does not raise anything against light or its numerous synonyms: glow, beam, brightness, luminosity. To which or what does 'Darkness' owe its hateful, pestiferous existence? Not to light – it goes without saying; for a substance cannot engender an opposite substance and thereby the Holy Virgin gives birth to our God and not to their Satan. Basil says, '"Darkness" is the enemy of souls, the primary cause of death, the adversary of virtue,' which once again puts us on the right track and therefore we say, '"The soul" isn't "Darkness"' mother; nor is the virtue its father. "Darkness" is an evil that exists by itself and everyone is allowed to affirm that "Darkness" is its own father, mother and son.' Thus we come up with the notion of 'The Unholy Trinity' and we stick to this notion as long as we ponder on the problem of Evil.

So it exists and does not proceed from God Who is neither its father nor even its distant uncle, its cousin's nephew's sister. God is good. We learn this maxim in our cradles, and whatever we memorise during the cradle-period of our lives cannot be forgotten, even if afterwards – midway through life's journey, as it were – we come *down* with amnesia; unlike the greatest poet ever, Dante, who journeyed *up*, and *up*, and *up*, after going down for a while. But we are unlikely to go up; at least during our lifetimes we keep going *down* and *down* – towards death and its primary cause, alias darkness, God's tenacious opposite. And even if, after our deaths, we keep our eyes wide open, we see nothing with the exception of utter darkness further accentuated by the hand that takes the trouble to shut them (our eyes) once and for all.

All of a sudden, Basil cries out, 'From this what perverse and impious dogmas have been imagined! What grievous wolves, tearing the flock of the Lord, have sprung from these words to cast

themselves upon souls!' From what? From what 'this' did our impious dogma stem? From the words of the Prophet? Which Prophet did Basil have in mind? *The P*rophet? But who is this The? And capital P?

Be that as it may, we should separate the wheat from the chaff and do our best not to wander off the point, talking about the Oscars and the Russians in the same breath: the Russians are not likely to get any Oscars in the near future, even if they accept a few hordes of black migrants and stop projecting Charlotte Rampling onto their screens. As for light and darkness, we should not separate them, bestowing upon darkness a sort of self-sufficiency condemned by Basil and, to all intents and purposes, by other Fathers of the Church; for some obscure, not to say dark, reason. Indeed, for all our goodwill, we cannot see why darkness, alias evil, is forbidden from being on its own – from standing in a corner, for instance. We say to darkness, 'You're evil, our dear darkness and, in spite of your presence in our midst, before our very eyes, we put you in a corner.'

So at present our darkness, which is ours only in part, needless to say, can be found in the corner opposite, and to all outward appearances, it stands there alone, unassisted either by God or by our crutches and clutches. Oddly enough, for all its defects and shortcomings, our darkness needs neither crutches nor even our moral support: it can stand in the corner for ages, untroubled and almost serene. But we can kick it as hard as we can – as if it were a ball, which demonstrates a direct link between its essence and our substance. So darkness is *not* on its own, contrary to what one may think when looking at its solitary figure and at the corner against which this figure is silhouetted. Basil nods his agreement and light-heartedly we pass on to Spinoza who maintains that evil has no essence in its bowels and consequently was neither engendered nor conceived by God. Evil is certainly not consubstantial with or to God and so we are not obliged to talk about this Christian doctrine in connection with dark sides and ages; nor with the cold dark days of winter.

According to Spinoza, evil or darkness or any dark size or wintertime is nothing but negation or privation or limitation or just 'or' and nothing more. Nero kills his mother, but his deed is not evil in the light of what Spinoza said in the previous paragraph: his deed displays no essence which might connect it with God. Inasmuch as you are your mother's son, you are responsible for her health and even her wealth. That is your essence and as long as you stick to it, missing no marks and violating no rules, you rub shoulders with God or one of His emissaries or missionaries. But if you kill your mother, you become a *modus* operandi or vivendi, as the case may be. And no modus can be compared with or to essences; these two notions are worlds (words) apart and the modus-world is a non-God word. So God has nothing to do with evil, darkness and the winter during which all delicate plants need to be kept in a greenhouse.

What does Nero's crime consist of? asks Spinoza. By way of an answer, he talks about this son's ingratitude, non-submission and anti-mercifulness. He reminds us (Spinoza does) that Orestes also killed his mother and that no one has ever accused him of anything except this murder. All right, all right – you might *touch upon* this murder, if you wish, but you should not *accuse* Orestes who felt

it was his duty to avenge his father. You have a duty to yourself to take a holiday now and then; and you successfully fulfil your duty as a holidaymaker either in Switzerland or in the South of France. And others are duty bound to kill their mothers: it takes all sorts and it does take them, otherwise the world would first have been made and then unmade – like an actor's career. Anyway, according to Spinoza, Nero's assassination contains a positive element upon which no one enlarges, however; not even Spinoza's opponents.

'A sample of water was taken from the point where the river bifurcates.' Sometimes you may hear such a remark in the middle of a fancy-dress party, and you wonder what conclusion can be drawn from these words most casually uttered by someone whose intellect needs to take centre stage before the end of the night. You can also say something along the lines of, 'Have you paid attention to how a bird flies under the sun?' Anyway, you take a sample of water in order to model your train of thought and speech upon its pattern: you should emphasise the timing of the whole operation that precedes the river's bifurcation. So you talk about the Oscars and stop before your thoughts begin to bifurcate, some going to Russia and others to Japan where they stay for a while in a garden that murmurs its tale of happiness by means of a cascade you cannot make out. You look at your water, the water you are holding in the palms of your hands, and say to yourself you should take a few lessons from its peace and the way it reflects the universe.

And what about light and darkness? If you say that water has essence and existence, neither Spinoza nor Basil will call you names such as 'wolf', 'dog', 'flea', 'worm', 'bug'. Nor will they ever say to you, 'Tie up the top of the bag so the rubbish doesn't fall out,' meaning you should keep your mouth shut and bite your lips or fingernails instead of opening it and letting stray words out. So you say water is essence and it has properties that can cure you of cancer, according to the Japanese who like water not only in their gardens, but also in their stomachs. And what about darkness? Let us forget about light for the time being and concentrate on darkness, even if we end up agreeing with Basil that it has no existence outside light's cultural and scientific spheres. We admit that evil or darkness is the consequence of light's withdrawal from our sight and mind. And while we are about it (about the light-darkness problem), we should not omit to point out that, but for darkness and evil, our dearest light would not be as bright as the cloud-unsoiled sunshine. Indeed we admire light so unconditionally only by virtue of its perfect foils such as darkness, pestilence, earth-wars, and so forth. What did Leo Tolstoy establish once and for all? Peace needs war.

Suppose we decide to eliminate wars and bugs. After much soul-searching, we opt for the lesser of the two evils, for an easier task, and get rid of bugs with pesticides and other weapons, stopping short of atom bombs; for obvious reasons. And then, slowly and surely, our attention shifts onto environmental issues – onto starlings, to be precise. In December 1968, according to a detached observer, their flocks could be huge and even close to a million birds stretching from one side of the horizon to the other. After a few decades, all of a sudden, their numbers collapsed by 80 per cent because, according to our scientists and bird-lovers, starlings and their offspring struggle to find

enough invertebrates – bugs, in other words and terms – to eat and enjoy their earthly life; they simply and unavoidably and inadmissibly starve to death. Apparently this could be behind the recent decline in house sparrows, too. But let us remain with our starlings and their lack of bugs on whose physical support they could count in December 1968.

What does all this mean, according to our minds and apprehensions? We should not obliterate darkness. We should rather protect it at all costs, even if we resolve to do so after searching our souls for many hours at a stretch. Nor are we any longer supposed to get rid of the bugs that nourish, sustain and keep kicking our favourite birds without whom our lives would be as empty as an empty bottle of sake. Yes, we must say to ourselves with assuredness, 'The shortage of birds of all kinds is due to the lack of invertebrates and of the brains that could solve this problem, saving a lot of starlings; a startling number of starlings.' 'Possibly our reliance on insecticides and weedkillers,' say the brains we are missing so much, 'and the decline in unmown, unweeded bits of land are at the root of our problem.'

In short, we should keep darkness by our side, just in case; otherwise we may find ourselves in a desert, miles from anywhere – even from one-horse towns; let alone one-horse races. All right, we are surrounded by light on all sides, on all skies, so that, whenever and wherever we look at something or someone, we see only light associated in our minds with harmony and cities of God. So what? What are we supposed to do with this light? We can admire it of course, saying to ourselves, 'In the various regions of India, Hindus worship different gods and observe different religious festivals. But we worship only one God for the simple reason that we're monotheists. Actually our reason is as simple and monotheistic as our beliefs. So we worship only one God, alias light that we worship to the detriment of darknesses and suchlike; and such anti-lights.' And then we realise we are dying and so the importance of being on the dark side – if only from time to time – dawns upon our brains. And we compose a poem in which both light and darkness dominate a landscape, standing side by side:

O Light! O Light!
Hear my prayer!
O Darkness! O Darkness!
Hear my prayer!
I love you both.
I wish you could
Enlighten my brain,
Endarken my soul.

But something is wrong and we are aware of the fact for the complicated reason that storms caused power cuts in hundreds of homes last night; and one of these homes was our home. So this morning we made up our minds, saying to ourselves and our souls, 'Darkness isn't our cup of tea. This tea is

too strong and black and therefore we cannot see anything. And we yearn to see the beauty of nature and enjoy the flawless skies and the transparency of lakes.' What is more, our train of thought continues to bifurcate: we talk of light and switch to darkness as if to pay homage to the saying, 'Switches on switches on switches.' So we compose another poem where light is treated with metaphysical honours:

Light, light, light, light.
How beautiful you are!
I am in seventh heaven.
I am in eighth heaven.
I am in ninth heaven
With Dante and Bea.

As usual, after much soul-searching and world-searching, we resort to the Cabbala the superlight of which enlightens all those who are in the know – all those who know they must consult the sages whose sayings and precepts are stripped naked on the pages of this exceptional book or scripture. Often you can hear something along the following lines, especially if you are in a park, amidst trees and benches that welcome both intellectuals and their disciples: on those benches you talk either of love or of art and the Cabbala. This time you talk about the Cabbala, staring fixedly at someone who does not seem to know these sacred books by heart. And you say to this ignoramus: 'How come you've never read these books from beginning to end?'

'I've read many other books, you know.'

'But you must read the Cabbala, otherwise you'll never know anything about light and its counterpart.'

'I just look at the world. The dappled sunlight fell across my wife's face as she lay beneath the tree. I'm not likely to forget this episode that blessed my life nine years ago. It was in Venice, you know. A turning point in my eternity.'

At this point you can quote Luria's student Hayyim Vital, and you do quote him, for you have plenty of time and the bench you are sitting on does not seem to mind your exposition of the Cabbala's tenets: 'Ein-Sof then withdrew itself from its centremost point, at the centre of its light, and this light retreated from the centre to the side, and thus there remained a free space, an empty vacuum.' And you might stress the importance of the up-dated term 'vacuum', pointing out we have been living inside a vacuum for some time now. But hope never dies: contrary to what some of us believe, disbelieving the might of light, hope does not even spring eternal, for it never dies and consequently need not spring or otherwise rise from the dead. So you add, your brown eyes twinkling behind the gold-rimmed glasses, 'In order to illuminate and animate that matter, which now lay in darkness, Ein-Sof sent a ray of its light back across the void at its heart.'

‘How do you mean?’ asks the man sitting by your side on one of the benches scattered around a park where many Cabbalists take their walks as they try to enlighten all those whose darkness is too conspicuous by its overriding presence.

‘I mean what I mean, as Iago might have put it.’

‘I know Iago and even Othello. But I don’t know Ein-Sof.’

‘You’d better concentrate on the ray of its light, on light itself.’

From what has been said so far we might conclude that darkness is wholly due to the retrieval of light, which should not be confused with ‘information retrieval’. Of course the darkness we are talking about has been stored on our hard discs ever since the Almighty resolved to withdraw into His own being, leaving behind the void where our world installed itself. Darkness exists only on account of God’s conspicuous and momentous (and momentary) absence. ‘And therefore,’ we say to ourselves, ‘our darkness that we should immediately disown doesn’t exist on its own and therefore has no substance and no essence.’ And therefore everything springs temporary and goes away as soon as high time (or high tide) comes.

So once again you face a sort of void, although this void of yours – the one you face on a regular basis – should not make you come to the following conclusion, ‘There’s nothing to think about. There’s nothing to think with.’ The point is you can think even if you do not exist and even if you have no essence, for the chief thing is to be able to ‘*est*’’, as the Russians put it. To decipher this wise saying, we should know that *est*’ means ‘to eat’ in Russian; and also ‘to be’ so that, if you are determined to recite Hamlet’s monologue either on the stage or outside it, you prove once and for all you are tempted to broaden the scope of this utterance or question, adding a lot of food to it; and a few three-star restaurants.

To eat or not to eat –
That is the most important
Question one has to deal with
In one’s life and world.
And if you decide to eat
And consequently to be –
No hunger strikes, this time –
You ask yourself yet another question,
Namely, ‘What to eat?’
And then you ask yourself
Yet another question

That sounds thus,
'What to drink?'

Of course a lot of opponents of what they call 'the Russian way of life' might say offhandedly that the Russians never ask themselves or others the ultimate question, on the grounds that they know *what* to drink and *how* to drink it. They just buy a bottle of vodka, go to the nearest building, open the front door, sit down on the floor under some staircase or other, open the bottle and drink its contents to the dregs without giving any thought or wish either to deep-freezers or to glasses. Their vodka is mostly *chambrée* and they empty the bottle they are holding in no time at all, now and then biting into a loaf of what they call 'black bread'; or into a huge pickled gherkin. All this means that the Russians do not even ask the first question because what counts is 'to drink'; eating and consuming dainty dishes comes after and most of the time it does not come at all.

If these opponents – and some other westerners – speak of Russia at all, they speak of her in relation to the United States, among other countries, and one gets the feeling our Russia is just one of the (united) states; one of the states of mind of a westerner who thinks that the entire world is made up of the States-included states. In other words, there is only 'America', as some singer or other sings in his or her song, repeating the same word many times – America, America, America, America – as if there were people whose knowledge of the world did not establish the United States at its core and centre. (Both this knowledge and the States are at the centre of their world. And there is nothing but this centre, as theologians say when speaking of God.) I have talked about this centre many times and I do not think my insistence contradicts any existence that should centre upon one point from which both everything and everybody radiates and issues; not only light. But let us leave all this alone for the time being, for once again my train of thought derails, coming off the way-of-all-mind tracks, of common sense which might guide one for a while on condition that it does not sound too trivial. We shun triviality because, for some reason or other, we think we should be exceptional and consequently think big while others – even our relatives and friends – think tiny. Inevitably we come to the conclusion it is better not to think at all: if you think about God, you attribute to Him all sorts of thoughts, thereby minimising His effect upon the world. God is unthinkable, full stop!

You talk for the sake of talking and say to yourself it is more or less acceptable in the light of what Joyce's antiheroes and anti-heroines do throughout *Ulysses*. I used to admire these trains and monologues to the point of thinking they were capable of opening up our brains and exposing them to the curiosity of those researchers who are bent upon probing into the mystery of our innermost being called 'intellectual substance' (or 'intellectual nonsense'). And I used to worship Joyce to such an extent – now I would need an extension lead for such an extent – that I even endeavoured to find out Parnell's whereabouts on the map of human achievements. Nowadays I know Parnell was an Irishman fighting for his native land and her (or his) freedom and what they still call 'Home Rule', I suppose. I sympathise with the Irish, but not to the point of immersing myself in Irish history and culture – just

because they are Irish; and also in homage to James Joyce. I think my brain and also my very existence is neither Irish nor Russian nor French: it is just an existence, assuming there is such a thing as existence; or non-existence, for that matter. The point is existence does exist, if non-existence does as well; and you say at once, if confronted with this problem, 'Non-existence doesn't exist because it's *non*-existence.' Too difficult for utilitarian minds. The Germans, however, might understand this remark – in German. As Hegel put it, speaking about some philosophers, 'They were admired because they wrote in German.'

But we were touching upon Russia and, at some point, we realised we should not *enlarge* upon her, for fear of being banished from our (or their) universal community. At present we just *touch* upon Russia, and we are even allowed to touch her soil, if we have a visa whose unquestionable presence in our passports might enable us to moon around Petersburg for several days. Let us go on touching upon Russia and even touching Russia herself, even if, in order to do so with impunity and a clear conscience, we are supposed to speak of the United States – in the same breath and with the same stroke of the pen. All right, all right: on our writing desk we have another issue of the *International New York Times* – not *Pravda*, mind you – and we put our index finger on the word 'Russia' because we are allowed to do so without soiling our conscience and also our train of thought. (Our rain of thoughts.) Our index finger covers Russia as if anyone could put one's body on her territory, saying to humanity, 'At last I've covered the whole of Russia, you know.' Our finger is still on Russia, but this does not prevent us reading the rest of the title on the beginning of which our finger continues to lie, apparently enjoying itself and saying to itself, 'This word is nice and cosy in the winter.' The *whole* title sounds thus, 'Russia limits U.S. options at Syrian peace talks', and we cannot help listening to this sound, otherwise we would not know how and to what purpose we are allowed to speak of Russia nowadays; and probably ever after.

Upon reading the article, we come to know that the United States 'has insisted there can be no military solution to the Syrian civil war', and then the Russians barged in and threw their bombs as if to contradict the States through the following phrase, 'There can be no diplomatic solution to the Syrian conflict.' Well, the two sentences stand side by side as the days of intense bombing continue to elapse and remove our armies from numerous calendars. Our armies, therefore, are looking at the future; or at least in the direction of so-called days to come which, incidentally, may never come, as we all know in the light of the experience we went through last year when our uncle collapsed and had to be conveyed to the nearest hospital where he died a few hours later. Yet he used to talk about 'days to come', 'years to come', 'happiness to come' 'nothingness to go'. Anyway, as soon as we open our mouths in our eagerness to say something along the lines of 'to come', we restrain ourselves for the obvious and clear-cut reason that nothing comes *automatically*; as if there were no automatons, machines and clocks around the world. Of course we still might utter the following statement, 'Everything comes *reasonably*,' thinking about Leibniz, among other thinkers. (Or t...inkers – the way some mothers still talk about their boys.)

The Russian armies do not seem to be looking for Godot who will not come as if still taking his cue from the days I touched upon in the previous paragraph. So we realise that many Americans and their allies – we are of their number of course – fear a trap. (We have been fearing traps for many years and millennia.) 'The cease-fire would not apply to attacks on the Islamic State or the Nusra Front, an affiliate of Al Qaeda.' At the same time – in the same breath – we do not realise anything, for we do not know what the Nusra Front means, and we wonder why we should try and find out what it does mean and signify because we may pass away tomorrow, during the next day to come; and our knowledge of the Nusra Front will not help us during our meeting with St Peter or any of his counterparts; let alone our encounter with death.

Of course you are tempted to speak of your motherland and you do it all the more sincerely if you belong to the country and the people who talk about their origins round the clock and even outside these rounds. The Russians are of their number and also of the soil they kiss whenever they come back from foreign lands, after using foreign tongues for a long stretch of time; even if this stretch and space-time are limited to a few yards-days. Upon their return to their huge and hospitable (or inhospitable) home they talk Russian non-stop, often addressing utter strangers who are much better than foreigners – whatever the former's intellectual quotients – for they know the Russian language. And even Kafka whose origins where not rooted to the spot where he found himself on the day of his conception was not altogether indifferent to his surroundings where the ever-growing number of tourists admire the castle I hardly remember in spite of my personal acquaintance with Prague.

In a way, I have finally paid homage to my native land and its inhabitants whose language is my mother tongue, a protagonist of some of my nightmares: occasionally I wake up shouting a few words in Russian. But there are universal problems I have to pay attention to, even if the Russians are excluded from their solutions and also from the roads leading to these solutions and the sighs of relief heaved by a multitude of scientists, their assistants and worshipers. One of the problems foreign scientists have been dealing with for more than a century concerns the proverbial space which had become proverbial even before Einstein got his prophecies published in a proverbial magazine. Newton, too, left his imprint on the space we see and jog through almost every day; only inveterate drunkards and paralytics can afford not to pay attention to space day in, day out; yard in, yard out.

Well, Einstein talks us into believing that space is warped, and since it is fraternally linked to time – hence the time-and-space honoured expression space-time – we live in a slice of warped time as well. We wake up and begin to warp time which reminds us of our duties. We endeavour to shirk them by staying in bed as long as humanly possible and admissible. We would give anything to be able to warp space too, bringing our offices to our bedrooms – our entire offices with the exception of the people who work and circulate there: we never hit it off with our colleagues. We often hear the

remark, ‘He’s living in a time warp – he even wears a bowler hat to work!’ Whatever may be said about our habits and customs, bowler hats have nothing to do with them; and even the time warp those individuals touch upon is not hand in glove with our rituals because staying in bed is as fashionable today as it was yesterday and 13 centuries ago. So the behaviour described at the beginning of this paragraph is natural, logical and matches human nature more biologically – death-instinct, sloth-instinct – than any go-getting attitude. (Or any getting-up-getting procedure.)

It is said that prison warps people, but many people – not necessarily those who have been warped by prisons – think and hope that all this happens the other way round. According to them, it is our will to live – whose pig-headedness has nothing in common with any will to power – that warps both time and space; otherwise we would already have died in the above-mentioned prisons. There is no denying we are dying and, whatever they say, maintain and prove, our globe is a sort of prison or just a prison; but certainly not a prison of sorts. We are enclosed in it and in its laws we are trying to warp to the point of being justified in saying to extra-territorial tourists: ‘Here’s the Earth, a sort of mother, a sort of father. Please find enclosed several billions of earthlings.’ So we do realise we are human, Earth-born creatures, and consequently our death is not beyond the mountains, as many Russians say when questioned about their dreads of death; or about the dregs our death bequeaths to our relatives after our untimely demise.

So we warp everything in the hope of finding a loophole thanks to which we might escape into another hole – a white or red one this time. (Or another ho*p*e: white, red or blue, as the case may be.) Whatever the colour of the hole we are bound to plunge into on our way to the final deliverance called ‘nirvana’ or ‘no more karmas, please’, we are eager to accept it and even welcome its essence with open arms. We open our arms and a number of holes enter our Schiller-initiated embrace, promising a great many immortalities, for one immortality is too precarious to be counted upon in the domain of eternal survival. Anyway, we read newspapers and our eyes and inner light and sunbeams (I-am beams) light upon a piece of news that declares we do not live in a common space where there are gardens and motorways; and car crashes; and planes’ ashes. The piece of information we have been looking for years and minutes sounds as follows: ‘The black holes that LIGO observed created a storm “in which the flow of time speeded, then slowed, then speeded. A storm with space bending this way, then that.”’

We are glad. What else can be said? Any warp, whatever its nature and feature, is welcome on condition that it comes and does not drag its feet or wings or protons. So we summon our offices to hear an emergency report and they appear in our rooms, obeying our Yeats-like calls and walking through our walls. (Or snaking their ways through our walls’ and paintings’ molecules.) And we realise – too late perhaps – that our colleagues keep these offices company because they are part and parcel of the Whole or of the One or of the Single One about whose benevolence and elegance our theologians continue to write a lot of books. So we say to our colleagues: ‘Cosmic chirp from black holes vindicates Einstein.’

‘What are you talking about?’ they say and think.

‘Did you hear the chirp?’ we ask.

‘When?’ they ask.

‘Some time ago.’

‘We heard many chirps. Some time ago.’

‘What kind of chirps?’

‘Birds, their songs. Chirrups, you know. Chirp, chirp, chirp, chirp, chirp. Ups, ups, ups, ups, ups.’

‘What about downs?’

‘*What* about them? What *about* them?’

‘You’re downs, my dear colleagues.’

‘How do you mean?’

‘“Down” means “damn fool” or “bloody idiot” in Russian.’

You cannot hit it off with your colleagues unless you hit them and off they go. But you cannot hit them off and away because you cannot hold out until doomsday without words and their plays; and your colleagues’ days; and their nights and midnights and summer-provoked dreams. You might, on the other hand, hit it *on* with them or someone else; and you do so in expectation of Paradise Found and Refound and also regained by some means or other. You reach this or any other Paradise and find yourself in your bed surrounded by your colleagues and a few heaps of money you cannot reach, for all your extension leads allowing your arms to stroke a few stars you do not need. So you continue to talk to your colleagues, unaware of what may lie in store for you because you are no prophet and even no seer: you see nothing except yourself and your pains and sore throats. (Suddenly you realise you have many throats and all of them are covered with sores.) Not to mention your numerous toothaches; and stomach-bowel-ear-shoulder-blade-and-toe wounds.

And you go on warping both space and time around your bed or even in the streets where you walk or ride from time to time, anxious to find the end of the road on condition that this end does not coincide with death or a two-month-long coma. You hear no birds and no chirps that are used to reaching our astronomers’ ears after billion-year-long journeys. What do these chirps experience as they travel through the universal night and vacuum, deprived of holes and collisions? Do they feel involved in a cosmic process of the utmost importance? They indulge in idle dreams and talks which kill both the time and space they have to traverse and conquer on their ways to the machines awaiting them in order to confirm or disconfirm Einstein’s hypothesis. So they cannot help talking to each other, which is done all the more easily since one chirp usually follows another chirp as they both continue to face a lot of stardust and other elements flowing in the sky, in the middle of the Milky Way. They fly in dribs and drabs, not all at once, otherwise they might already have been mistaken for a piece related to the music of the spheres, and in this case no one would ever listen to them, saying, ‘It’s nothing, you know. Nothing to write home about. Just another celestial oratorio.’

They talk to each other as they fly in the direction of our astronomers' ears – ear-bound, so to speak. One says to another, 'Shall we stop for a while?'

'For a billion years?'

'Just for a few seconds.'

'Are you bored or tired?'

'I think we should all realise the uselessness of our undertaking.'

'Why are you talking like that?'

'All right. Suppose we do reach their machines and ears. So what? I'm not even sure they'll hear us. They're partially deaf since birth.'

'In comparison with the Martians?'

'Yes.'

'Over the last five years, the entire system was rebuilt to increase its sensitivity to the point where the team could realistically expect to hear *something*.'

'Their machines are dumb. So even if they do hear something, they'll be unable to transmit the news.'

'And what if they do transmit the news? All over the world, people die of hunger every day. What would happen if they heard us, our bird-like song? Do you think people would die of hunger every *other* day?'

The Hole War. 'About 1.2 billion years ago, once upon a time, in a distant galaxy a pair of black holes circled each other. The larger black hole was 36 times the mass of our sun and the smaller one 29 times. The intense gravity accelerated the black holes to half the speed of light, pulling them closer and carving distortions in space and time. In a fraction of a second, the pair collided and merged into an irregular shape.' This fairy tale is less exciting than whatever they recount as they dig deeper and deeper into the past inhabited by Arthurs and Merlins. They talk to us about a king who was not a true king, so everybody called him a 'false king' or a 'wrong king' or a 'usurper'; for there was a genuine king somewhere, in some woods or other, hiding from the false king's wrath and taking his cue from Shakespeare's Duke or whoever he was. (I remember only Jack the Dreamer.) At any moment, the other king – the Other, as Sartre and Levinas would have put it and him – could attack the false one, forcing his hand, making his own hand remove the crown from the false king's head.

So the former has a tower built to protect himself from the onslaughts and insults of the latter. But the tower has a knack of collapsing at some point, even though no one knocks it down. So the fake king summons his gurus and they say in unison, 'You should water the soil with the blood of the one who was of no father born.'

'None of *woman* born?' asks the fake.

‘Of no *father* born,’ repeat the gurus and other sages.

‘Jesus Christ?’

‘Nope.’

We are waiting for two sequels to two stories. The first might put us into the picture about what happened in the aftermath of the holes’ collision; the second should enlighten our curiosity as to the fate of both the fake king and his tower. The first sequel is rather banal: ‘The unstable blob smoothed itself into a sphere. The invisible waves rippled outwards at the speed of light.’ So what? We are unable to see those waves, for they are *invisible* and cannot even leave a few traces on the snow: they are not the invisible *man*. But we can see and hear Merlin whose birth and origins have nothing to do with any father, however dwarfish and ludicrous. Even *this* piece of information is more exciting than whatever they write about the two holes and their dispute or litigation.

And we cannot help asking all sorts – or just one sort – of questions about our origins, for there are gurus who pester us for hours trying to find out whether we know where we come from (where our forms come from or whether they come at all) and what our destinations are. Many of us declare we have no fathers Others have expectations and spiritual aspirations, and their greatness is measured and judged in accordance with the aim they pursue as they repeat two words, ‘Jesus Christ’ wherever they go so that some think they *are* the Jesus Christs they are speaking of – or at least their Johns and Baptists – and others say they are impostors. These others say there are impostors everywhere and the greatest impostors are those who say they are Jesus Christs or at least – at the very least – a number of John the Baptists.

And other gurus – there are so many gurus one cannot say who are others or *those* – continue to say one should water or rather bloody the roots of the tower in question to find out why the same tower whose identity does not seem to change in the course of its construction has the knack of disintegrating as it reaches one of the upper floors of the building in question; and this question is one of the biggest questions our human and animal kind is said to have yearned to answer since the same time or time memorial. So all the people involved in the process of looking for and waiting for and coming across whoever it is light upon a sort of darkness where Merlin’s assistant stands as if waiting for guests whose status seems to open all gates and kingdoms – even those of Sesame. So he says, ‘I suppose you wish to bleed Merlin with your leeches to *arroser* – the French translation of to bloody, you know – the foundations of your king’s Babylonian Tower.’

‘Yes,’ says an officer. ‘We wish to bleed and blot your Merlin’s blood.’

‘All right,’ says the assistant. Or rather he blurts out, ‘All blood.’ For once, everyone understands him and even his words which are incomprehensible most of the time. And *most* of the space as well: at least in *some* parts of this particular space these words of his are utterly unintelligible and unconceivable. But Merlin thinks otherwise and he says so as he sees a number of officers, colonels and lieutenants in front of him, of his own public persona. He thinks and says, ‘You’re half-wits, all of you. And another part of you may be considered third-wits or fourth-wits, if you wish or do

not. And you don't have the humility to admit you're wrong. You should look for Merlin whose knowledge of the Grail and its implements is beyond bounds; and beyond these and other bounds.'

'We're not looking for the Grail,' answer the majors, mayors and their subordinates.

'But you should look for Merlin,' says Merlin's secretary and bed mate. And checkmate. And mate bed. And sheik.

'Why?' everybody asks and says and ruminates for weeks.

'Because Merlin will tell you what to do.'

And Merlin says to them, 'All your gurus are ludicrous and ridiculous because only one guru and sage can tell you what to do under the circumstances, or under any other circumstances and influences. Forget about the blood of the underman born from no woman and no womb. There are dragons born and reborn from and out of nothing except what is worshipped as "dragonish semen". And those seminal-fluid creatures are buried under the spot where those half-wits are trying to erect a tower inside which they hope to spend the rest of their lives. But there are neither rests nor lives within those illiterate monsters' reach. So these monsters and you and the rest of the world should dig and dig and dig-dog, for digging and dogging in the garden is good exercise.'

So they dug and undug (outdug) the dragons, which proved that Merlin had been right.

Suppose Merlin is right along with his numerous offspring whom we meet everywhere, paying homage to the sanctity and unpredictability of life. They say those dragons fought and died; so did we and I and they, so to speak. In a way. If it is not the way – not the *right* way, as they say – it is *a* way anyway, as they say; even if no one except yourself believes in it. The point is if you do not believe in a *way*, *this* way of yours has no energy either *inside* or *outside* its bounds and therefore *this* particular way does not succeed in becoming THIS WAY about which both our Buddhists and other Hists and Ians deliberate as they expound their doctrines and expose their bodies. No, no, no. So you decide to be on the safe side and think no longer in terms of ways, anyways and days. There are only nights around you and these nights are deprived of ways, paths and even those Japanese cascades one hears almost everywhere, anywhere, provided one stays in one's bathroom after opening one tap in it. That is what storytelling is about, by the way. A trickle of melted butter made its way down his chin. This is the beginning of a story the end of which no one can see or hear, whatever one's ears are supposed to capture in the universe.

In Moscow I heard a story I am about to tell because only storytellers are allowed to speak in the world where all other people utter four-letter words and four-inch thoughts. A friend of mine told me this story which reminded me of a Japanese story I had heard and seen many years ago, in those days when stories could be told and heard in the presence of informers who were in touch with torturers and other representatives of social power. You tell a story and someone grasps your hand to convey you to

prison – that is how you were dealt with in those days when our stories could not be told within the bounds of the void where no one can hear anything; nor can one tell a story inside the void. I wish I could live inside it, for I do not like stories – neither their beginnings nor their cliffs and hangers. Actually I do not like those who hang from cliffs every other day to improve their health and the power of their muscles. One might say I even prefer to see their bodies *under* the cliffs, under the *claws of the birds of prey* whose task is similar to what our businessmen do in their and our lives: they put their claws on our skins and sink them into them. As a result of these skinnings and sinkings we find ourselves naked – not on a private beach, mind you; if you do not mind. We remain stark naked in the middle of anywhere, nowhere and everywhere, and everyone looks at us saying, 'Our Chairman is naked,' 'Our President is naked,' 'Our Chairman Mao is naked.'

In Moscow I heard a story about a woman who was determined to cross the woods in the dark as if the dark she thought about had been a sort of light – a divine light, the best guide one can find in the world where only fiends (or friends) are likely to meet us everywhere as soon as we venture outdoors. At least all these people are portrayed in the media as complete fiends – as the migrants lying in wait for the damsels who think we should be hospitable and humanism-imbued humans. I have no idea whether Elois or Alois or other inhabitants of the future are likely to know who are migrants and why we should fear them, living in fear as long as they stay not far from our doorsteps; or *on* our doorsteps, assuming that our doors are *shut*. If they are *not*, the same migrants stand on our *doormats*, on our *carpets* and even on our dinner *tables* because they think their dances and rituals are destined for our dinner tables and not for our floor tiles, ceramic tiles, carpet tiles and marble slabs. They dance on whatever they wish to accommodate their feet and we worship their dances in expectation of the Nobel Prize for Peace and Generosity. We get this prize, but the dances go on because they are not beautiful enough to deserve the Nobel Prize for Dancing.

Here is the story I heard in Moscow: 'A woman is resolved to go back. And going back means "home" because this woman – for one, for one – lives with her husband who is rich enough to own a house and even a small garden where the couple's cat disports himself every morning, bent on finding and eating mice and birds.'

This is the beginning of the story that has no end. So looks and behaves any self-respectful story in the meanders of which everybody loses themselves and finds only a series of other meanders, let alone labyrinths and mazes. My friend told me this story a few days ago and I listened to the loose ends that he did not tie up, either neatly or otherwise, at the end of the story. There was no end to this story. Or rather I heard an end, but a detail was missing somewhere and so my friend said, 'You know, I could tell this story for hours and hours – on end, if you wish. But I'll skip a few episodes because neither you nor I have time on our hands.' And he added that the woman was harassed and raped in the woods where she could see nothing with the exception of a bully, a rapist and a ripper. This ripper seemed to have ripped a few organs out of her body and the woman made her way through the same wood, determined to find her husband and also her fireplace in front of which she used to tell her

adventures with gusto. She told her adventure in great detail, omitting neither her organs nor their loose ends, and her husband said raucously, in a crow-like voice, ‘Are you crazy?’

‘Perhaps,’ said the woman.

‘Do you realise what you did?’

‘I do.’

‘No one wanders in our woods – not even in broad daylight. And you venture into these clumps of trees in narrow nightlight.’

‘I do.’

‘Have you drawn any lesson from your monstrous exploit?’

‘Yes. One should carry a lot of condoms whenever one ventures into these woods.’

Of course I laughed for a few seconds, anxious to please my friend who is so self-assured he thinks he cannot tell an unfunny story. He often writes uncanny stories, being a writer in his own right, but even his uncanny stories are funny, according to his expectations and calculations. So I laughed and asked him what episodes he had skipped for the sake of our job and metaphysical thoughts that always need a lot of time to mature inside our heads and on the surface of the sheets of paper we put in front of us whenever we feel like writing about metaphysics. ‘What did you hide from me?’ I asked.

‘What are you driving at?’ he asked.

‘I’m not driving, not in the least. I just wish to know what episodes you skipped in the course of your narration.’

‘What episodes are you talking about?’ he asked.

‘Did the rapist tie the woman to a tree before inserting his organ into her?’

‘What are you talking about?’

‘Did he ask her to strip nonchalantly, to the beat of his drum?’

‘She wasn’t beaten to death,’ he said mournfully.

What would I have done, had I been in the woods at the hour touched upon in my story? Of course I might have got lost in another part of the same woods, for it is not enough to find oneself in the woods where a woman makes her way towards her husband and the chimney pot under which she usually eats her chicken/oxtail/fish/tomato soup. Hot soup is very comforting on a cold winter’s day and the day we are talking about is suitable for the purpose and even fits the bill. In other words, it is a cold winter’s day and the woman whose body was mercilessly raped at the very core of the woods where she used to play in her childhood is as cold as the day we are doing our best to describe for our purpose. And our purpose has a great many affinities with the woman whose husband says as he looks at her loose-end-like clothes, ‘You’ll feel better once you’ve got some hot soup down you.’

‘Do you really think so?’ asks the woman.

‘I do,’ says her husband, showing her the soup he has been talking about for some minutes, if not for an hour or so.

‘All right,’ says the woman. ‘Empty the soup into a saucepan and simmer gently for ten minutes.’

The husband follows the advice given by the woman whose destiny and identity are linked to his own life by a marriage contract. And this contract presupposes some level of fidelity that does not admit a life of debauchery and even a walk in the middle of which an act of debauchery might flourish to the detriment of decency and morals; and the traditional customs and ways of conduct that are typical of a particular (part of) society. Middle-class mores, as they say as they think about women who are not afraid of walking in the woods at midnight when all spectres (and spinsters) leave their tombs, their new wombs, and come out to meet their successors, eager to provide them with a few recipes such as, ‘You’ll need a can of tuna for this recipe.’ ‘Baking a cake isn’t difficult – it’s just a matter of following the recipe.’

‘What kind of recipe?’

‘This kind. And this recipe.’

‘*Ah bon.*’

‘The recipe is given in both metric and imperial measures,’ says someone. You see this someone but you have no idea what identity he bears within his chest and brain. You do not mind: what counts is the recipe you are supposed to follow as you cook your dinner and also the lunch your cousins will enjoy tomorrow upon entering your house and looking at the dishes arrayed all around your ballroom. And if they dare ask a few questions, probing into your recipes and their secrets, you say, ‘I never follow recipes exactly when I cook – I just use them as rough guides. I’m always on the lookout for interesting new recipes.’

‘Are you?’

‘I am.’

‘How nice.’

‘It *is* nice.’

The woman in question – her behaviour has already given rise to unanswerable questions – talks to her husband, blushing and trembling so that one might think she thinks something along these lines, ‘I blush whenever I think about it – it was awful! Even the mention of the rapist’s name makes me blush. I blush with embarrassment. Here comes your favourite rapist now – look, you’re blushing!’ She looks at herself in a mirror and says to herself and also to her husband, ‘Look, you’re blushing!’

‘Who are you talking about?’ asks her husband.

‘You and I.’

‘What do I have in common with the rape you’re about to recount? In great detail?’

‘I wish you were my rapist,’ says the woman.

‘What do you mean?’

‘You don’t excite me any more. If you could rape me once in a while, I’d be in ninth heaven. Do you know what Macbeth said about life? “A tale told by an idiot.” I wish it could be a tale told by a rapist. Full of sound and fury, you know.’

‘You know, life is a clumsy fairytale. Nothing more, nevermore.’

‘Bravo.’

‘All fingers and thumbs, you know.’

‘I know.’

‘Gawky, ungainly.’

‘I know. A fairytale, nevertheless.’

‘Never, never, never, never, never.’

‘Less, less, less, less, less.’

‘The, the, the, the, the.’

A woman goes somewhere and as she does so her brains and even her body realise that somewhere is her final destination and also the point she has been hankering after all her life; even in her cradle she kept repeating, ‘Point, point, point, point,’ and also ‘Destination, destination, destination.’ At last she knows which path to take and follow, walking past bushes and trees that grow everywhere to prevent women and even the representatives of other species from going through the woods in search of the Grail. Whatever we look for is the Grail, as every mystic puts it in our periodicals, and we leaf through them since we are bent on finding the truth, a lot of gods or at least a gold watch which might help us keep up with the times, Joneses and Joanas (and Darks); and also with gold.

The woman digs up a pair of gold-plated earrings and says to herself, ‘There must be another pair like that in the woods, otherwise human existence makes no sense.’ So she spots a path and puts her both feet on this path in the hope of finding another path and another pair of earrings she might sell with the intention of buying a villa in Italy and two villas on the Riviera. (A good return on a pair of gold-plated earrings.) All of a sudden, she comes across a man who seems to be willing to cross her path – for no reason at all, as she hastily concludes because she is in a hurry: she needs a lot of money rather badly and the sooner she reaches the gold-studded point, the better. But the man says to her, ‘Where are you going to, my pretty maid?’

‘I’m going to my grandmother’s,’ says the maid.

‘What for?’ asks the ugly man.

‘I haven’t seen her for ages. She must be quite old now. You know, I have two rather elderly aunts.’

‘And here are two elderly *ants*,’ says the man, showing her two ants he manages to hold in the palms of two hands.

‘Do you think they’re elderly?’ asks the awakened beauty.

‘I think they must be older than the oldest man on Earth.’

‘What can we do with them?’ asks the walking beauty.

‘We can ask them to strip their clothes off,’ says the man.

‘They have none,’ says the looking beauty.

‘In that case, it’s your clothes we should take off.’

‘What for?’

‘For my sake.’

‘And what’s your sake?’

‘My sake is right here,’ says the man showing his sake and opening a bottle of sake. (Let us not forget that our cliff-hanger is set in Japan and filmed by Hitchcock or Kurosawa, which and they amounting to the same thing. (Or the same film-director.))

There is a woman in my life and everybody else’s life, I suppose, except that no woman will ever dare enter the life of a homosexual unless he says, ‘Please, come in and be my guest.’ In short, there is a woman and, for the time being, she is not quite in my life because she is rather in the life of the woods where she is walking and talking to herself: talking to yourself is the best of way of warding off all the dangers associated with your crossing any woods after midnight and even slightly before it. So you cross the woods you set your heart upon and you also cross your heart as you continue to cross the woods in question. You say to yourself and also to the woods and its inhabitants, its wolves, dwarves and goblins and hobgoblins whose legs are as crooked as their ways, ‘Dear ugly things and sins! Please let me make my way towards my house situated outside this abode of yours. Do you know Mr Johnson?’

‘Who’s your Johnson?’ asks a hobgoblin or just a *blin*. Or a *crêpe*. Or a pancake, if you wish.

‘I wish for a pancake.’

‘Let’s go back to Johnson, if you please.’

‘Let’s.’

‘He was sent off for deliberately tripping Robson when he was about to score a goal.’

‘Was he?’

‘He was.’

‘When was that?’

‘Nine years ago.’

‘I can’t place this episode in my recollection.’

‘And seven months ago.’

‘All right.’

A woman is walking through the woods and the woods seem to admire her beauty to the point of worshipping her legs and overall elegance. The woods – or so it seems – are prepared to rape this woman without seeking any help that might come from a stranger, provided this stranger is not too old to make love to the woman whose legs are *so* much admired by the woods through which she happens to walk at a late hour. Both the woods and the stranger swoop down to snatch a young woman about

whose beauty the writer of this text has been talking for some time now. Neither the woods nor the stranger we are enlarging upon look like an eagle whose habits make him and also her swoop down on rabbits. Nevertheless both of them swoop down upon the woman who wrestles professionally with them – for five minutes at least. The woods tackle the woman and wrestle her to the ground with the intention of raping her then and there in spite of her so-called reticence. But the woman says, '*Aïe*, *aïe*, *aïe*' – in French, mind you – and the woods concur by letting the woman lie on the ground. So does the stranger, by the way and incidentally, barring a number of incidents that might crop up whenever any incident is mischievous enough to crop up and stick out a mile, let alone two miles.

Our woman lies on the ground and as she does so, she starts stripping her clothes off; and both the woods and the stranger leave her in peace, instead of interfering at every stage of her professional, yet home-made striptease. (In a way, they leave her in strippeace.) The woman's identity cannot change whatever and wherever she does it or that; at least our Hindus think along these lines going back to days of yore. The woman in answer strips her clothes off and starts again, all over, prolonging the pleasure and also the torture: neither the woods nor the stranger dare so much as touch her. (They indulge in what is called 'self-love', 'self-serving', 'self-knowledge,' 'self-possession', 'self-help', 'self-pity' and 'self-fulfilment'.) A wolf turns up upon hearing there is damsel in the vortex, network and nexus of the woods. Of course the wolf joins his victim after much soul-searching that enables him to find out whether this Little Red Riding Hood belongs to the species designated by this name. He carries out a search within his soul and even on the outskirts of it and comes across something rather little and even defines it as a sort of hood. But he is not sure the hood he sees and touches and rumples to his heart's content is really a genuine article – the Hood of Little Red Riding Hood fame. It is true that the hood in argument is little, but the point is it is not red, contrary to the descriptions supplied by Perrot or *Pierrot Lunaire*. Sure enough, this riding hood, if any, is blue in accordance with the work where Pierrot Lunaire acquires the tint known as a 'lunar tint' by which all melancholy-affected people can be recognised all over the world. So the wolf asks a nearby fox, 'What do you think about this hood?'

'This is a little blue riding hood,' answers the fox.

'Do you think I'm allowed to eat its owner?'

'Why not?' asks the fox.

'Because it is said that wolves don't attack humans. I'm worried about my reputation. And also about my honour.'

'You omit one "unless",' says the fox.

'Which "unless"?' asks the wolf.

'Wolves don't attack humans *unless* they're hungry. Are you hungry?'

'Not particularly.'

'All that walking must have given you an appetite, though.'

'I never walk when I'm embarked upon soul-searching.'

The fox has no alternative but to remind the wolf of the following proverbial proverb, ‘The appetite, says the proverb, grows with eating.’ The wolf swallows a few redcurrants and once again looks at the little hood. ‘It’s turned red,’ he says to the fox.

‘That’s right,’ says the fox. ‘That’s red.’

The wolf realises he does not have to work up a real appetite, climbing in the mountains: his appetite is more than real. It is both surreal and hyperreal. So he runs after the Little Red Riding Hood but fails to catch up with her. He finds a horse, swings himself into the saddle and rides off. He rides past a shop, dismounts, buys a heap of clothes, puts them on and continues his ride, passing himself off as an old gaga, alias grandgaga. And he does his best to recall the lullaby he used to sing to his little granddaughter a few centuries ago:

I’m my own gaga, I’m your grandma,
My teeth are very big.
But you should be not frightèned:
I’m going not to eat.

I, for one, can also go somewhere, if not everywhere, as they say, when they think about global villages and all the Schengens one can come across and cross while going somewhere or nowhere, as the saying goes, ‘You go somewhere; you go nowhere, for there’s nowhere to go. Nor is there anywhere.’ I take a plane or a train and show my tickets to all the collectors I meet as I cross all the borders someone constructed on my way with the intention of putting spokes (and strokes) in my wheels. I do not seem to have many wheels, which minimises the risk of getting stuck in the middle of nowhere. Of course I would not mind stopping in the middle of everywhere where the Almighty stands erect like a monument; according to sculptors and theologians. But if you are not the Almighty Himself, you do not opt for any middles, being far more attuned to what the Russians call a ‘hut on the outskirts’, meaning you do not know anything about what is going on. They – whoever they are and have been for years – kill everybody else, but you are not in the know, being on the safe side where no one kills anyone. And so you are not killed, not yet; nor are you murdered or assassinated or hanged like the protagonist of Wilde’s poem. Instead, you are associated with drug addicts and alcoholics, but it is far better to be associated with them than with the dead who cannot even drink a bottle of wine without saying to themselves, ‘We can’t drink wine because we’re dead.’

As far as I am concerned, I might go somewhere and I do, from time to time, for the sake of some argument or other; incidentally, I can also do it for the sake of a walk in the woods where wolves and grandmas have been swarming ever since all our little hoods including the red one resolved to pay a lot of visits to their grandmas and mas to make things easier for everybody. I, for one, put on a mask

that says I am a handsome young wolf, and go in search of my grandma whom I intend to kill for the sake of Freud who kept talking about assassinations as if we could not live away and on in our sterilised society where murders are tolerated only if committed by migrants. These migrants are hungry, thirsty, in tatters and cannot go on without a few murders that are always on their agendas, contrary to what our humanists and Merkelists declare either publicly or not. These migrants consult their agendas on every page of which you can see either 'rape', or 'murder', or both and also 'harassment' and 'so on' of course; and also 'and so forth'. These migratory humans get into a train and rape a few non-migrants; and the latter are not overjoyed, contrary to what the former's lawyers point out. The latter declare that any sexy woman prefers a rape performed and carried out Othelloistically to ordinary oral, phone sex, and so on. And the former say – and their lawyers chime in – they suffered a lot on the 'Long-Knife Night', as they call it for two complicated reasons: *Primo*, the knives were too long; *secundo*, the night was too long and sharp.

The nickname for these numerous migrants' is 'wolves' and, paying homage to their numbers, their opponents call them '*packs* of wolves', which is partly true, although one might point out these migrants, for all their habits, are not wolves, strictly speaking; at least they do not threaten Dr Zhivago in Pasternak's Nobel-Prize-Winner-Novel-River. It is true that there are packs of them (of werewolves or theyarewolves) and therefore, upon seeing them in the streets and in the bystreets, some passers-by – let alone a lot of journalists – are tempted to speak about packs. (Some of them speak of 'packs of wild dogs'.) These migrants go and give no thought to our grandmothers or our first human father; and yet we are bound to assassinate the latter for the sake of our pet theories stemming profusely from Freud's prodigious pen. There are primeval fathers, mothers, aunts and other fore nephews we must assassinate for the sake of history and our own lives. Why? I know that Philippa still holds a grudge against me for refusing to lend her that money; and this money as well. But my forefathers and aunts are not attuned to this grudge (and drudgery), which explains the cacophony we have to put up with, whenever we try and listen to the music of the spheres. So I am duty bound to bear a grudge (and not a fudge, mind you) against fore-grand-aunts and do not hesitate as I rack my brains – the wreck I euphemistically call my brains – because I know exactly why I am entitled to bear a great many grudges against my fores and grands. I was born and this eventful event is the grudge I bear all of them, be they my aunts, my ants, let alone my apes whose sexual organs play havoc with my limbs and the nymphs I contemplate after switching my TV set on. I worship these nymphs and also the Swan-Lakes they shower upon television viewers whenever the Russians are in the neighbourhood and even on our doorsteps, barging in to make us savour their so-called art and legs. (And we would give anything to touch them, if only with a barge pole.) We savour them, but they do not leave us in peace, contrary to our democratic and financial rules that dictate the terms of troop withdrawal from the region. 'What? What do you mean?' they ask.

'The terms of troop withdrawal from the region,' say our well-wishers and doctors.

'Are you watching *The Nutcracker*?' they ask.

‘We are,’ we answer.

‘Is it a Russian ballet?’ we are asked.

‘It is,’ we answer.

‘What do you want?’ they ask.

‘Withdrawal from the region,’ say our psychoanalysts.

‘What kind of withdrawal?’ we are asked. ‘Swans?’

‘No.’

‘What about Sleeping Beauties? From the region?’

‘We like their beauty,’ we answer.

‘They’re sleeping,’ say our psychoanalysts.

‘We’ll wake them up. Our hands on their shoulders will wake them out of bad Russian dreams.’

So the migrants (and I am a migrant too) continue to walk through our woods and go so far as to traverse them, which threatens our peace and quiet and our castles, alias our homes brimful with our spouses. They descend upon us – not from the heavens, mind you – and say, ‘Where are your grandmas? We’re wolves in full accordance with your European fairy tales. And we’re prepared to impersonate them in your beds.’ We show them our beds, resolved to safeguard our traditions and fairies and tales – as many as are consistent with our virtues. It is said and repeated on the radio that a good diet will safeguard against diseases, and our diet is a bed (or a good or God or *le bon Dieu*) we put in front of a theirwolf. This theirwolf of theirs installs his wolfish self in our bed and says he is our grandma; and consequently we are his little communist hood in spite of our mood that is not red at all. Our mood is blue and our humour is a bit too blue for the theirwolf’s tastes; but he does not mind and we do realise he does not eat us straightaway as if he were faithful to the text of our Western, bookshop-promoted literature. So he says to us, ‘Who are you?’

‘We’re Rotcappers,’ we answer.

‘Do you mean “Little Blues”?’

‘That’s right.’

‘Do you also mean “Little Violets” or “Little Daffodils”?’

‘We mean whatever you mean. We know that if we mean something else, you’ll eat us with your teeth and also with your stomach. In short, you’ll eat us for breakfast.’

‘So your names are Little Daffodils. Do you know the poem?’

‘What poem?’

‘About your names?’

‘Of course. Do you want us to recite it to you?’

‘I’d be delighted.’

I’m a tiny bit of Daffodil.

Actually I’m just Dildil.

Fot for? For Da and Da.
Da-da-da-da- da-da-da
Niet-niet-niet-niet-niet.
Yet!!!

I am perhaps in a *selva oscura* and I do not think I may pass myself off as Dante whose age – 35 years – would suit my purpose and even fill the bill, if I were in his *selva oscura* and also at the *beginning* of the *Commedia*. (Or just in my everyday life imbued with deep, religious feeling, as poets say when speaking about mystics.) Alas, I am always in the middle of a *tragedy*, and even *melodramas* are not entirely estranged from my life: my tears abundantly testify to their odds and ends, or rather to their obtrusive presence. So I am in the middle of a dark wood, on the outskirts of the Schwarz Wald, and I do not know what to do; and the animals, who are symbols or signs and do not seem to be just animals in their own right, keep wandering around me as if in expectation of my decision to welcome them. I am reluctant to welcome anyone or anything, and life is just a sixpence and all I can boast about is a pocket full of rye. I do not think these setting and predicament mean 'life' or something along these lines; along the Life Line, as fortune tellers say as they look at the palm of one's hand.

In many parts of the world, and especially in the Celtic world, forests constituted truly natural shrines; but I am not in the Celtic world and I even wonder if I am in any world, however worldless and ludicrous. I may be found in a grain of sand about which not only Blake but many other analysts still enlarge with all the gustos they have within their reach. In this grain of sand you find the cosmos in its entirety and futility; you also meet someone and everybody and deal with them on face-to-face terms. And you say to your friends and curious colleagues, 'So far we've spoken on the phone but never face-to-face.'

'Who? What? When?' ask all of them, then and there.

You are astonished on the grounds that no discussion has any meaning if you do not touch upon God, if only metaphorically and symbolically, for you are not likely to touch God's skin, even if your mother puts a pair of mittens into your coat, fearing the risks one is sure to run in the course of such encounters. The hour of this encounter is on the horizon and you draw your mittens from your pocket in the hope of protecting your own skin from that of God, which is pure fire, as they say. They say, 'Fire is more important than other elements and God is made of pure fire. We are mostly water, you know, but God is Fire, the purest Fire one can chance upon in this world of impurities and oddities.'

So you answer straightforwardly, looking straight into the eyes of your colleagues, 'God and St Paul.'

'What are you talking about?' say your colleagues. (Needless to say, St Paul catches your meaning at once.)

‘What we see down here can be seen only darkly – through sunglasses, so to speak.’

‘Why don’t you take your sunglasses off?’ they say and suggest.

‘Because I’m supposed to see everything and everyone very, very darkly, as if in a looking glass installed in the middle of a *camera obscura*.’

‘Why don’t you transfer this camera to your garden? Why don’t you let our sunshine disentangle the knots of your doubts?’

‘A depressing, overcast winter morning.’

‘Has no one ever spoken to you about sunny afternoons?’

So you put your mittens on and God or one of His emissaries begins to march in your direction, towards your hands and also with the intention of touching your heart; and removing it, if necessary. You realise you might be promoted to the rank of a prophet: every prophet has his heart and tongue removed by an angel, otherwise nothing can be done, given the deficiencies of our natural members and resources. Someone gets in touch with you and both your mittens and your body open their structures to display a number of tiny holes exposed to the sun and eternal truths.

Of course you cannot know for sure who you will meet in the other world; or even in this world of ours and yours. Suppose you are in the playground and all of a sudden, according to the laws of determinism and predestination, you come face to face with a gunman as he strides into the same playground that, to all outward appearances, does not belong to you and consequently is accessible to gunmen and even gunwomen; and even to the gods to whom all playgrounds and ordinary grounds have belonged since our time immemorial situated before creations and recreations. You think this gunman might turn out to be an angel; after all, you have no idea what either a plain or an extraordinary angel looks like except that he has a pair of wings and his face is sure to remind you of Fra Angelico’s works and cells. At worst, this gunman of yours – especially if this gunman happens to be a gunwoman – may prove to be a fallen angel and any angel, however fallen and perverse, is better than a human. At least you hope that is how the matter stands on the playground where you found yourself a few minutes ago. You recall a few facts related to the theory of relativity which teaches us the difference between a space and another space. It is true that we are used to calling a spade a spade, but the matter stands differently with space. Sometimes we say to ourselves, ‘In some of these spaces no matter can stand or even lie.’

Be that as it may, a space can be like a face screaming in agony; under the pernicious influence of time and speed. And you say to yourself, ‘Suppose this playground is just distorted beyond recognition. That’s why I can’t recognise the angel whose face is that of a gunman. Not even that of a gunwoman. However, if I make a suitable time-space-speed effort, I may correct this error and distortion, finding the right angle of vision, provided I chance upon the right non-local connection.’ You set about looking for the best non-local connection and at first you seem to be making good progress with your search. After a while, however, you say to yourself, ‘I tried to get hold of a perfect non-local connection, but I think I set about it the wrong way.’ And then you set about it the right way

and what happens next reminds you of a film you saw some time ago. At the end of this film dealing with drug dealers you effortlessly spotted a bunch of men and you thought these men were drug dealers. But as events turned out, the men who had arrived in the guise of drug dealers were actually undercover police officers. Your gunman turned out to a beautiful woman or God's emissary; or Aphrodite and Helen of Troy. And immediately, without losing a second, you began to play a game of cops and robbers with this woman; after all, you were in a playground. And you are still convinced that this game is the most erotic game one might play in a playground or even in the woods.

Contemporary psychoanalysts regard the darkness of the forest and the deep roots of its trees as a symbol of the unconscious. The same goes for a playground, even if there are no trees on it because your fears and any darkness do not really depend on trees and suchlike: one gunman is enough to awaken your unconscious where all sorts of crimes and sins have been lying in wait for many years, if not for centuries. (Let us not forget Freud's fathers and their primeval sons.) Actually forests and even dark jungles are not as terrifying as an ordinary space, be it a playground or just a lawn. You can cut down any number of trees, even if you are not resolved to attack a number of mountains, as the Jade Emperor Yu did. You have nothing against mountains and you prefer to use them for your descents and skis instead of killing them with your sword. But suppose you are still afraid of the dark forest where Dante embarked upon his personal search for the Holy Grail. In this case, you can ask a lumberjack to cut the trees down; all of them, in point of fact. But an empty space is far more terrifying than any dark forest, however Dantean or Dantesque or Grotesque.

Let us suppose it is an empty space, a sort of void the traveller encounters at the beginning of the *Comedy*. Of course he is aware of the happy ending of his enterprise, given that the title of his work is *Comedy* and not *Catastrophe*, which might be the only title of whatever has been written since 30 years ago at least. And in these matters no one knows exactly what is least or more: no landmarks or benchmarks are really important. In a way, every piece of news is a landmark, an Unpromised Land where no one would yearn to live, even if such a life might mean prosperity in the long run. What kind of prosperity are we talking about? An unprosperous prosperity, as Prospero might have put it when talking to Caliban or even Ariel who is as unpromising and stupid as Caliban and other drunkards one meets in *The Tempest*.

Dante survives one or two tempests staged and performed by Gulfs or Goblins whose names I forget, being far more preoccupied with my own conflicts and their irresolute resolutions. I cannot say I am in Florence and my party loses its way, grip, mind, touch and heart, for I belong to no party, however apolitical and unpopular. But with a bit of unluck I might turn out to be in the middle of the *selva oscura*, and no tempest of any kind is needed to convey me to the darkness where Dante lost his way and probably his heart despite the loss his body suffered upon his very first meeting with

Beatrice. To tell the truth, one can hardly call it a meeting or even an encounter: he spotted her figure and face in the midst of other damsels whose beauty used to inspire many Kavalkantis for two centuries at least. (At least I know how to spell Petrarch.)

You are in the middle of this *selva oscura* known to any Italian as if he or his wife went mushrooming there every weekend and during public holidays. You pick a few mushrooms and suddenly the darkness of the *Commedia* fame descends upon you, engulfing your children as well; assuming you have some children or others. And you say to yourself there are a few symbolic animals in store for you, in the wings of the wood exclusively designed for mushrooming, eating berries and trapping small animals and birds. You take advantage of the offer and eat three baskets of berries and trap one bird whose name you cannot place in your recollection. And then the mystery or rather the tragedy starts: you first see a few animals you can neither eat nor speak to, and then a guru makes his appearance and you follow him so as not to get lost in the darkness that is both symbolic and metaphorical; and also metaphysical. The same darkness is also material and realistic, judging from the hesitancy experienced by your feet, eyes and nerves. They all hesitate and you end up admitting to yourself you are afraid of the darkness like an immature, high-strung boy; like a child depicted by Dickens, I suppose. Or by Dostoevsky.

As everyone knows, you cannot generalise about a continent as varied as Europe; nor are you supposed to apply the same method to Russia that is as varied as Europe. (And let us not forget she is much larger than Europe.) Nor can you generalise about the darkness because many boys and girls adore the darkness which allows them to kiss and cuddle each other without taking the trouble to find the back row of a second-rate cinema. They kiss and cuddle and play hide-and-seek because it is no easy task to find one or anybody in the dark. This one or another stands by your side and you cannot see them, being overwhelmed and overpowered by the lack of God's grace that bestows upon us light and a number of light-begotten revelations, providing we are the elect and not the reprobate whose fate was sealed before the Big Bang.

Suppose we are what they (or rather He) call 'one of the happy few', a member of the team called 'The Elect'. You are keen on mushrooming and therefore go to the nearest forest reputed to be one of the best depositories of mushrooms in the world. You pick up a few unpoisoned mushrooms and suddenly an animal shows up without any warning; and also without further ado. The warning signs of death are respiratory problems and dizziness, but you are neither dizzy nor short of breath. So you say to yourself the animal in question is a symbol and must be construed as either a representative of evil or good. You feel and know – and your sixth sense takes part in the investigation – that this animal is *not* beyond good and evil; not only because it reads neither Nietzsche nor Spinoza. This emblematic animal is also beyond *your ken*, but you do not give a damn about your ken, enjoying time and space as they come; and they come in dribs and drabs unless you take a train or a plane; let alone a spacecraft. If you do, space-time bombards you, killing and injuring your sentiments and even presentiments.

Let us forget for a moment – or perhaps forever – this horrific and almost doomsday scenario. Let us forget spacecrafts and the speed of light that blurs the distinction between reality and fantasy, old age and fountains of youth. You come back and find tombstones on which there are names of your relatives stretching down to the offspring of your fathers and mothers. And you are in your prime and can even dance on your relatives' tombs because your legs are as agile as those of Nijinsky. Let us forget this speed-provoked madness and try to cope with the madness we encounter every day, even if there are no spacecrafts around us. What is there? we ask ourselves and the answer we give to our inquisitive mind boils down to a gigantic dark forest where, according to Dante, there are a few animals, which is logical after all and does not contradict our own impressions and memories. Whenever you go to a forest, be it dark or crystal-clear, you might encounter a bear or another animal whose claws are prepared and willing to tear your body apart at any moment. Of course you do not have to concentrate upon a few childish fears that are unable to take into consideration either symbols or what is sure to lie behind or inside them.

Suppose you encounter a bear who eats a lot of raspberries because, according to this bear and his personal clock, it is dinnertime. And the Russians know that bears like raspberries even more than wild strawberries to which Ingmar Bergman dedicated his legendary film. But the Russians are also aware of the fact that bears prefer humans to raspberries and other berries, however succulent; if you happen to come across a bear, your childish fear informs you that your bones are likely to crumble in the course of what is defined as a 'bear hug'. But let us follow in Dante's footsteps instead of letting our fears invade our fragile, unreliable bodies.

In China the bear is a male symbol and therefore heralds the birth of boys and is an expression of *yang*, which does not tie in with what our feminists are accustomed to in the contemporary world: there are only *female* symbols around us and probably inside our bodies as well. (According to some psychologists, we are all androgynous.) But bears are not alone in the dark wood to which we are paying a *lying* visit, as it were: we do not feel like *flying* inside this particular stretch of time. All this leads us to serpents who are always in conflict with bears; and our serpents belong to the kingdom of *yin*, the equivalent of water. At this point, however, we must point out that the bear is slightly *yin* as if in disagreement with the boar's *yang*, and this fact explains why the she-bear recurs so often in India. And even in India there are a great many dark woods where Dante might have begun his mythological journey, had he been acquainted with Indian philosophy which offers one a wide range of options and symbols.

Moreover, in Islamic exoteric tradition the bear is sometimes classed as a wretched, disgusting creature, and the Russians might come round to this point of view, if they were not so fond of bear-tamers whose art we can admire in Russia-situated funfairs. That is why the Russians are convinced that bears are so cute they would not harm a fly, let alone human beings who are far superior to flies; at least in the domain of the brain. But we go back to Dante – or to our own selves facing a bear in our favourite dark forest – and say to ourselves, 'We're disgusting creatures, if our solution to this symbol-

loaded problem is correct.' We might also think we should switch to raspberries instead of devouring bowls of strawberries and cherries; after all, bears seem healthier than humans, especially when they tear the latter apart.

Of course many psychoanalysts affirm, 'Whatever we encounter in any wood is our unconscious that manifests itself whenever an opportunity presents itself.' And one's walk in the woods is the best opportunity one can come up with when analysing the beginning of Dante's *Commedia*. No one can imagine, if only for an instant, one's doubts and fears sunbathing on a beach where beautiful bodies seem to wait for an embrace or a kiss; or even a sexual relationship or abuse. A dark forest is our unconscious loaded with rats, serpents, dragons and suchlike: the list is too long and even the library of Alexandria would not hold all the books devoted to our agonies of guilt, to our complexes and our fathers' tombs.

So you go mushrooming and suddenly spot a serpent which might have been in your mind or rather in its remotest corner ever since you committed your first offence. In a way, this serpent drills a hole in your mind and snakes her way through your skull, determined to reach the grass and look you in the face from a distance. You are seized by a terror so intense the blood rushes to fortify the seat of courage, flooding your heart. Contrary to what happens to Dante – after all, you are not Dante, for all the love you bear him – your fear is not assuaged: you do not conceive the hope of escaping from this forest upon catching your first dim glimpse of the light of virtue. Indeed all lights are out of your reach as long as the serpent you have nursed within your mind for years and years continues to stare you in the face.

You are much influenced by the remarks which are used to turning a serpent into a serpent, so to speak, and the people dropping these remarks – Lady Macbeth is of their number – just say, 'We call a serpent a serpent. And you're one.' Actually they misunderstand this manifold symbol inside which there lies buried the wellspring of life and of the creative spirit. The serpent is a line and this line has neither beginning nor end; moreover, you are invited to change it into any shape, bizarre or reminiscent. Poets often admire the beauty of clouds, but serpents are more intricate and infinite. Besides, all possible snakes together form one single primordial manifoldness, an inseverable primordial Something which yet is ever coiling and uncoiling, melting away and re-emerging. 'Look like th'innocent flower / But be the serpent under't,' says Lady Macbeth to her husband. So now you are an innocent flower and everyone thinks you will never be capable of a murder like the ones we witness in *Macbeth*, on several occasions. But they uncoil and kill a few kings, anxious to become one of them in the course of the history that often neglects all those who yearn to become kings and queens. You melt away whenever accused of a murder or overreach yourself – like Richard III who reads the Bible as the crowd shouts, 'You're our King, you're our King.' And then he re-emerges and murders his kinsmen, nephews, nieces and a bunch of old women; one might conclude he is a serpent sunbathing on a flower. Anyway he looks like one or rather two: the flower and the serpent; and you can see them both, saying to yourself, 'Serpent symbolism is linked to the notion of life itself.'

In a way, in many ways, everything is linked to the notion of life or just to life itself: we have no need of notions, categories and suchlike. We can go straight to nature, to dark woods and ersatz woods, even if they are teeming with serpents, snakes and their likes. Sometimes, when you attempt to speak about a snake in the presence of an optimist, he answers, 'A snack? You're right – if there's a cafe nearby, we could stop for a snack.'

'I'm talking about a snake,' you say with a frown.

'Fresh or dried fruit makes an ideal snack, you know,' he says with yet another smile.

'Have you ever heard of a Great Invisible Serpent?' you ask.

'A Great Invisible Snack? Why *invisible*? Are you on a diet?'

'I had a huge lunch, so I'll only need a snack for dinner,' you answer playing up to your opponent.

'I agree with you on this issue. The doctor put me on a low-salt diet to reduce my blood pressure. But many snack foods are high in salt, sugar and fat.'

This dialogue might have been written and filmed by Antonioni whose skill in the domain of uncommunication remains unsurpassed: in this day and age everyone does a three-year course in *communication* skills. We communicate all the time by sending dark forests to our friends and girlfriends whose curiosity is aroused by the image of the wood where Dante lost his way of life; his *Italian* way of life. 'What do you mean?' they answer thinking only in terms of downhill skiing and sunbathing; and sea bathing.

'Have you ever heard of Dante?'

'What *are* you talking about?'

'About the prologue to the *Commedia*. According to Sapegno, the unpractised narrator is in less than total command of his means and goals.'

'What does he want? What do *you* want?' Just another SMS.

'The symbolism of the prologue is at times less than transparent.'

'I think we should try to make this exchange of SMS *more* transparent.'

'The narrative and dramatic technique are laboured and contrived.'

'They are. What next?'

'Dante obscures his moral message. His art is unripe.'

'So is yours.'

'That's right.'

'That's right.'

So you decide to stay at home because, according to your fear and trembling, you are surrounded by dark forests, woods, groves and copses. You seem to be under attack, even if you are counting on your

walls' protection and loyalty. Suddenly – nothing happens all of a sudden in our lives – you see an impressive number of copses and these and their branches suggest that co*r*pses are on the attack again. You can call them names; you can call them what you wish, but they advance steadily through your internal and external dark forest, and you realise it is your own corpse you must be afraid of. Whatever happens or does not happen is in your head; even your own tomb is in your head, within your skull which you would call a 'cemetery' if you were more clairvoyant. You are not because you are *dark*voyant, *gloom*voyant, *hell*voyant. You wish you were not voyant at all but you *are* voyant and *fear*voyant, even if you do not really *see* your fear with your own eyes; either in front of you or overhead. Nor do you actually see your *trembling* because you shy away from mirrors and looking glasses: you are reluctant to contemplate your trembling soul. And if Dante or any other poet were resolved to describe your physical appearance, he would not go about it as follows, 'His bottom lip trembled and tears welled up in his eyes.' Why? you may ask. Because your *other* lip trembles as well. One gets the feeling your body is covered with a multitude of lips.

You cannot escape from the dark forest where you have been imprisoned for some time, and you say to yourself as you recall the teachings of all the fathers, that love is the best remedy against every obstacle one might meet on one's way to doomsday. Your body is covered with lips and even mouths, and you begin to kiss all of them, although our fathers and forefathers usually speak of the love we are supposed to convey to *other* bodies, souls, minds and mouths. But what is generally called self-love is an appropriate prelude to the universal love one is likely to chance upon in works of art and landscapes which, according to Kant, awaken our awareness of beauty, dragging it from its beauty sleep. If you do not love yourself, you are unable to bestow the honour of your love on anybody because you do not know the first thing about love and other bodies, others – and mothers, as the Russians often point out, emphasising the role of mothers in our lives and loves. Well, to begin with, you kiss a few lips with which your body is magnanimously endowed and then walk around your room in search of the universal love in question. You do not question this love, for it is universally believed this love is everywhere; otherwise it would be neither universal nor global, as we say nowadays. It is unquestionable and if you go so far as to question it, you hear the kind of beep you are accustomed to hearing when working with computers and other electronic devices.

Anyway, love is everywhere and so you need not go out and cross a street where you might be run over by a cyclist or a Rolls Royce; even a simple Roll would be enough to crush your bones, sinews, thoughts and hopes. So you stay at home and sit down in one of your armchairs only to find it is another dark forest – a dark forest of sorts, so to speak. Of course no one would compare your armchair to the *selva – sterva* means a 'bitch' or 'slut' or 'cow' in Russian – but nevertheless you tremble all over as you await the animals carrying symbols under their skins, which reminds us of terrorists and their suicidal attacks. The animals in question – this is another question – turn up and spray you with their symbols and mythological significance. A she-wolf sprays you with cupidity and, for no reason at all, you are reminded of your mistress who sprayed red paint all over your car in one

last vengeful act before leaving you for good. Your piano is also a dark forest and it looks all the darker since you play *The Moonlight Sonata* on it. As they say, the dark can be seen only in the midst of light. (I like the contrast of the white trousers with the black jacket.) And vice versa: you cannot see light if it is not silhouetted against a number of clouds; or try to pierce the same or other clouds. Dark clouds massed on the horizon and suddenly you saw a beam of light, whereupon you set about believing in God; and your faith was under way for quite a while.

To go back to *The Moonlight Sonata*, you should play it as often as you can after switching all the lights off in your house. That is what they call a 'spiritual light' which is far more important than the Blackpool illuminations or a firework display. Suppose the sky is alight with hundreds of fireworks. So what? Is this sky of yours spiritual, mystical, godly, Christian, Muslim? The instructions on the fireworks said 'Light the blue touchpaper, and stand well clear.' That is what it boils down to: technicalities, beer, vodka. You watch the fireworks, oohing and aahing with everyone else. And neither your oohing nor your aahing has anything to do with Masses and Communions; with Bach's cantatas. There is no spiritual dimension to this fun. You just say to yourself, 'Spirits are more expensive than beer, but they get you drunk faster.' If you play *The Moonlight Sonata* in the black hole of your room, you die and are offered another birth whose inborn spirituality cannot be questioned either by St Augustine or by the *lieber* Augustin about whom a touching song has been sung for two centuries at least:

Ach, my darling Augustin
Augustin, Augustin,
He-re-is a cookie tin,
Time's wearing thin.

THESIS, ANTITHESIS, SYN

T1

There is a blot, a blotch or blood that must flow through veins instead of going here and there in the world where suits and suitcases speak about humans. And this world is alive because a lot of blood flows through it; or does not *flow* as you can see if you look at the world persistently. This blood is frozen and you look at it, saying, 'It's frozen food,' and you eat this blood, even if you are not hungry. You eat whatever you can eat and you do not die of hunger, contrary to what happens to other people who, according to our charity organisations, grow thinner and thinner. They grow thinner; we grow fatter and sinner, and we realise all that when we count the money we have received as a result of the dances we execute in the course of our charity balls. We execute a dance and a lot of money is thrown into our hats which we hold out in expectation of this gold rush or rather gold rain. We recall Danae or just Dana who welcomed Zeus whose appearance coincided with that of a downpour painted in gold. You paint the rain and get a lot of money, even if you are a very bad painter. You paint a blot on the world and get the world so you no longer have to represent it: you are holding it in the palms of your hands. And you are holding a lot of date palms in the palms of your hands.

A1

There was an accident and the world lost all its blood in this accident. So the world is bloodless and even frozen blood is no longer on the market. Humanists are jubilant at the lack of blood in any shape or form: they say we should drink Coke instead of aping vampires. But we ape vampires even when we drink a glass of Coke – on account of our teeth that are much longer and sharper than any set of dentures one can come across during one's holidays and business trips. With our teeth we can eat beasts and animals such as cows and horses; and after a while we discover how eating raw food helps balance our bodies and aids digestion. Of course we all make a grimace of disgust when we see the raw meat for the first time; and there is always the first time and even the second. But by the end of the year we no longer grimace; we smile instead as we enjoy our meals or rather our meats. We must point out that even our teeth shed no blood whatsoever: whenever we see a drop of blood, we fling the bloody hunk of meat in a rubbish bin and go on eating bloodless sinews and muscles. We are aware that people can become infected after eating raw or undercooked meat. Frankly speaking, we are not *people*: we are vampires except that we drink a lot of Coke. And we hold a great many credit cards in the palms of our hands.

S1

Not only our bodies and souls need so-called balance: our very life needs it, even if, for once, we are not dealing with the *human* condition and human *predicament*. Bloodlessness is perfect in the domain of pacifism and humanism; but evil is as necessary as good. It is even more necessary than good,

otherwise no one would ever speak of ‘necessary evil’. (Does anyone ever speak of ‘necessary good’ or ‘necessary virtue’? Even Plato does not, let alone Aristotle.) Now and then we should therefore drink a little bit of blood, if only for the sake of our mental equilibrium. Boris Godunov was not in the habit of drinking blood either for breakfast or after lunch. That is why, according to Mussorgsky, he saw blood-covered toddlers as he continued to go round the bend; at dinner time. Even if we are determined to plant ourselves beyond good and evil, we need a bit of evil to ascertain our whereabouts. Suppose we contemplate a lot of good and do our best to plant ourselves beyond it. And what about evil? Aren’t we supposed to be situated beyond good and *evil*? Where is it, may I ask? There is only good on the horizon and in front of it; and also beyond it, in the great Beyond. In other words, there is not enough room to swing a cat, let alone a chunk of evil. Of course you can always go to the nearest cemetery and empty a corpse after digging it up. The point is drinking dead blood creates only an infinitesimal quantity of evil: you need the quick and their contents to replenish blood stocks conveniently. So you accost a maiden, kiss her hand, drink the blood that circulates in it and plant yourself beyond good and evil. In one of your hand you are holding a few pieces of silver; in the other a credit card.

T2

‘I saw the glass of the terminal blown out, a lot of agitated people streaming out. There were people with blood on their faces.’ A witness happened to be there instead of being anywhere else as if there were no elses nowhere, which is not true; and we realise the untruth of this statement when we look at our globe literally covered with other places, sites and minds. A terrorist goes and throws whatever he carries on his body and in his mind, hoping to reach his Paradise in no time at all. ‘There was suddenly a loud explosion. There was smoke everywhere.’ There are witnesses everywhere because our globe is big, even if it looks rather small on our tables and chests of drawers. We witness smoke and of course there is a lot of fire somewhere, whether we say that to ourselves or not. We say to ourselves, ‘There’s a lot of fire everywhere,’ and see some smoke; and as we do so, we drop to the ground. Smoke and soot everywhere: that is how we define ‘everywhere’: smoke and soot. We run through a cloud of dust; or a cloud of *must*, for we have to run; otherwise we shall not be able to walk; to *walk*, let alone *jump*. And we like walking for the sake of our health; and wealth. If we do not walk, we are not likely to reach and open our safes which are our selves.

A2

If a bomb explodes somewhere, we say to ourselves, ‘The US was the first country to have the bomb.’ And so we believe our freedom and countries are protected by this bomb because this bomb will always serve as a nuclear deterrent. And if another country comes up with the same idea and an almost identical bomb, you put both bombs on a dinner table and say to everybody, ‘If these two bombs touch each other, our civilisation with all its Bachs and Boschs will disappear forever. And we like Dante,

you know.' So these bombs stay on the table as if determined to vote for peace in the course of the conferences staged by the United Nations, the United Kingdom and the United States of America; and the United Arab Emirates. Then someone comes in and says, 'I heard what sounded like a thud a minute or so before 8 a.m. It sounded like it could have been something dropped off the back of a lorry.' 'Something did drop off the back of a lorry,' we chime in. 'Nothing to worry about. Just a stone of no importance.' But the spoilsport goes on thus, 'Ten to 20 seconds later, I heard a loud explosion and I immediately knew what it was.' 'What was it in your opinion?' we ask. 'I saw smoke coming out of the front entrance of the airport,' says the spoilsport, spoilday, spoillife. 'Did you see fire?' we ask him. 'No,' answer the spoilmood. 'We'll sort that out – don't worry your pretty little head about it!' we say, showing him a bomb. One atom bomb can serve as a deterrent to brooding.

S2

We must protect our life and its beauty, and if our life's beauty is made up of a number of precious birds, we chase cats out of our gardens, parks and woods. And if it is cats we should protect, we begin chasing dogs out of our houses, castles and museums. The Red Cross's primary concern is to preserve and protect human life but its colour reminds us of communism and its commissars who used to kill everybody, even their own colleagues. So we are tempted to rename the Red Cross, putting White or Blue or Pink in front of the Cross which reminds us of the Cross. We know we are not doing enough to protect the environment from pollution, and we swear an oath to do our best to be able to do quite enough to protect our planet. Scientists warn of an abrupt shift in the world climate. According to them, the likely consequences of our misbehaviour would include killer storms much, much, much stronger than any in modern times. Such a storm is on our doorstep, but we say to each other, 'It's nothing. Something just dropped off the back of a lorry. Or it's another suicide bomber.' And what about a rise of sea level sufficient to begin drowning the world's coastal cities before the end of this century? Of course we are not likely to live until this end: there are other ends in store for us. Luckily for us, there is no shortage of ends in human life and even in that of animals and plants. Yet we had better build another Great Wall of China to keep this and other storms at bay. And of course we should orchestrate Britain's exit from the bloc that is already conflating terrorism with the migration crisis.

T3

'There remains hope,' says St Augustine and he is right of course, for deprived of hopes or esperanzas, life may be likened to a large family confined to a studio flat at the top of some building situated on the outskirts of Paris or any other city. As we know, these families can overcome their fundamental misfortunes only by creating the last circle of Hell (in their earthly hell). How does this theory translate into practical policy? Following your rabbi's advice, you give shelter to goats that stink and thereby make your live unbearable – as if it were bearable without goats and skunks. You welcome a

skunk with open arms and then you close your arms and the skunk leaves you in a relative peace. At least you no longer hate your way of life, your never-ending asphyxiation: for all their slovenliness, humans are better than skunks, especially if they belong to your family. Don't you worry – it will end sooner or later; and that is what hope and its ramifications are about. Of course you can call an earthly hell an earthly hell, if you wish, but you do not wish it for the simple reason that you hope to get out of this hell through death and the forthcoming Paradise. And that is what we optimistically call 'hope'; in other words, we call 'hope' 'hope' which, according to St Augustine, remains somewhere, perhaps in the same crammed studio. 'There remains hope,' he points out, 'which, as I think, is compared to an egg. For hope has not yet arrived at attainment; and an egg is something, but not yet the chicken.' In short, we are supposed to translate the present into the future and that is not a literal translation – far from it. How do we translate the word 'goat'? 'God', no pun intended, no blasphemy intended. (A translation intended.) Indeed if we welcome God with open arms, our studio turns into Paradise or rather into one of its suburbs: the real Paradise cannot be seen face to face on our Earth. How do we translate the word 'studio'? 'Egg.' And 'spade'? 'Cat.' The French call a cat a cat. (As if the English could call a cat a dog.) So, instead of talking about a spade propped against a tree in your garden, you enlarge upon cats. You say and write that in India statues of ascetic cats depict the beatitude of the animal kingdom to which you do not belong, alas; even if you have a goat at your place. You may add that in Cambodia a cat is carried round in a cage from house to house with songs and procession – just a sort of religious ritual, a pretext for praying out loud. That is what a real and useful translation is about: it makes you pray and kneel down upon spotting the word 'spade'. And there are other spades beyond Creation and any translation, however literal, faithful and word-for-word. So you cannot help holding a spade which is neither a cat nor a ruby. Taking care of rosebushes? What for? An involuntary homage to the rosebud of *Citizen Kane* fame? No such luck. Digging your own grave.

A3

'The husbands, the booze, the bling; Elizabeth Taylor's "lust for life" knew few boundaries, says Roger Lewis in *The Times*, Saturday March 19 2006. What else does he say in the same issue of the same paper? 'Whenever I read yet again about the jewels and diamond bracelets, the 279-tonne, 450ft private yacht, the minks, the jets, the 2,800lb of baggage on a trip to St Petersburg in 1975, the entourage of hairdressers and bodyguards –' Why does antithesis exist? For the sake of Hegel's dialectics, say philosophers and their students. You can begin a sentence in the section designed for theses and finish it in the one where you can find at least one antithesis. You begin your life with a number of rose-tinted views stored in your mind and even in your body that is in good form and perfect health in spite of bouts of flu and measles. And sometimes you cannot restrain your nature and instincts so that your mother discovers a huge yellow spot on your sheet. But neither pools nor yellow spots perturb your rose-tinted universe because you are still a child and think you will live forever. And when you see Elizabeth Taylor as you sit in front of your TV or computer, you say to yourself,

‘I’ll also have a lot of yachts and diamonds – like Elizabeth Taylor and her husbands. I’ll be as shameless as them. I’ll get away with greed, covetousness, adultery and sundry other deadly sins. And I’ll wear a $25,000 couture gown for my wedding in 2021. A $75,000 couture gown. What’s the rate of inflation? And I won’t forget a few rocks from Cartier. And I’ll steal other women’s husbands. And if I’m a man, I’ll steal other husbands’ wives. But I’ll never go to Petersburg. I haven’t lost anything there, as the Russians put it.’ For a while you continue to look at life through rose-tinted glasses and then you buy a telescope instead of indulging in yet another bodyguard. Suddenly you discover the other side of the Moon or of the world; the other side of the coin, as capitalists put it. They take a coin out of their pockets and look at it for a while, smiling broadly and happily. And then they turn this coin and look at its other side, whereupon their and your faces begin to exhibit a gloomy expression. And you say to yourself, ‘There is widespread gloom and doom about my future and that of humanity that doesn’t care a sod about ecology.’ But your black-tinted telescope belongs in the antithesis section so that for a while you enjoy both life and your own hopes. And whenever you happen to sit brooding in your room all day, you say to yourself you had better recall Elizabeth Taylor, her adventures and exploits. You think about her sado-masochistic games – she bragged about her punch-ups with Burton – and say out loud, ‘I wish I could marry Richard Burton. I know that their affair on the set of *Cleopatra* was decried by the Vatican, but I don’t care a hoot about the Vatican. Or two hoots, if you wish. And if I’m a man, I wish I could marry Elizabeth Taylor. I wish I could punch her on the nose and on the other parts of her magnificent body and miserable soul and mind.’ Yes, you care neither about the Vatican nor about the wrath of God, and it does not really matter how many hoots you touch upon as you reflect upon how you might catch up with Elizabeth Taylor’s style of living. You are at home, alone, and this state of affairs traditionally provides one with a chance to reflect on spiritual matters in solitude. But, intentionally or unintentionally – and this does not really matter either two hoots or three – you miss this chance once again. Nor do you reflect on human injustice and iniquity. You do not even say to yourself it belongs in the antithesis department. According to your light-heartedness and nonchalance, it does not belong in your life at all – even if you do not say so to yourself either out loud or innerly, if I may say so as I reflect on the quietude of the countryside.

S3

‘...I long for the pale Celia Johnson being cosy and peaceful, wearing a brown cardigan and singing hymns in an air-raid shelter.’ It is high time one could swing on the thesis-antithesis swings to the other pole of our existence, which denotes the opposite attitude to life. In that other attitude and life of ours we do not dream about diamonds and husbands whose family happiness may or may not be under way in other latitudes or just next door. But we care neither about other women’s husbands nor about their offspring: we are neither paedophiles nor even ordinary homosexuals. Why? Because the Vatican used to decry both in spite of its undercover relationship with both. Of course the new Pope – he has just visited South America – keeps up with the times which are fully attuned to the homosexual cause;

so that both the Pope and the times applaud the prosperity of the homosexual community. But in days of yore (or awe) our Catholic brothers were against Elizabeth Taylor, her husbands and her indescribable behaviour described in detail in the book entitled *A Private Life for Public Consumption*. And people did their best to imitate Celia Johnson's style of life symbolised by cosiness and cardigans. Actually our Celia always wore the same cardigan that understandably took a lot of wear and tear; especially a great deal of tear. 'Could you mend this hole in my shirt?' she would say to her friend whose skilfulness in the domain of holes knew no bounds. After a while, however – and after much soul-searching – she decided not to have these holes mended. 'I can sing my hymns notwithstanding these holes.' What is more, at some point, in full accordance with the new layout of her mind, she began to *make* holes in her inveterate cardigan, saying to others, 'I'd like to ape St Francis, you know. I'm convinced that his way of life is far superior to any other way because of the holes his clothes constantly displayed.' Of course you fling all your money and precious stones out of the window and wonder why there are so many people on the pavement situated right under your flat. And then you mutter to yourself, 'There are too many admirers of Elizabeth Taylor in this world of ours. They say, "Elizabeth Taylor is rich," and act accordingly,' which is absolutely true. These people – and other people as well – know nothing about antitheses: only theses adorn their minds and discourses. They think only in terms of money, saying to their relatives and colleagues, 'A lack of formal education is no bar to becoming rich.' And if others answer, 'It's a bar, it's a bar,' they shake their heads and point to Elizabeth Taylor's portrait, saying, 'She grew up in the days when a woman's main aim was to snare a rich husband.' In point of fact, even an antithesis can talk about money, provided this talk is centred upon St Francis and his outlook. For instance, you can utter the following antithesis, 'The organisation has enlisted the support of many famous people in raising money to help homeless children.' Thus you kill two birds with one stone: you pay homage to Celia Johnson and give a thousand dollars to antispoilt brats. Any synthesis belongs in the category entitled *The Middle Way* – a novel where you do not sit in a desert, sucking stones and throwing the same stones in the direction of devils. You put a stone into your mouth and suddenly a little devil turns up under your very nose. So you spit the stone out, catch it and throw it at the devil: it is more important to get rid of a temptation than to satisfy your hunger. You often suffer from hunger pangs in the middle of the afternoon, even if you sit at home and not in a desert. But even at home, in the middle of your living room, you are likely to encounter a group of devils whose task and its fulfilment concerns your sex organ, your soul and its fatal vulnerability. A tiny little devil shows you a naked body and your soul succumbs to its sexual allures, to its shapely thighs. If you could see your soul in these moments of distress, you might notice a lot of wounds the shapes of which remind one of female legs and likewise of male biceps. Anyway, you do not sit in a desert because those little devils are even more efficacious in the middle of sandstones: your whole body may occasionally look like a female leg. Nor do you sit in a pub, drinking gin or whisky. In short, you are neither a saint nor an unpleasant young debauchee. You drink beer somewhere – in the middle of the street where you live, of all places. And you dream

of young women at the same place, on the same spot, which might be far away from any brothel, any desert. From any thesis or antithesis.

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A3

Any work of art that seems to be worthy of its name says to us affirmatively and triumphantly, ‘Life is beautiful and its ugliness can be dealt with either through catharsis or oblivion.’ You just forget both murders and their victims and enjoy lakesides, trees and the sun under which there is no evil, needless to say, for there is no room for it in the world created by God and not by an obscure demiurge. When you undertake the task described by Benjamin, you say to yourself you should tackle the problem of words and not of the other*word*iness which is bound to betray both works and their authors, the latter’s intentions and poetic gifts. So if you come across the word ‘spade’ you translate it thus: ‘*Bêche*’, ‘*pelle*’ or ‘*chat*’. Or ‘*lopata*’. You do not strive to insinuate that the world is all that is the case. Nor do you point out that the case is what the world is and will be even in the 24th century. This is the mysterious part of the statement using the word ‘spade’ and you need not concern yourself and the reader with what this mystery might reveal to humanity, if your translation were less literal and more to the point – the mysterious point which is much more than a point: it is a word we might liken to a point because it is just a word and not the world. Of course one might say, ‘The world is what it is – the world where there are lots of spades.’ But in this case the word ‘spade’ might go on a spree instead of making a simple statement: ‘Spade.’ Anyway, whenever you try to find your whereabouts in the world, you should not say to yourself, ‘This world is not alone in the world. There’s at least one beyond on which I should count so as not to die once and for all.’ No, there is no such thing as the beyond one might translate as ‘*arrière monde*’. There is nothing either beyond or behind; in other words, there is no ‘the behind’. So you cannot say to someone, ‘Why don’t you get off your behind and do something!’ because you have no behind to speak of. Of course you can utter the word ‘behind’ as many times as you wish, doing so to your heart’s content. But are you (or your heart) really content with this word? Don’t you prefer the word ‘spade’? It is far more beautiful, isn’t it? And the beauty of words does count in the world where nothing really counts except money and those who count it. Well, there is a word ‘spade’ and you translate it. Actually there are two spades: one can be found in your garden and another in the expression that calls a spade a spade. (Also an offensive word for a black person, and a card in the suit of Spades.) In this case, you speak about cats, even if you have only a smattering of English. A cat is far more precious than any spade, especially if this cat is of good stock and costs a lot of money. But it is easier to translate the word ‘spade’ if it is not linked to a philosophical statement that points out that the world is whatever is the case. And the spade is certainly a case. Well, let us pick up the spade lying in our garden and devote our afternoons to organic gardening. (After putting a pair of gardening gloves on.) Let us forget about the world and its

cases. A rosebush is far more important than any world, however glittering and glitterating. And it is not time yet to dig our own graves.

The point is any foray into translating life into another life is fraught with dangers and inaccuracies, and you are likely to end up realising you have just dreamt about the other side of the looking glass. All these white rabbits and queens are the nonsense one comes across whenever one's translation deviates from the original, whatever this original may be in this world.

An explosion and the screen you are looking at are more or less white. A quantity of blood flows through this homemade fog that has nothing to do with God and His weather forecast. And you say to yourself whatever happens does so within a fog or a looking-glass at which you do not have to look. You have your sandwich and bite into it, and serenity calls in a lot of sun and even a thin, healthy layer of suntan that no cancer will ever follow, either in its footsteps or otherwise. And

PREDESTINATION II

THAT'S LIFE

This moment is of no importance and that is why you pay no attention to it, which does not mean your attention is fully occupied elsewhere, being engrossed in a book, sacred or otherwise. All books are sacred if they can be found in your personal library; at least they are sacred to *you* and that is what counts. You cannot take care of the entire sacredness that the world is overloaded with: our churches, mosques and so on resound with this sacred text, another sacred text. You end up listening to voices, not to the letter of the law or any other letters. There are 22 letters in the Hebrew alphabet and no one forbids you to listen to them, even if you have no Hebrew. You listen to these letters and realise the Almighty uttered the same letters when speaking to Moses and other prophets. Was Moses a prophet or a guide? Both, both, and this thought has a soothing effect on your nerves and even on your genes. Now you know you will be saved; what is more, you know where to go, and it does not really matter if you do not set off on your journey at once: God can wait for you because He is subjected to neither time nor space. To what or whom is He subjected? To nothing and no one. He is not even subjected to Himself, for He is above Himself, superior to Himself; in a way, He is a supergod. And yet He neither overacts, nor overreaches Himself.

There is another moment and you take notice of it because you say to yourself, 'Too long, too long.' You must be waiting for someone or something, otherwise everything appears too short, even the universe which is infinite, according to some astronomers. But you do not listen to astronomers, your attention being wholly seized by the moment you are trying to disregard. Yes, it is too long, too long, and your waiting is growing unbearable. One cannot bear *everything*, even if one happens to be a saint. There are pains that are unbearable and toothache is only one instance of such pains; yet they punctuate our existence and we cannot get rid of them altogether. We go to a dentist and have one of our teeth pulled out; but we have got 33 of them and sooner or later such and such a tooth will spell disaster for us and our wives, our husbands. At night they wish to sleep instead of listening to our moans and groans which are likely to keep them awake and rather far from their sweet, delicious dreams.

Nights were created for sweet dreams and the deep sleep during which our souls roam somewhere, out of our reach – out of their own reach sometimes, for they often overreach themselves and overstep all sorts of bounds. They are as free as the wind that used to be a yardstick by which the freedom of our ancestors – they were poets, all of them – was often measured. 'O wind, o wind,' they used to say or sing. 'I wish I could be as free as you are.' They did not sing these songs in prisons; they were just yearning for more freedom because in all earthly countries – with the exception of free countries – the lack of freedom makes people

suffer and erect barricades. Some are on one side of the barricades, others on the other. *Others* are usually policemen or soldiers and *some* are the poor who fight a losing battle because they have only stones and mud. And both soldiers and policemen have shields and helmets which enable them to stay in the kingdom of the quick – until the next struggle for life and freedom and brotherhood.

You spend several nights on one side, on the other side, and the barricades you erected to keep your colleagues company seem to merit space in a museum of ancient monuments. Another night and yet another. Upon awakening you realise that the whole city has been converted into a museum – overnight, as they say. Over which night? There have been so many of them that, in the long run, you are likely to lose count not only of nights but also of days and your projects. You vaguely recall some of your projects, but hesitate as to their number and the ideas into which you intended to put your heart and soul. Both your heart and soul are prepared to leave your body and join your projects that promise prosperity and happiness to yourself and your children. Into what can you put them now? Nothing short of happiness will ever satisfy your heart, let alone your soul on account of its immortality, of its time-originated infinity. All your projects, alas, have fallen through and you blame yourself and the barricades for this unforgivable failure. Do not forget that there is such a thing as a metaphysical or psychological barricade which should be taken into consideration alongside its material counterpart. On the one side of this particular barricade there are hard-pressed wishes, on the other repressed ones.

This barricade is a keyword, if not a symbol: you struggle with others and also with yourself. Of course you struggle with nature, represented by mosquitoes, bugs and other miniscule creatures that you can hardly see with the naked eye. The smaller they are, the more pernicious they turn out to be if you give them too much freedom in your house, let alone in your body. They are on the opposite side of the barricade but no barricade can prevent them from visiting your body and psyche. They often drive you mad and you are at a loss to understand what is going on both inside and outside your *substance*. (One cannot live without this word; and yet it is not a keyword.) They climb over barricades, walls and other barriers you erect in the hope of keeping them at bay. Once inside your walls, you feel protected and safe, even though you learnt at school that one cannot be on the safe side, however astutely one may behave, now and then saying to oneself, ‘Better safe than sorry.’ You may be sorry but you are certainly not safe, whatever you do or think. ‘You are both sorry and unsafe,’ as a Chinese writer put it.

So you are often driven mad by bugs and mosquitoes, especially if you are in your bed, trying to get some sleep after sleepless nights. First you say to yourself, 'I can hear something buzzing,' and you know what insect you have in mind, for there are no bees, no wasps in your bedroom. You know you are talking about a mosquito that is on the point of biting your cheek and sucking your blood. You start flailing your arms around and the mosquito vanishes for a while, although it is still in your room – you are quite aware of that. At this point you start going mad: the faster you flail your arms, the nearer you get to madness and the nearest lunatic asylum. The mosquito does not need to circle above your head and around your ear; and for once it can survive without your precious blood. It has achieved its objective, for driving you mad was its only objective and ambition. Your blood is intact but you are not aware of that, for lunatics are unable to measure the quantity of their own blood – even if they slit their wrists or throats; even if their blood flows into basins and bowls.

The same goes for bugs except that you do not flail your arms around for the simple reason that you neither hear anything nor see how this insect – or whatever you may call it – penetrates your body and the rest of your numerous substances. You are a manifold creature – every human being is, being the most perfect creature made by the Almighty out of nothing. Well, only out of nothing can one create everything and everybody – that is the axiom often alluded to in the Scriptures and elsewhere. Of course not everybody reads the Scriptures every day, but you do not need to read anything to realise that the world came out of nothing, at some point. At some point, therefore, there was nothing, otherwise the world would not have had a beginning. Well, you take your time machine and go towards the past – as far as you can. Sooner or later you are bound to come across a beginning – a beginning of sorts, no doubt. Not the Big Bang, the Big Deal. A small world perhaps, for the world *is* small and its beginning might have been small, for all we know.

So a multitude of bugs wreak havoc inside your body – and also outside it, doing justice to the saying 'What is inside, so outside'; and also to the saying 'What is in the middle, so elsewhere'. Everything is everywhere and your mosquito buzzes here and there, in the United States and in Australia, as if not satisfied with your madness, your deadness. You are dead to some extent: all lunatics are, judging from how their colleagues and relatives look at them. They look at them and say, 'Where are we going to bury him or her? In the family vault?' 'There isn't one,' say your neighbours, meaning you had no family and consequently no vaults. What to do? Let them find a way out of the situation because the dead are supposed to take care of the dead and you are dead already, according to your friends and relatives. All right, you bow to the inevitable; you also bow to the evitable for the simple reason that you

like bowing and nothing can prevent you from doing so whenever you feel like it. You feel like it now, as if you were on a stage. Yet you are not and you know that in spite of your madness, your *lunatism*, as you call your madness. Perhaps you just like the word '*luna*' that means 'moon' in Russian and in some other languages as well. Perhaps, perhaps. You do not speak other languages. Well, you are a moonatic – in English, in English. Aren't you, aren't you?

Where are your bugs now? 'What have you done with your youth?' as a French poet says. What have you done with your bugs? What have *they* done to you? Nothing, nothing so far. They are not used to your body yet and therefore have to make themselves at home before swinging into action, into your malediction. They will curse you some day, but not today: you are on top form after your illness, after your numerous deaths. Your resurrection is in perfect working order so that once again you believe in Jesus Christ and *his* Resurrection, *his* 'Comeback', as they say now. They update everything, for they think no one will ever understand them if they do not keep up with the times. So they keep up with the times and spaces, and everything goes smoothly as far as their objectives are concerned. Of course they are not likely to notice that their objectives are very subjective and suit only their own purposes. Never mind, never mind, as they say. We all say that; we hear that as well because we usually hear what *we* say – *our*selves, not *others*, not the multitude. What counts is our altitude, not their multitude – that is what we say to ourselves, not to others who would not understand anything. Anyway, they do not know the world 'altitude'.

There are no bugs; at least you do not think about them. And if your thoughts are bug-free, so is your body, for your body is influenced and affected by your mental life, by your mind that lords it over your life and probably the rest – the whole world. Of course you are no dictator and only your representation may be discussed in this connection; but you are weary of your representation. You know the world is what it is and no Schopenhauer, no Berkeley, will ever modify it. Philosophy is powerless in the world where machines march up and down the streets, cleaning houses, pavements and mere stones that would not mind remaining dirty and dusty. No one asks them what their true nature is and so they undergo all sorts of treatments under the hoofs of horses, under our wheels, meals and other ills. Actually we are no better off than stones – after what has happened in our lives since our births and previous deaths. Why speak about stones?

So we speak about domes. We see a dome in the distance and start thinking about it. Our train of thought pulls out in front of us and we look at it, curious to find out what we are thinking about. We are thinking about this dome and compare it to other domes we have seen

ever since the same birth that does not go from one maternity hospital to another. Sometimes we speak about our 'births' in the plural, taking into consideration the number of lives we had lived before we were born in such and such a maternity hospital; sometimes we just think about one birth, for one birth is quite enough for one life. And we have no intention of living several lives (and only one karma): the doctrine of metempsychosis does not really suit us. It does not seem to fit our requirements and there is nothing we can do about it; and the same goes for our requirements. Yes, they cannot do anything about it either, for they are unwilling to change. They reject whatever is below their standards which are very high, needless to say; otherwise requirements would not be requirements. For instance, we have not yet been able to find a house that meets our requirements so that we live in the streets, in the open air.

This dome – the one we see in the distance – reminds us of religious ceremonies and we say to ourselves that we have not been to church for many months. We cannot say we have not been to church ever since our birthday: after all, we were baptised in one of the churches, although we do not remember if that particular church had a dome or was domeless. Suppose it was domeless. So what? Our baptism is valid in spite of this insignificant absence which has nothing to do either with faith or Jesus Christ. St Francis did not always have a dome above his head, which was no obstacle along his path to God and His stigmata (*his* stigmata): you can get them in the open air on condition that your faith is mighty and mature. So you get them as a matter of course and now you wonder what you are to do with them. Should you show them to everybody, bent on converting the entire world population to Christianity? But some people became Christians in their babyhood – at the end of their christenings. Your stigmata are not likely to change anything in *their* lives except that, upon seeing this sign of God's awesome presence, they may decide to adjust their faith to His presence and the awe they experience. So they adjust their lives to the renewal of their faith and thank you from the bottom of their hearts. That is what your stigmata are for and so you have no regrets about the way things worked out.

And what if you show your *soul* to them? They may be Christians, for all you know, but that does not mean – not *automatically* – that they believe in the existence of the soul and its immortality. So you pull your soul out of your glands and show it to them, saying, 'I'm dying. Could you please take care of my soul?' 'What should we do with it?' they ask. 'Send it to heaven.' 'To Paradise?' 'Of course.' They take your soul and you die, for no one can live without their soul; but you keep looking at them to find out what is in store for your soul. In hot weather, they sell masses of cold drinks and ice creams: people need to get cool and the only way to accomplish this feat is, for example, to drink a cold Coca Cola. No one sells Coke

in this sort of desert and the woman to whom you gave your soul is sweating like a pig. So she wipes her dirty face on your clean soul and once your soul is dirty, she sends it to heaven.

You know it is self-indulgent of you, but you speak about yourself all the time – even when you speak about others, saying 'they, them, one' and so on. Why don't you speak about their souls, their troubles that are far more numerous than yours? After all, you are not starving to death; nor are you going deaf or blind or mad. You are going dead – that is for sure, but this is no exception to the rule which says that Socrates is human and so he must die. Roses are not human, which does not prevent them from dying in their turn, and one wonders why you do not speak about roses and *their* fate. I am going gaga no doubt: twice a week I buy roses in the nearest supermarket and smell them upon awakening and before going to bed. Sometimes I also smell them in the afternoon, for they smell not only in the mornings and in the evenings, and one is wholly justified in enjoying their fragrance. So whenever I happen to walk past them, I bend over the vase and inhale as much air as I can; and my lungs are thankful for the fresh and fragrant air I offer them.

Well, I did speak about roses for a while; I also touched upon other people, although I am not sure they are my neighbours to whom I owe a lot of love, according to some sacred books. Everything is sacred, as pantheists and hedonists affirm when they feel like bolstering their morale or morales – it depends on how many morales they have at the moment. One had better keep a dozen morales at one's disposal: if three of them are fairly low, the other ones can give them a helping hand. If, however, you have only one morale, you are doomed to follow in its footsteps – up and down, up and down, up and down. Now you are on top of the world; now you are at the bottom of the world, of the self-same world. You are allowed to have a multitude of morales, but there is only one world around you and you must cope with it to the best of your abilities. So you do your best to straighten your problems out; you can never be sure you do your best because you have no idea what the 'best' is – in your case, in other cases. Well, you are still alive and even if you stay in bed round the clock, you are happy and bless whoever shows up within your field of vision.

It is better to bless than to curse because you may be punished for your curses, whereas you are sure to be rewarded for the blessings you shower upon your fellow creatures. And even if you are not rewarded at once, you should recall Pascal's bet as a result of which you will go to Paradise and not to its unpleasant counterparts. So you bless everybody and go to Paradise; at least no one dares to curse you and you count on this self-restraint, even though you know that people do not always return the favour and often disregard both gifts and good turns. But neither your faith in God nor your numerous blessings cost you anything so that

you go on with your rituals and are often rewarded with smiles and pastries. People invite you to tea and also to dinner, whenever they think you have not skimped during your worldwide distribution of blessings. And you rely on God making an effort in the Hereafter where there are so many furnaces and palaces, and gardens, and fires, and brimstones.

You do not always think in these terms, for life may display other components for your benefit – not only your colleagues' tea parties and their plonk. Life is beautiful and you see the proof of this axiom everywhere, not only during your visits to Niagara Falls. Its ugliness is also part of its beauty – all depends on your angle of vision and on the visions you avail yourself of in your dreams. Your sweet dreams often lavish on you what is described in the Koran and some other sacred books that you tenaciously consult to find out what awaits you beyond life and death. I, for one, do not know the Koran by heart so I have to go downstairs and look for it in my library where I keep a lot of paradises which may come in useful if there is no real Paradise either on Earth or in the Hereafter. You just memorise one of the literary paradises and live within your memory without ever going out – not even to the nearest park where you used to walk every afternoon for the sake of your lungs, heart and body in general.

When I think about Paradise, I visualise only one garden because, in my opinion, one garden is enough, provided there are a lot of fountains and maidens in it. But in the Koran there are two gardens and twice as many maidens, I suppose; and these gardens abound in branches and fruit. Why do I never think about fruit in the course of my virtual excursions into the Garden of Eden? Because I am afraid of the forbidden fruit? But I do not think there is anything forbidden in this redecorated Garden, given that we are quite mature today, after spending so many millennia in exile on Earth. I adore exotic fruit like mangoes and papayas; I also have a weakness for apples, even for cooking apples. But there are no doctors in Paradise, are there? And if there are, why keep them away?

'– lovely as rubies, beautiful as coral –' Does Mahomet speak of maidens' lips? Anyway, in Hell there are neither rubies, nor coral, nor maidens, nor mature women whose bodies some individuals prefer to those of Lolitas, otherwise they would not sell porn movies dedicated to matronly persons. Why think of Hell anyway? There are other ways of spending time and even if we are determined to *waste* our time – there are individuals who are keen on wasting their time – we might eventually hit upon another idea, a more rewarding wastetime, as it were. Of course, after reading or re-reading the Koran, one may reach the conclusion that, whatever we do or undo, we waste our time and this state of affairs will remain unchanged as long as we remain on Earth instead of going under her – literary speaking.

Figuratively speaking, we shall travel upward, to the spot where two gardens and a myriad of maidens await us with their fruit and excellent moods.

Everything we look upon is blessed, as a poet put it. Poets put anything, anywhere, calling it ‘poetic licence’, and nobody says anything, for we like poetic licenses and licenses in general. Not often are we given licence to do this and that, but even if we only do *that*, being deprived of *this* – for some obscure reason – we are happy and even *that* happiness is capable of making us happy for a while. And ‘a while’ is enough sometimes: we are in excellent mood and our projects multiply and replenish the Earth. We know we need to open up overseas markets and we do open them up just as we do our best to keep active: commercially, politically and sexually. A year later we say to our competitors, ‘Our company has been successful in penetrating overseas markets this year,’ and our competitors envy us our ability to work with overseas clients. Actually our luxurious lifestyle and personal ostentation are both hated and envied. We must have been blessed either by God Himself or by some of His envoys; or just by an ordinary citizen walking on Earth and thinking in terms of earthly life.

The point is you cannot be blessed by anyone, for a blessing has nothing to do with a curse – it is just the opposite. And this time opposites are not supposed to meet, not even in the Hereafter where a kind of universal and everlasting harmony continuously reconciles religion and science and also different points of view. You can be cursed by everyone and sometimes it does happen – when your social life is at fever pitch. A lot of people surround you and every word of yours resounds everywhere; and as soon as it begins to resound it gives rise to a series of misunderstandings. You are misunderstood by everyone, not only by your relatives, neighbours and colleagues. This gigantic crowd ostracises you and once again you find yourself in front of your fireplace that is quite cold today, as you say to yourself; and you have no logs to burn in it.

Suddenly a distant memory invades your mind and also your body, considering that body and mind are never separated; and if they are, they are never too far away from each other. So they communicate and let you know what they think about your life and its discomfitures; and also the predicaments you refuse to face as you try to persuade yourself that everything is all right. But everything is *not* all right, far from it, and you begin to wonder if *anything* is all right today, tonight; if you have enough willpower to extricate yourself from the situation. Of course you have a lot of will *to* power, but willpower is not identical to either will to power or will to live. You wish to live and struggle for life, but this wish of yours – and all other wishes of yours – are not equivalent to what may be termed ‘your willpower’.

And it is not enough to have such a thing at one's disposal: one's ability to handle it properly depends on its quantity, not only on its quality. It took a lot of willpower to stay calm, you say to yourself as you think about the prelude to the night you are spending in front of the fireplace, a place without fire, a mere grate. No fire, no fire – either inside or outside.

And what about that distant memory of yours, that mind-invader? You seem to have forgotten it as if you had put no value on memories, the past, the heaven you saw in your childhood. And then a voice says to you, 'When I lifted the log, there were lots of beetles skittering around under it.' Your memory's voice no doubt. Yes, you were thinking about the logs you did not have within your reach – except in your memory where logs and beetles went on moving to and fro. Is it a blessing, one of the blessings you thought about some time ago? Whatever it is, it does not outweigh the curse which led to your bankruptcy and other misfortunes; you are reluctant to think about them in front of the fireplace – or anywhere else. But, for reasons best known to yourself, you are thinking about curses, which enables you to single out the curse you hold responsible for your innumerable failures. The point is you can be cursed by anyone and that is what makes curses so different from blessings.

If someone takes the trouble to bless you, you can ask this person to show his or her credentials, for only saints, priests and messiahs are allowed to bless human beings. Of course you would not put in prison an individual who has just said to you, 'Bless you!' or 'Bless you, dear!' Nor would you reprimand a woman who says, 'May God bless you,' whenever you help her with her shopping. But an efficient, *useful* blessing requires a gift and a social status bestowed only upon *exceptional* creatures and you must take notice of this fact instead of rejoicing whenever the verb 'to bless' reaches your ears. Actually, you ought to make sure this verb is addressed to you and not to the whole of Creation: to logs, beetles and fireplaces, among other things. And even if it does concern you *directly*, you had better not give free rein to your emotions and tears of joy. A down-and-out may bless you, if you put a few coins into his hat or whatever he uses for his business-related purposes; but this down-and-out is not entitled to bless anyone or anything unless he or she is a saint. It is true that many saints used to beg on the streets – for money and food, for coins and banknotes. It is partly on account of this pastime that they were promoted from tramps to saints: there is one law for the rich and another for the poor.

Well, it is easier to be cursed than blessed and that accounts for many failures and suicides to which human beings resort when they cannot get off the hook. There are many hooks and their number does not depend on the number of people who hang from these hooks as they wait for saviours, the Messiah or Mother Teresa. I am not sure they swing as they

hang on these hooks, but they have no strength left to get *off* them and that is what counts under the circumstances. It is not the way you *hang* on your hook that counts, whatever you say; anyway, you should not confuse hooks with swings. Nor should you confuse swings with roundabouts, otherwise you will go on losing your money and health, your happiness and wellbeing. Of course you are a born loser but you may be born once again, a second time, provided your second birth is destined to become a *spiritual* birth, not just a *physical* one. Do not forget St Augustine and many other saints who were born twice, thrice – many, many times, which accounts for their high-level, high-class, high-end, hi-fi spirituality.

So you are born a second time and this time you are a born winner, even if for the moment you do not win anything, not even a single game of ping-pong. But this does not really matter: you are not a sportsman and the Olympics do not appeal to your senses, your pride, or your feet. Do you wish to become a multimillionaire so as not to envy those who have villas and swimming pools on several continents? Perhaps. But given that your new birth is spiritual and not financial, you also aspire to *spiritual heights* which are not always situated in the areas where business comes first. So you think about your spiritual education: you can take care of it yourself, for it is your *second* birth, not the *first* one. It may even happen that your parents are no longer at your side and so cannot really help you, being ensconced in Paradise or in its suburbs. You read sacred books and realise how important it is to be a *spiritual* creature, even if spirituality is not often backed up by bank accounts and suchlike, whatever 'suchlike' may mean in the context. Well, it is easy to guess what it means: you do not have to read sacred books to solve this problem. All you have to do is buy one issue of *Paris Match* and look at the photographs you are sure to find in it.

You look at them and realise they are far more entertaining than the books you have been reading ever since your spiritual birth. They are far more *joyful* as well and a lot of saints used to place joyfulness among the ten major Christian virtues. And Buddhists smile for hours and hours; they even smile in their sleep, which proves that they never have to cope with nightmares. And if they do, they continue to smile because they react neither to reality nor unreality, being divorced from whatever may perturb their inner and outer peace. Even if you do not give them alms, they go on smiling, although any lack of money and food is commonly regarded as a nightmare from which one would like to awake; anyone with the exception of a Buddhist. Buddhists do not need to get rid of their nightmares because they have none. That is the best solution to any problem – its total absence which spares you the necessity of getting rid of it. As for yourself, your second birth got rid of many problems and you should not buy *Paris Match* too often so as to guard against any outbreak of inner rioting.

Of course you would give anything to be able to smile forever, notwithstanding Ebola and other diseases that pursue their goals and do their best to annihilate both life and Earth. They do not think in terms of spirituality: it is our *physical* life they endeavour to annihilate. Well, as long as we are spiritual and keep our faith intact, we shall prevail, survive and preserve our immortality against all odds. It is true that, in this struggle for immortality, the odds are stacked against our victory; but we have our own truth and our *personal* truth is often at odds with the *Absolute* Truth. And no amount of capital letters will ever shake our confidence in our triumph over time and its stooges. Over space, among other stooges and things.

A man boards a plane in Australia and lands in Europe where he is welcomed by his friends, relatives, colleagues and admirers. No one is aware of the fact that a number of microscopic strands of a virus travel with him, being stowaways inside his body. No one tests him for contamination; he transmits the virus to the crowd of admirers and also to his relatives and colleagues. We should triumph over space by arresting this man in Australia to prevent him from landing in Europe or anywhere else. We shall allow him to land up in a local prison, though.

So we can triumph over space by isolating it from whatever belongs to us: time, health, happiness, women, men, gardens and fruit. But our gurus obstinately repeat that we should not think about the fruit of our labours because only our labours – or paths, or ways – really count. Others say the opposite and these opposites do not meet either so that we are lost somewhere in the middle of opposites and labours about which both superman and Hercules know nothing at all. Why should we get involved with superfluous things that can neither bring us to the end of the road nor even put us on the right track? All tracks look alike and all we can do is reject passions and emotions, leaving only virtue, peace and quiet, and a modicum of love, otherwise no Christian will ever liken us to saints. And our parents have worked hard to inculcate what they call a ‘team spirit’ into our brains. And this team spirit is in no way different from the atmosphere one finds in a church where there are a lot of saints, a lot of sanctity as such.

As a child I thought it was easy to become a saint because so many people had already joined this sacred team. Besides, one had nothing else to do in life: becoming a saint was a full-time job, according to my parents. You had to be virtuous and generous, offering your clothes to lepers, whenever you came across them in the streets. ‘And if there are no lepers in the streets?’ I asked my mother. ‘Then give your clothes to cancer patients. Anyway, finding the sick is the easiest thing in the world.’ That is why I thought it was easy to become a saint.

Now I know you have to become either Mother Teresa or a Pope. And that is easier said than done. Sometimes it is even hard to *say* that: your tongue does not turn, as the Russians put it.

In the meantime, you continue to read sacred books that talk to you about right and wrong, about virtue and your own status. You should not do what others do because you are supposed to quit everything you stand for: your family, business, the world itself and many other selves, its, his and hers. You must do it for the sake of your own self which cannot shine unless you abandon almost everything, almost, almost; at the end of this road you begin to wonder what else you can abandon, reject and so on. You strip yourself of your clothes and give them to the poor, even if you end up naked as a result of this ritual practised by saints and other benefactors of humanity. And if you have some money – coins, banknotes, credit cards – you put all this on a pile of dog muck because that is what your credit cards deserve, according to St Augustine.

Today your guru assures you that nothing will happen either to your body or to your mind if you perform a few rituals *inside* your brain and not outside it. You are so used to the outside world you cannot imagine how it feels to be blind and deaf and deprived of your senses. But you can become mindful only if you withdraw into yourself to the point of forgetting others' charms, sex appeal, villas, golf courses and swimming pools. You should swim inside yourself; you should sink to the bottom of the ocean and it is pointless to ask what kind of ocean is alluded to because this ocean is your consciousness and unconscious. And then you are enjoined to obliterate them and when you manage to follow your guru's advice or order to the letter, you realise you are lying naked at the bottom of something. It is neither the swimming pool nor your consciousness: they are both abolished once and for all. You are just conscious of your misery and of a particle of nirvana that seems to wait for you round the corner. You abolish this part of your consciousness, whereupon this particle vanishes. You are really naked now – as naked as the naked eye that cannot see anything.

Back home you try to remember what your guru said this afternoon and realise you cannot remember anything, for your consciousness has been abolished and your memory is situated in both your consciousness and unconscious, not in this artificial oblivion of yours. Luckily for you, you have got a huge library on which you may rely whenever deprived of your memory by gurus and attacks of amnesia. What you do know tonight is limited to your house and furniture; at least you are able to find your whereabouts without losing your way in a stream of consciousness where one comes across odds and ends, gods and bends. So you say to yourself, 'I'm at home, I'm at home. There's a huge library in the adjacent room. I have to go there because I haven't forgotten yet how a mammal walks and runs.' So you walk over to

your library and find a few books which may and must shed light on your recent experience and lost memory. You are no longer conscious of your former consciousness and limit your requirements to your recent experience, to your guru's commands and bans. And once again you realise you have come up against a brick wall and this wall is surrounded by other brick walls; and it is pointless to remove bricks from these walls because – as you know from bitter experience – the more you remove the more you find, be it bricks or sticks or ticks.

Obviously your furniture does not want you to pick up an axe and hack away at armchairs, cupboards, ironing boards and so on; in other words, your furniture does not want you to hack it to death. Even furniture perseveres in its own being, but you are bent on attaining nirvana and so have no wish to persevere, to last, to come back for another life, another set of depravations and horrors, another sect.

Well, it does not really matter how long you have been looking at this shelf where there are books you need very badly, otherwise you would not have set off on this journey from the living room to the library, hacking your way through the jungle of objects and wayward thoughts. And these books talk to you about your duties which come down to overcoming bondage, and you go on reading them because, as usually happens, you do not really know what they are talking about. Whatever you read presents you with a problem that would be difficult to solve unless you are prepared to read such and such a book from beginning to end, notwithstanding your busy schedule and love for your children. They do not care for Buddhism and its bondages that you do your best to overcome as you leaf through the book you are holding in the hope of finding what you are supposed to overcome. Anyway, you are now on an island upon which your book enlarges for a while. 'Make thyself an island!' it says. What kind of island? A desert island? An inhabited island? If it is a desert island, you will not be able to go shopping; and you are no Robinson Crusoe, whatever your book might say on the subject.

Well, your impurities have not been blown away, not yet; not all of them. Some of your impurities float through the air – like rain clouds, like a cloud passing over the sun and the moon. You look at your impurities and are tempted to compare them to smoke, to a murky yellow smog or smoke hovering over the city. Yes, your impurities usually hover over the city and every time you see them you wonder how you could divert them from their trajectory: after all, they might contaminate the inhabitants of your native city and they can do it all the more easily since these inhabitants have already been contaminated and poisoned by their own impurities and by those of their friends and relatives. But your impurities have always hovered over the city you like so much. You know you are unable to divert them to another

city, to a foreign country about which you do not care. Luckily for you and others, the recent pattern of weather deviates from the norm for this time of year: you may count on winds and storms, their driving forces and energies. ‘Avast ye!’ you shout. That is all you can do for the moment.

And what about your defilements? Are they in any way comparable to your impurities and infirmities? You do suffer from a long list of infirmities and they cannot help affecting your mood, decisions and the overall pattern of your behaviour. Small children often behave aggressively and you follow the same pattern of behaviour as if you were a small child – in spite of your infirmities that cannot be associated with the lithe, athletic body of a ballet dancer. By no stretch of the imagination can you be seriously described as a handsome young man whose performances at the Bolshoi Theatre invariably draw a crowd. So you do not behave like a handsome young man who usually dances with sleeping beauties and wide-awake ones – at the Bolshoi Theatre, of all places. You are just an impure middle-aged man whose defilements annoy not only your gurus but also yourself; yet you are seldom annoyed nowadays, on account of your overall or partial indifference.

Sometimes you do not give a damn, sometimes you do – it depends on whether your life is at stake or not. As a *budding* Buddhist – budding, not even buddhing – you still care a little about life and are even ready to be reborn and assume a lot of responsibilities connected with another karma, another set of duties. If you are duty bound, you are bound – you are no Prometheus, though – and you should disconnect yourself from any bondage. In a way, you are already disconnected from it; at least you are on the way to being disconnected from it altogether. To some extent you are already a broken human or a broken machine, for humans are machines as some philosopher put it. Never try to mend a broken machine without disconnecting it from the electricity supply. Well, you are not eager to mend yourself and if you change your mind, you have nothing to worry about: you have already been disconnected from the electricity or Schopenhauer’s will. Call it what you will, you are disconnected, dissociated, disabled and disavowed – by yourself, if not by others. You are dis, dis, dis, dis; and this reminds you of the Dies Iraes you heard in Mozart’s and Verdi’s requiems. You have not yet forgotten the wrath of God; nor has His wrath forgotten you. That is what they call ‘reciprocity’.

In some books you are encouraged to be mindful; in others they speak of your watchfulness and you realise with horror that your life depends on a translation. You do not mind the mind and its fullness, but you feel no affection for the world ‘watch’ that reminds you of time, even though its present meaning is not situated in the domain of time and the

instruments used for its measurement. It has even more in common with what they call ‘neighbourhood watch’ and suddenly you remember that the inhabitants of your area watch each other’s property. So you are permanently watched, for your property is part of your life and so are you, however strongly you may wish to estrange yourself from both your life and possessions. (Your guru’s prescription for success and bliss.) As you distance yourself from your desires and golf courses, you get closer and closer to nirvana. But others interfere by calling the police and talking about the stranger they see in front of your house. A few police officers intrude upon your privacy and you have to start from scratch, fighting your desires and passions, nipping them in the bud, stepping in the mud.

Watchful, mindful, beware, beware. Beware of the anger of the mind; as if one could control one’s mind located somewhere in the head, in the brain, in the consciousness and probably amidst the objects you are looking at. A flash of anger suddenly comes to the fore and annihilate here a city, there a country, according to films and books that continue to talk about Hitler and his stooges. Beware, beware. You are reminded of Macbeth to whom his witches – and our witches and switches – talked like that, determined to set a trap and yet another trap. And he walked straight into it, them, into his enemies’ camps where they played with blades and trees, walking to and fro.

Do not fall into the trap of thinking you can learn a foreign language without doing any work. That is what your teachers, gurus and relatives say to you, and you realise you will never learn any language, not even your own. And life is a foreign language – everyone knows that and some people keep learning it as if hoping to live forever. And if you do not, it is not worth your while learning anything, given that anyway you will walk into this trap or that trap. And you will never learn anything about these traps except that there are traps and you are walking right into them, even if demarcations between regions are shown with dotted lines on the map you have on your wall. But what kind of region are you walking around? To answer this question, you need a map of the world or at least a map of Paris, of Brussels, of Berlin – not an ordinary road map adorned with dotted lines.

So you stop walking for a while as you say to yourself that you should beware of traps and witches who say from time to time, ‘Walk, walk, walk. You’d better walk a bit quicker – it’s going to take forever if you go at this pace.’ And what if it does? What if it does take forever? Is this the panacea you have been looking for so obstinately, with such persistence and insistence? You just walk very slowly and live forever. No more traps, no more trees that are likely to march towards you, hiding soldiers, Kalashnikovs and myriads of bullets. No more trees, no more tramps and robbers asking for money or life and murdering you even if

you give them your purse. Beware, beware. You look for traps and cannot find any because traps are usually hidden, otherwise no one would ever walk right into them. If you see a trap you stop in your tracks and do not walk any further unless your foot has already got caught in a trap, in a grave. That is what they mean when they say, 'He's got two feet and two arms in the grave.' They might say 'one foot and one arm in the grave' but they have no time for stages and consequently do not tell their tales in stages, going straight to the point. Time is money and they would lose a lot of money if they lived their lives in stages. Life is money, stages are money and the rest of whatever there is is also money and business. Monkey business.

Once again you turn to children because their mouths, their eyes, their hands and the rest of their bodies always tell the truths. A child is drawing something on a sheet of paper and you automatically think it is the truth you will see if you take the trouble to have a look at the child's drawing. You take this trouble and look at it for a while and it suddenly dawns on you that Absolute Truth is the child's work of art. What you are holding has nothing to do with art, with artificial and divine inspirations and what they call '*métier*' in French and sometimes in English. It is a spontaneous revelation or eruption of Absolute Truth that cannot be otherwise: there is only one truth – and one God – and the child's drawing is the most perfect expression of it, whatever some art critics might say on the subject.

And then you look at the child and ask him what he is looking at. 'A crow,' he says. You look left, right, up and see no crows, for all your visual and mindful efforts. You are both watchful and mindful but you see neither crows nor any other birds as if they had already flown south at the approach of winter. But it is a midsummer night or a midsummer day, and you are surprised at finding no wild birds either in the sky or on park benches: you are in Hyde Park or Gorky Park; or Dostoevsky Park. You are in Hitchcock Park and you are really surprised at finding no birds in it: no birds, no ropes. There is only one stranger in these parts and the stranger has drawn his truth that coincides with Absolute Truth, Absolute Health, Absolute Time, Absolute Immortality.

The child goes on talking, 'Crow, sparrow, bench, a stranger on the bench, clouds, mouse, cat, three blind cats.' And suddenly you feel a flash of disappointment. 'Three blind cats' instead of 'three blind mice'. Is that what psychoanalysts call 'word association'? You say 'cat' and a child says 'mice'. You say 'three' and the child says, 'three mice'. You say, 'three mice' and the child say, 'three cats'. You say 'cat' and the child says 'mousetrap'. You say 'mousetrap' and a bookish chap says, '*Hamlet*'.

What you should aim at is called ‘simplicity’ and so everything should be simple, otherwise no one will ever understand you, your meanings, your life and aims. They say that the advantage of the plan is its simplicity; and yet they are not children. They do not say, ‘Plan, advantage, bench, sparrow, arrow.’ They say that all the ideas down to Platonic ideas have a stunning simplicity that can be likened to a stun gun. In a way they produce a small electric shock and stop you from moving temporarily – without harming you permanently. Of course the truth – even the one that is not really absolute – can harm you if you take an overdose of it; at least Nietzsche thought so. (For once I know which philosopher I am talking about.) Even partial truth can kill you if you do not watch out, if you do not watch your step, so to speak, for every truth, however infinitesimal, is a step towards Absolute Truth or nirvana – take your pick. And if you take an overdose of it or stay only one step ahead of what you are allowed to know – just another version of the Tree of Knowledge – you may step into your grave, bypassing the mud and the pile of dog muck.

Whatever the state your memory is in, you should never forget William Ockham and his razor. ‘Entities are not to be multiplied without necessity.’ So you should not look for the superfluous and stick to what you have, to a few simple things such as crow, bench, children, mothers, milk, birth, death, so, on. If you say ‘so on’, you make things harder for everybody, for by saying this and other things of the same nature, you multiply whatever you have already said and done. On the other hand, if you say ‘so’, you do not multiply anything and no one will append a catalogue of things in themselves to your remark. Ockham’s razor is simplicity incarnate, but it may lead to a contradiction in terms, for when you utter the word ‘razor’, you think about what use you can make of it. For instance, you may be asked, ‘Do you use an electric razor or the kind that you have to put a razor blade in?’ And you may answer, ‘My hairdresser always shaves my fringe with a razor to give a soft effect.’ But this answer begs the question of how he does it; and even your hairdresser’s whereabouts and identity are likely to be touched upon – much to your annoyance.

So you fall back upon simplicity as such and touch upon neither razors nor Ockham and his successors. Of course no one prevents you from cutting this and that from the world you are looking at as you try to unravel its mysteries and find your path in a maze which must amaze every believer in God. ‘How marvellous!’ he or she exclaims. ‘Only God was in a position to create so many marvels. Not Dante, not Darwin. Only God, only God.’ All right, but there are too many entities in this world, too many marvels some of which bar your path so you cannot get any closer either to Absolute Truth or nirvana. You see a few walls around you and you are tempted to raze them, using Ockham’s razor or just a miniature bomb. You

achieve your objective or rather your *subjective*. You catch another glimpse of nirvana but neither this glimpse nor nirvana – *your* brand of nirvana – last forever. There are no more walls around you but there are other obstacles and screens beyond which truths have been hidden; and in their midst you are sure to come across Absolute Truth.

You look around and realise there are too many skyscrapers in the city where you hope to stumble upon nirvana, bliss and the Miss World contest that might help you find both. So once again you pick up Ockham's razor and set about cutting off the superfluous and the ambiguous. It is utter simplicity you have in mind and your mind directs the ritual, leaving nothing to the imagination, so to speak. You know that your imagination and its figments habitually distract you while you are working, and this time your work is blessed by gurus and suchlike. You are working on nirvana and even those who have only a vague notion of what it is – void, cloud, nothingness, paradise – respect your determination and perseverance. Sure enough, you are determined to make a success of this enterprise and find out the truth of the universe and its suburbs. And if you happen to talk to people who do not have the foggiest idea of what nirvana offers and propounds, you just say to them, 'My latest enterprise is to climb Mount Everest.' After hearing you out, these people nod and applaud. What else do you need?

But actually this is the wrong path altogether, given that you do not have to care about fame and renown which are used to dragging you into arguments and discussions. And these discussions are centred upon the merits and demerits of those who compete for a prize or a huge amount of money and a few TV shows. Winners become famous but as they enjoy the fruit of their phony perseverance they get further and further from nirvana that brings you peace and quiet; and eternal death devoid of any rebirth, however short and insignificant. Macbeth, Macbeth, beware of rebirth! No, that is not what the witches told him in their cave or cavern where only witches and Platonists sojourn, tackling eternal problems. Sir John, Sir John. But this is from another opera, as the Russians say all the time.

Ockham's razor is still in your hand and you know you should put it to good use, otherwise you were born for nothing. It is such a drag having to shave every day, but if you do observe this ritual, it will be a victory for common sense. And as long as you remain in a non-nirvana existence, you had better stick to the rules which ensure your safety in the world where you risk being destroyed round the clock. So you shave and then set about shaving the world which is too dishevelled and cannot welcome any bliss, however fragile and ludicrous. You do not need all these skyscrapers and if you do not need them, no one does because at this moment you represent the whole world. Your representation limits its scope to your mind

and this mind of yours eliminates whatever stands in the way of nirvana which, according to specialists, is the only solution to world-wide problems. So you raze the skyscrapers and look at the new cityscape that seems to prophesy a happy future unless you are mistaken. But you do not wish to be mistaken and your wishes count in the world you created on the spur of the moment – on a whim, if you wish. Why is this future happy? Because there is nothing superfluous in it – no anti-Ockham, as some theologian put it; or anti-razor, come to think of it.

You look down from your balcony and see a lot of people whose number grows as you continue to get rid of skyscrapers and other superfluous buildings. They do not know where to live and you know they have never known *how* to live; and that is why the world is what it is – a dumping ground for toxic waste. You have already gained enough momentum to seal these people's fate and you say, as you continue to look at them from your nirvana-bound balcony, 'From the moment you stepped into the streets your fate was sealed.' And you destroy them almost mechanically, which can be done without atom bombs, without any particular effort on your part. If you are close enough to nirvana, you just think about what should be done, and that is done in the twinkling of an eye; it is done quickly, in other words. So these people no longer interfere with your plans, with the purity of your vision abundantly influenced by Ockham and his immortal razor. The world is now clean-shaven, but you continue to shave it because there are still some hairs left on whatever surface you fasten your mind. Yul Brynner is the model you have chosen and, according to your calculations and ideas, the world should look like this star's head. Anyway, the world should look like a star – a real star, a movie star: it does not really matter what star you choose as your model. What counts is the *elevation* of the Earth which is too low, too dusty: there are too many ashes on it and under it. We should elevate the Earth to the presidency which is usually associated with the centre of this or that – with the centre of the universe, in the present case. We have Copernicus to thank for this problem: but for his so-called theory, the Earth would have remained at the centre of the universe. Where is it now? Everybody knows where it is because its location has been discussed by astronomers ever since Copernicus' discovery. There are maps where the Earth is shown in the company of other stars or whatever they are, for stars are somehow different from mere planets. Never mind, never mind. Today, we know where the Earth is and we compare it to a dumping ground, a rubbish bin, a pile of dog muck.

Should we eliminate dogs? If there are no more dogs on our planet, there will be no muck, no piles, no miles. We have razed skyscrapers and other huge buildings; nowadays there are no cities to speak of, no cities at all. We live miles from anywhere, in the middle of

the countryside that we worship for its fresh air and the songs of nightingales. But the number of these miles can be reduced to another number, provided we continue to use our razor, our Ockham, our messiah and guru. What do we really need? Air miles, sea miles? The world is our oyster and we are happy in this new world of ours because it has at last deserved the name of 'small world'. You often talk for the sake of talking and so say to a friend you meet in Australia, 'It's a small world.' But up to now the world has not been small: you met your friend ten years ago and you did not go to Australia on foot, if you remember rightly. You took a plane and used your air miles, flying to Australia for nothing. You flew to this continent and it took you many hours to reach it; you cannot say the world was really small in those days, in those times. Now it is small and you can go to Australia on foot or just step down from your balcony, saying to yourself you will be in Australia in no time at all.

The world is our oyster and this oyster is a kind of nirvana we have been dreaming about for centuries: this dream of ours dates back to the Buddha's sermons. He said we should not speak untruth and take what is not given to us, which means we are not supposed to take *anything*, for *nothing* is really given to us either by our neighbours or by fate. That is why we had better become go-getters, otherwise we shall only survive for a few hours or minutes because, in a manner of speaking, we are babies and will die at once if deprived of our mother's milk. So we have to find a mother – and not any mother, any woman, however beautiful and dignified she may look at her age. Yes, it is her age that counts: an old woman no longer has any milk in her body unless she drinks a lot of milk at breakfast, at lunch and before going to bed. But what counts is not the quantity of milk she may keep for a while inside her body, and every baby knows that. So our baby looks for a *suitable* woman with lots of *internal* milk and maternal instincts. As soon as it finds this ideal woman, ideal mother, he or she may feel on the safe side, for there is a lot of milk on this side, a lot of nutritional value.

But the Buddha warns us against the search for milk, and he also says we should not go to another man's wife. And what if this wife has a lot of inner, personal milk in her body and even in her brain? She has no children of her own and therefore dreams about her neighbours' child who may offer her an opportunity to turn her milk to good account. So on the other side of the wall there is a woman whose emotions are centred upon a boy or a girl living beyond the wall – a few yards away, to be precise. The world is very small indeed and so she walks towards this child, removing her blouse and exposing one of her breasts and herself, to some extent. Actually both the woman and the child need only one breast, one rivulet of milk, and the woman says to us, 'Take what I'm giving you.'

The whole thing seems to correspond to the Buddha's precept except that we have screamed a lot to make this woman realise we are badly in need of her milk. Well, whatever we do, we dig up our own root, according to Buddhist scriptures, unless they speak of the wise who are so pure that no dirt can touch them. Desires are the dirt on which these scriptures enlarge to put us on our guard against what the Russians call 'bad eternity'. Actually, for Buddhists all eternities are bad as long as they remain rooted in earthly lives, rebirths, reincarnations and so forth. The only eternity they accept and advocate is the one eternally linked to nirvana and I, for one, am growing weary of this word which does not seem to mean a lot. Of course it is a state of freedom from all suffering which, according to Buddhists, can be achieved by removing all personal wishes. But if you ask them where one can find this state or at least catch a glimpse of it, they point to the Buddha's statues and speak of their colleagues. Alas, we cannot meet these colleagues of theirs, for they already live on another plane, in another world closely associated with nirvana to which we have no access. So we always come back empty-handed – but not empty-*headed*. And we should become empty-headed, empty-minded, empty-hearted and even empty-bodied, otherwise we had better forget the word 'nirvana'. And also the state this word seems to denote as it strives to convey its meaning to those who have been listening to it for months, if not for years.

Ockham is another word or rather a name to which we listen conscientiously as we continue to wipe buildings and human beings off the face of the Earth. Do we really need so many people around us, in our streets and parks, on our motorways? And what about traffic jams and overpopulation? And demography? The increase in the number of young people leaving to work in the cities has had a dramatic impact on the demography of the villages. And it is in our cities that we look from our nirvana-bound balcony supported by Atlas or one of his stooges. Sure enough, our nirvana-bound balcony is Atlas-supported – at the same time, in the same space. It *is* the small world; and the small time. Be that as it may, there are too many people in the cities we are looking at and so we are quite justified in wiping them – both the cities and their inhabitants – off the face of the Earth and from our own faces. No more worries, no more riddles, no more bags under our eyes.

Let us rewrite or rather update the Bible which is in the making, as George Bernard Shaw put it. Well, he was speaking of God but, as everybody knows, God is the Bible and vice versa. So we read either God or the Bible, and we recite both whenever we read the Bible out loud to our children or half-blind relatives. Instead of the injunction 'Multiply and replenish the Earth', from now on we shall recite *our* version of the future awaiting us beyond the horizon and also amidst the stars investigated by our astrologers. 'Decrease and desert the

Earth.' And it is not high time to say, 'Easier said than done' because it is not as hard as one might think, given the training we have received in the course of our lives. This man deserted his wife and family for another woman. That woman deserted her husband and family for another man, for a Russian oligarch. And at some point we all deserted our respective villages and settled in Paris, Rome, London and New York. We have trained ourselves to desert our families, our villages, our countries and our armies. The Earth is nothing but a village, another village. Why not desert her, our Mother? It would be as easy as pie. This departure is all the more logical since our Mother Earth will soon have no more milk for her babies. In the foreseeable future.

So they have left the Earth thanks to our skilful use of Ockham's razor that is probably the most ideal and pure instrument one can resort to in the domain of Buddhism. You have to cut and cut and cut, as Buddhists say as they remove from their fields of vision both their visions and everyday reality. Ockham's razor is embedded in their minds so they neither shave nor cut whatever they are determined to get rid of for the sake of their enlightenment and our revelation. ('Enlightenment' is not the word traditionally used by *our* priests and saviours.) Jesus says that we should forget our families and follow his footsteps, in his footsteps, even if he happens to skim across the tops of the waves; and any burden, however respectable and reasonable, may affect the speed and loyalty of our thoughts. Suppose we are so exhausted when we get home from our work that we trail wearily up the stairs to bed, muttering under our breath, 'I'm tired, exhausted, weary, fed up and disgusted.' Is that how we should follow Jesus Christ or even an ordinary saviour who, for all his normality and triviality, can save us from drowning or a woman? Of course not. We should run, run and run; and we should be able to run a mile in four minutes, if we are resolved to keep up with our saviour of sorts. And if we do not manage to catch up with him, we should go to the gym and train ourselves until we are able to run a mile in three minutes; or two miles in seven minutes.

We continue to cut whatever we lay our hands on and our hands cut off both objects and subjects they are unable to touch. So humans and objects continue to disappear and we realise that we need only one human being on Earth and our decision to keep one specimen of our species may be likened to what was going on before the Flood. All right, we shall model our behaviour upon that of God – it is not the first time we are temped to act like Him in order to accede to a higher plane of regard. We need a male and a female to preserve our species: one child would not be enough, contrary to what some of us think. It is not enough to put one child – either a boy or a girl – on a pedestal to show him or her to Martians, saying, 'They used to walk on our planet before the Revolution or another stage of Evolution.' No, we have

to enlarge this pedestal of ours to allow another child to stand or lie on it, having sex with the other child. And these children of ours should belong to different races so as not to impoverish the future human race.

But first we have to teach our children to have respect for different races and appreciate the diversity of other cultures; otherwise they will kill each other before giving birth to their descendants. We all know that people should not be stigmatised on the basis of race, but some children may be unaware of the fact, on account of their immaturity. Let us not forget that even nowadays many Americans are still grappling with the issue of race. (I have no idea to which 'nowadays' this piece of information belongs.) Discrimination on the basis of race, gender, age or disability is not allowed, and even if our girl is incapable of conceiving a child, we should not banish her to the Hereafter. Let her stand on our pedestal, childless and helpless. At least *our* bodies will keep her company.

And what about putting a cosmic man (or woman) on the pedestal, a symbol of microcosm and macrocosm – Adam Kadmon, in other words and names? (Or Eva Kadmon.) According to Zohar, Adam Kadmon or the Spiritual Man is 'both the import and the highest degree of creation, for which reason he was formed on the sixth day. As soon as the Man was created, everything was complete, including the Upper and Lower worlds, for everything is comprised in the Man. He unites in Himself all the forms.' Well and good. Alas, this definition does not suit our purpose because we should not forget that discrimination on the basis of race, *gender*, age or disability is not allowed. Where is our girl, in other words? Where is the Woman? Of course, according to Zohar, everything is comprised in our Adam. But according to us, *not* everything is comprised in him, for the Woman is conspicuous by her absence. To allow her to be conspicuous by her presence, we should correct the text as follows, 'Everything is comprised in the Man and in the Woman. They unite in Themselves all the forms.'

But let us go back to the Buddha, to where he is sitting under his tree or just under the sun, under the polestar and the Milky Way. What does he say? 'All created things perish,' 'all uncreated things perish,' 'all non-things perish,' 'any thing in itself perishes,' 'any out-of-itself thing perishes,' 'perish the thought,' 'perish the passion,' 'perish the emotion,' 'perish the greed,' 'perish the need,' 'perish the deed,' 'perish the undeed,' 'perish the indeed,' 'perish the "I am",' 'it is important to store perishable human beings in a cool place,' 'keep cool – neither shout nor lose your temper,' 'lose yourself,' 'loosen your tie and your ties,' 'loosen your grip,' 'don't loosen your tongue,' 'you should loosen up,' 'a gin and tonic may loosen you up but you should not drink,' and so on and so forth.

What does St Paul say? I am already in my library and I have so many books around me and even overhead that I do not know which one to choose. St Paul seems a proper choice because in churches his letters are commented upon as if they had been written *yesterday*, being influenced and affected by what is going on *today*. Suppose you are a doctor and sit at a table surrounded by your colleagues who talk and talk; and you realise they have nothing else to do. They are not in their surgeries, in their offices; they are not about to pull yet another of your wisdom teeth out, which might make them focus their attention upon their instruments, rather than words. Of course they often talk when pulling your teeth out; yet they are somehow distracted from their monologues and so you enjoy a kind of respite because their words are even worse than their instruments. They usually talk nonsense and you do not like nonsense in any shape or form, even if its present form is meant to make you forget your suffering.

Surgeons, on the other hand, do not talk and that is why most people prefer surgeons to dentists – to the point of being prepared to undergo operations, which might enable them to enjoy peace and quiet, if only for one or two hours. Well, suppose you are a doctor and not just one of a doctor's patients. You sit at a table, in a room where one can see no surgical supplies/instruments/gloves. For want of anything better, you talk to the people sitting around you and drinking the tea they are offered by your secretary, or their secretaries. After a while you go home and write in your diary, 'The discussion focused on topical issues in medicine.' That is what one can say about St Paul, for his letters seem to have been written just after such a discussion focused on *topical* issues. For instance, he writes, 'For ye suffer, if a man bring you into bondage, if a man devour *you*, if a man take *of you*, if a man exalt himself, if a man smite you on the face.' Doesn't that apply to you and anyone else, today, this morning?

Upon awakening you see a man who says, 'You're under arrest. And don't think it's just a bad dream, a nightmare you read about in Kafka's *The Trial*. It's not a book, my dear friend. The stark reality is you're really under arrest because the law is against you.' And if you ask this man to what term you have been sentenced, he answers, 'I'm going to devour you.' And he sets about devouring your toes, your left foot, your right leg, and you realise you can do nothing about it. You just say to him, 'Why are you eating my legs and tummy? I'll go and fetch a few croissants at the baker's. Of course you'll have an English breakfast, not a continental one. Scrambled eggs on toast, ham, orange juice. You'll be served scones with butter and jam. Eggs are better than human legs. In my opinion, they're even more delicious

than frogs' legs. We had to dissect a worm and a frog in our biology practical last night. Disgusting.'

Meanwhile the man you see beside your bed sets about dissecting your body as if you were a frog or a worm or a mouse. He does not look like a cat; yet he seems to enjoy his meal as if you *were* a mouse one can find in any house, provided one looks for it for one hour at least. 'What do you take me for?' you say to the gluttonous man. 'I'm not a mouse, am I?' 'You are,' he answers without batting an eyelid. 'You're a mouse, a worm, a frog, a grouse. Don't you like grouse? I would devour myself, if I were you. Luckily for me, I'm not you.' That is how he rounds off because his mouth is so full his words cannot get through, and he seems to prefer your muscles to his own words. Is that what St Paul writes about in his Letter to Corinthians? But what does he mean when he says 'if a man takes *of you*'? According to another translation, it means 'takes advantage of you'.

All right, you are being taken advantage of and you do not seem to mind this operation or ritual. Why don't you call the police? All right, you call the police and say, 'There's a man in my bedroom. He's devouring me limb by limb. I'm a lamb, you know. All my life I've compared myself to Jesus Christ. I'm afraid this man will roast me on a spit. I'm afraid he'll end up cooking a lamb casserole.' But the police officer interrupts you to say you are talking nonsense because you live in a free country and consequently cannot be ill-treated by ogres. And he adds after a pause, 'We must do more to smooth the country's path to democratic reform.' 'Is that your way of doing more?' you shout. 'This man exalts himself, you know. Soon he'll smite me on the face.' 'Why?' asks the police officer. 'Because it is written, "...if a man exalt himself, if a man smite you on the face –"' 'If he does, you'll call us, I hope,' says the policeman before hanging up.

If you read a novel by Gabriel García Márquez or Graham Greene, you enjoy – or not, as the case may be – a series of figments of one's imagination, and however important this 'one' is, it is nothing but a figment and an imagination you come across. And let us not forget that you too have a lot of figments and a huge imagination, and you do not really need other people's contribution to your daydreaming and nightmares which you enjoy from time to time, considering they are not real and cannot harm you. Upon awakening, you realise that you are screaming for nothing, for a figment of your brain's imagination, and you heave a sigh of relief, saying to yourself, 'It was only a nightmare, nothing more, nothing else, nothing, nothing.' And what about Gabriel García Márquez and Graham Greene? For some reason their works captured the imagination of readers but you are not of their number because you are fed up with your own imagination and therefore do not need exterior

figments and outer flights. ‘Just another flight of fancy,’ you say to yourself as you continue to hearken to your own homemade, brainmade stories. And you also hearken to St Paul’s epistles because you need *reality* now and then; you need what may be journalistically called ‘topical stuff’.

‘But what I do, that I will do, that I may cut off occasion from them which desire occasion; that wherein they glory, they may be found even as we.’ Why is this verse topical? Because I think about myself as I read it and my perseverance or resistance – my act of resistance, as Deleuze puts it – seems to be echoed by St Paul’s declaration, by *his* perseverance and resistance. Come hell or high water – or paradise, or purgatory – I will always do what I am doing now, whatever they say, think or make. Of course I am no martyr but sometimes it is better to be crucified, for at least they take notice of you and erect a cross for your sake instead of leaving you out in the cold. They may think you are used to the cold, and they may even say to each other, ‘Anyway, he’s come in from the cold,’ thinking about someone else’s figments, imagination, fancy and flights. Or they do not say anything, unwilling to make an effort on your account. Instead, they make a lot of effort as they help nonentities of all kinds and breeds by making names for them – for those who deservedly have no names. Adam did not take the trouble to name them and they had remained nameless until the day an important person took notice of them and began to make a multitude of names – household names and good names, among other names. Why don’t you give these humans a series of bad names?

Sometimes your life seems to stay outside your body – not necessarily when you listen to the orders given by your superiors and inferiors. Within the framework of democracy, your inferiors often grow so insolent they think they are entitled to order you about and that is more unpleasant than being pushed and mishandled by your superiors. At least what you call logic is respected and used when your superior says, ‘What are you doing here? You should be over there.’ And he or she does not even take the trouble to show you where this ‘over there’ is located; you go here and there, and nothing suits either your mood or your purpose. St Paul must know what you are to do today and tomorrow, but you do not always carry his epistles in your pockets or attaché cases. And you should carry his epistles even if they are too heavy for your puny constitution because what counts is not your constitution, however important it is for your life expectancy. What counts is your *mind* and whenever one speaks of the mind, one does not fail to mention a series of entities that Ockham would have eliminated either with his razor or bare hands. His bare hands were so used to cutting off edges and other superfluous bits that he did not really need either razors or axes or Kalashnikovs.

Deprived of St Paul's moral and mental supports, you are at a loss to know how you can help yourself and to *what* you can help yourself. You like chocolate and you wish you could help yourself to a box of chocolates; but both your superiors and inferiors had something else in mind when they talked to you about their agendas and your duties. So ask yourself what you can do and, first and foremost, ask yourself the following question: 'What should be done?' When you project your worries into the cosmos, you feel you are part of it and so it is worth your while to deserve universal love. How can you deserve it? By doing what should be done. If you do only what *you* have to do, you crawl/go/retreat/retire into your shell or hell, whereas you wish to address yourself to the cosmos and take part in its growth and history.

What is the answer you are looking for? The people you see in front of you shake their heads as if they had Parkinson's and you realise you cannot rely upon them, even if they tell you they teach at the University of Oxford and have a few Nobel Prizes. You do not have to say you prefer St Paul to Nobel Prizes because you should waste neither your words nor your breath. Nor should you waste your energy, your lungs, your heart, your soul, your liver and so on and so forth, as you usually say. But before going on, you had better consult a book on anatomy, otherwise you are unlikely to know what you may waste if you continue to talk to those people and to others. If you talk to your superiors, they turn a deaf ear to whatever you say, even if you shout, scream, stamp your feet and clap your hands. Their deaf ears are as deaf as the deaf who will not hear: for once, the will dissected by Schopenhauer holds no sway over them. They are not far from nirvana, in your opinion, although you hope they are far from whatever you respect and worship. Why should they be in the middle of the bliss you cannot reach, for all your mental and physical gymnastics?

If you talk to your inferiors, they also turn a deaf ear because not only your superiors have a lot of deaf ears at their disposal. Anyway, they are unlikely to help you because even God helps only those who help themselves; and yet He might help *everybody*, especially those who can*not* help themselves. We call them the poor, the infirm, the needy. It is true that God should not help the greedy and also those who *can* help themselves by calling their bankers and lawyers. These people say to other people, 'The company's results are in line with stock market expectations.' They are full of great expectations which dwell both inside and outside them as if there was enough room for hope in human life. Well, hope is believed to be a virtue and so you count your money and hope you will count even more money in the future. All right, you will not change the world, even if you become a messiah or a worldwide reformer – another Mrs Thatcher, for instance. Apparently it is not enough to become Mrs Merkel. Well, you are what you are, even though you have not yet become what you are.

At this point you are bound to recall St Paul for the simple reason that you never forget him, whatever happens and whoever you may talk to. You do talk to people now and then, especially when you feel like wasting your words, breath and the rest of your body and soul. You talk to them for the sake of talking – for your own sake, in other words. Why? Because you like both your words and yourself and therefore you could say, using Ockham's razor, 'I'm in love with myself. Of course I'm also in love with my words, but my words are part of myself so I can cut my statement down to size and just say, "I'm in love with myself." Please, don't turn a deaf ear to what I'm saying right now. I see your deaf ear everywhere and enough's enough, you know. At least one ear of yours can hear and I'd like to see this ear and not the other one. So please turn the former and not the latter. Sorry, it's the other way round. Turn round and turn all your ears in my direction, in the direction of my words. Do you see my words? Do you see in what direction they're going? Do you see their aim, in other words? You don't?'

Going home, going home. You are getting closer and closer to your library; its waves and particles reach your brain and touch it ever so softly so as not to give you a shock, for doctors say that any shock, however delightful, may damage one's nerves to the point of destroying them completely. But your library has a soothing vibe and you welcome its echo in the middle of a street you seem to recognise, for all your daydreaming. But you should not rush, whatever your desires, wishes and passions are this afternoon because your future depends on your safety, on your body's completeness. Yesterday you were rushing along with your head down when you cannoned into an old lady walking the other way. You killed the old lady, for all you know: she was taken to hospital and you know nothing about her fate and health. But you assume she was killed as a result of this collision because she was an old lady and old ladies are as fragile as a case of wine. Be that as it may, it is your body you should think about and yesterday – and also the day before – you might have got run over by a car, and any car, however small and insignificant, may kill you or at least cut off one of your legs or arms.

Anyway, you are at home now and you head for your library where a lot of sacred books await your fingers which they know almost by heart. It is true that you often just touch them without being tempted to open and read anything: there are moments when you are fed up with instructions, injunctions and threats. All these books threaten you, saying you will go to Hell if your passions are not dead – even deader than the dead who may be recalled and in a way brought back by the quick. But you are not supposed to recall your former passions for fear of being dragged into loves, hates and other emotions, sensations and tensions. And you

should say to those who are eager to discuss this crisis and that predicament with you, ‘Look, I don’t want to get into a fight with you over this, so let’s forget it.’ And you forget it or at least you do your best to forget it, for the Buddha and also St Paul advise you to get unpleasant tasks over and done with as quickly as possible – and even as impossible, as the Russians say from time to time.

Do you really know what sacred books are and how they differ from *un*sacred ones? Let us take Darwin, for instance. As soon as we consider him we realise we might have been born in a zoo or a jungle, and neither of these places suits us. Is his book sacred? No, because it says we might have seen the light of day without God’s participation in the act of our creation, of our emancipation from *Nichts*, as Heidegger puts it. Frankly speaking, we do not like nothingness even if it has *some* affinities with nirvana, judging from what the Buddha says about removals, spring-cleaning, dry cleaning and other good clean-ups. But for God’s activities and kindness, we saw not only the light of *day* – nothing to write home about: anybody can be born on condition that this anybody or nobody was already conceived by a man and a woman or in a test-tube. We saw the light of *God* and that makes all the difference. Of course there are individuals who turn a blind eye to the light of God and we often hear them say, ‘This light makes no difference at all. There’s nothing wrong with the sun and with our electricity.’ ‘Storms caused power cuts in hundreds of homes last night,’ we say to them.

All this does not mean you can choose sacredness on a whim, on the spur of the moment; and given that there are many moments, an impressive number of moments, you are likely to read all the books there are, provided God bestows immortality upon you, as La Fontaine puts it. All right, you are immortal and read whatever you can lay your hands and eyes on because you have nothing else to do: within eternity you have plenty of time, a sort of cornucopia you have to cope with so as not to die of boredom. You read Darwin, St Paul, Wittgenstein and realise that any book is sacred as long as you take it seriously and put it on the top of your life. And then you put it *at the core* of your life and live with it for some time, hoping it will help you cope with time, eternity, space, dark corners, fatal women, fatal men and dogs, wolves and crocodiles. You cope all the time and as you do you penetrate your brain like a bullet. You see what you are and you are frightened to death of your own fragility. Even within the kingdom of eternity you are fragile, unsubstantial; and you may be frightened to death, to another samsara, karma or whatever they call it in English, Sanskrit, Russian and German.

You are in the middle of the night and you enjoy this fact as you open your window and breathe what is called fresh air, although it is not as fresh as all that, according to newspapers

which talk about pollution and dissolution. You are even tempted to coin a verb and come up with ‘to dissolute’, which means you are leading a dissolute life, drinking and womanising, playing cards and the piano or any other instrument. You need music from time to time – as Shakespeare’s characters do – and you indulge in this pastime: whatever time you encounter on your way to eternity, death and mess, is a sort of pastime or just a ‘sort’. You pass this time, that time, and you do not skip space; nor do you miss out on it. ‘Don’t miss out on the fantastic bargains in our summer sale,’ your neighbour says to you and you begin to love your neighbour after hearing this piece of news. But, for all your energy and perseverance – you keep going from one shop to another, from Paris to London – you miss out on these fantastic bargains and consequently on time, space and love. Usually you fall in love with the objects you buy, even if they are simple, cheap and look like keepsakes – they have great sentimental value for you – and not like real objects you can show to your neighbours and friends, saying, ‘I bought it in London, at an auction.’ You miss out on everything but your life grabs you by the scruff of the neck and throws you out of the coffin where you had already installed yourself for good.

When someone says, ‘For good,’ you are tempted to say, ‘For bad,’ because you are already mature enough to know that everything and everybody are *for bad*, and there is nothing *for good* except a few peanuts. Of course you pick these peanuts up because you are not a spendthrift and spend nothing if you can keep whatever you have without starving to death or putting your bed in the middle of a street, for want of anything better or worse. Well, once again you realise that St Paul and his epistles are far superior to your interior monologues, and so you pick up your copy of The Bible and start reading; and you keep reading the Epistles far into the night. ‘For whoremongers, for them that defile themselves with mankind, for menstealers (*wo*menstealers?), for liars, for perjured persons, and if there be any other thing that is contrary to sound doctrine –’ Everything is contrary to sound doctrine, to anything sound, because everything is unsound, as you pointed out a few hours ago. Never mind, never mind. So everything is unsound, according to you and many other thinkers with whom you are acquainted through books, epistles, letters and emails. St Paul is not of their number or of your number because he is Number One, at least to some people. Well, let him be Number One; or Number Two, as the case may be. Or Number Four: he comes right after the Holy Trinity.

Whoremongers. Does he mean ‘warmongers’? I am watching a documentary on the Second World War and recall the words someone uttered: all words are to be uttered sooner or later. This someone uttered the following words, ‘For the Russians the war was yesterday.’

I hope it was yesterday for everybody, for everything was yesterday; everything is today, whether we forget this everything or not. We may forget all the everythings that punctuate and fill up our history, but some of them should not be forgotten and that is why we do not forget them: we cannot do otherwise. Yes, for once there is no 'otherwise', no 'elsewhere', no 'on the other hand' – for the simple reason that there are no other hands. All hands are here and they hold a corpse, a multitude of corpses, and they also hold bullets, ropes, ravines, crosses and their absences. They also hold tears and blood, many bloods, and also 'also', and yet another 'also', and another, and yet, and another. Also, also, also, also. How can you hold all this in your hands, on your back, in your mind and memory, in your brain and outside it? You are holding our history and you have no alternative but to hold it without being tempted to collapse and forget everything, the everything itself; and the everybody himself, herself, oneself, no one self.

Is it a sacred book? Is this memory a sacred book? It is sacred – no doubt about that. But it is not high time to rely on doubts, saying, 'I doubt, I'm Cartesian,' because for once you do not doubt. All this did happen, however incredible it may appear in the light of this and in the light of that. Of course you are tempted to say there is no light and consequently you were born into a dark family, into a family of darkness and void. And so you saw the dark of day, the black of day, the black eye of day; you were born into a black picture of day painted by someone you are not acquainted with. Sure enough, you are acquainted only with blackness; and also the void; and also a set of trials and tribulations; and also with manicure sets. You are acquainted with many 'alsos'.

My parents were born in St Petersburg and this city is still my city, wherever I may find myself as I settle down here and there, in France, in Germany, in England and even in New Zealand – whenever I drink *their* wines. I was born in Moscow but this birth of mine does not alter my lifestyle centred upon St Petersburg and the 19th century when I would have chosen to be born, had I presided over my birth and its consequences. I did not and so was born in Moscow, and I cannot do anything about it now; nor was I able to do anything about it in the late Forties when French wines were at the height of their powers or will to power; or just will, intensity, longevity and so on, on condition that whenever you say 'so on', you think about wine and the richness of its nose.

And here is another image, another vision. You are sitting at your desk, surrounded by books and tubes that are supposed to symbolise knowledge, science and intelligence. Is this image edifying? Hardly, hardly. No one needs your books, whilst your wallets and credit cards have already been removed from your desk and even from the room where you are

sitting and talking. Ockham's razor is as sharp as ever and its efficiency accounts for many burglaries and other misdemeanours such as sexual harassment: in this case, it removes *virginity* from some female bodies. And while it is at it, it may also remove their joie de vivre, faith in the judicial system, faith in God, and faith in good faith. Did the criminal act in good faith for his victim? Of course not. So no one will ever act in good faith for anybody. There are only criminals in the world; the world itself is a violent criminal. Doesn't it throw bombs on us? It does. And what about cultural, economic and spiritual impoverishment? Humans cannot be expected to shoulder all the blame for disasters and poverty. The world is also guilty and therefore ought to be sentenced to life imprisonment. Where shall we imprison it? In the Hereafter. But the Hereafter should also stand trial. For what? For Hell, for its very existence. Let us sentence it to life imprisonment too. Hell and Purgatory are to go to prison in the Hereafter; Paradise will come over here.

What is Hell on Earth? The Jews, of course. That is what Hitler thought and he said it many times, but for some time no one heard anything; only a few friends and fellow travellers did from time to time. The latter listened to what Hitler said and nodded all the time, and their heads ended up nodding even when Hitler was not speaking. He was just looking at them and they nodded their heads – and also their minds. And also their brains and their hearts – everything inside them agreed with Hitler. And whenever he uttered his favourite keyword 'Jews', they clenched their fists and ran towards those who, in their opinion, were the Jews or their representatives. They would have run as far as Jerusalem, but for Hitler's practical mind: his mind knew that there were more Jewish men and women in Europe than in the Bible. Hitler was more interested in the Book of Realism than in sacred books.

Nietzsche thought that all anti-Semites should be shot and I wonder whether he wrote that before Hitler's birth or after it. Anyway, Hitler ought to have been shot in his cradle, along with other anti-Semites who might have been in their offices and elsewhere when Nietzsche sentenced all of them to death. Actually Nietzsche must have come up with this idea well before he wrote it down and sent it in an envelope to Overbeck or another friend of his: as usual I am too lazy and so do not feel like going all the way to my library to check the name of the addressee. What does it matter anyway? What counts is Nietzsche's thought and Hitler's death, and one regrets they did not coincide in spite of the number of coincidences one has to deal with in everyday life. As we all know, Jung even devoted a book to synchronicity but I am not sure he spoke of Hitler and Nietzsche – in relation to the Jews and the destiny of anti-Semites. This does not matter either because death is always more important than books unless we are surrounded by books of life.

In all the places the Nazis occupied, the round-up of the Jews began because Hitler wished to create Paradise on Earth and in his mind the Jews were associated with Hell, with Evil and its only root. He thought that all evils would disappear from the world upon the Jews' disappearance, annihilation and eternal death. In his opinion – and in his mind, in his body – there was only one evil in the world and all other evils were just its auxiliaries. In other words or images, there was the Tree of Evil in Hitler's world and the Jews were the trunk of this gigantic Tree; whereas the rest or other evils had been reduced to the ranks, so to speak. In other words, they were just the branches of the Tree, its twigs, leaves and even a number of birds that were in the habit of singing their songs while enjoying the Tree's hospitality. So the Tree had to be cut down; in other words, the Jews and their evil had to be eliminated, root and branch.

'The colossal empire in the East,' wrote Hitler, 'is ripe for dissolution. And the end of Jewish domination in Russia will also be the end of Russia as a state.' In other images, Russia or rather the Soviet Union was yet another tree in Hitler's garden, and the trunk of this tree was almost identical to that of the Tree of Evil, given that it represented the Jews. And logically enough, this Tree was to be cut down as well so one wonders if Hitler was allergic to trees as such. Of course he was fond of the grass or grassroots, for he often said, 'The feeling among the grassroots of the Party is that the leaders are not radical enough. We should have eliminated the Jews a long time ago.' As long as his army was victorious he was in love with the grassroots of his Party, but the defeats it suffered in the course of the last years of his dictatorship turned his love into hate. At the very end, one could not even speak about a sort of 'love-hate relationship', for Hitler hated the Germans to the point of yearning for their annihilation: he had many Ockham's razors in his chests of drawers.

Hitler spoke about the dissolution of Russia as follows, 'Nitric acid will dissolve most animal tissue. And what about us and Russia? Are we inferior to nitric acid? Aren't the Russians mere animals? Actually they're inferior to animals – to my dog, for instance. Aren't they, aren't they? Why don't you nod? All right, all right. Enough's enough. Have you already learnt the lesson? I hope you know now that the Russians aren't mere underhumans. They're more and less than that, worse than that. They're underanimals and underinsects. They're underflies and underworms. What else? Do you have any idea? Do you wish to complete my inventory? All right, all right. I'm not finished yet. I know you wholeheartedly adhere to my total doctrine, to my total war. Do you think the Nazis are unable to tackle this problem? You just dissolve a spoonful of powder in warm water. Easy, isn't it? As easy as a spoonful of powder. As easy as warm water. Don't you have enough water in your

bathrooms? Not enough powder in your chests of drawers? All right, I'll supply the powder. The world has already supplied it. This powder is the Jews. Let us dissolve them in our water, in our warm ocean. Can't we heat up our ocean? Can't we dissolve and disintegrate Russia in it? As easy as the spoonful of powder. As easy as the spoonful of pow*er*.'

January 1942. About 4,000 people were dying in Leningrad each day. During the blockade of the city, more humans died than the *total war* dead of Britain and the United States of America combined. Nietzsche used to say, 'What does not kill me fortifies my body and mind.' And what if you get killed? Are your body and mind fortified by the snow? A Leningrader said, 'Every day I went to the shop where I was given my ration of food. On my way to the shop, I saw two corpses in the snow. On my way back I would come across four corpses.' This is what the total multiplication table is about. If you multiply seven by 15 you get 105. If you multiply two by four you get 4,000.

We shall struggle on, drawing our strength from the courage of others. That was not enough under the circumstances. Sometimes you have no alternative but to draw your strength from your hate and not from your love, contrary to what sacred books affirm as they teach us how to cope with death. (Hate keeps a man alive, says a character in Ben Hur.) Love triumphs over death – that sort of thing. For once, it is not as easy as falling off a log. You fall off a log and say to yourself, 'It was easy, wasn't it?' And what if you fall flat on your face in the snow? Dying from what? From hunger/cancer/a heart attack/your injuries. It revolts you to know that the world spends so much money on arms when millions are dying of hunger. And what about Leningrad? What about the blockade? What about the corpses you met on your way to buy food or whatever passed for such? Bread was made with sweepings, cattle-cake, sawdust. People ate soap, linseed oil, wallpaper paste. Call it 'food', if you wish. There was lots of food and drink at the party. Where? When? In Germany, in January 1942. And in January 1941. At least there was a lot of food in Hitler's official residence; and in his bunker.

Leningrad. January 1942. March 1942. Melting snow revealed thousands of corpses in the streets and yards. A campaign was launched to clean up the city. Just another Ockham's razor. 'I have found this razor a most fruitful principle in logical analysis,' wrote Bertrand Russell. So did Leningrad's authorities, although they did not find themselves in the domain of logical analysis. Never mind – the city was cleaned up; as a result of this winter-cleaning, the inhabitants of St Petersburg did not have to wage war on epidemics.

Did they draw their strength from the courage of others? And what about those others? What did *they* draw their strength from? Did the latter draw their strength from the former? Did the former draw their strength from the latter? A vicious circle? A Catch-22 situation?

You cannot have strength if others do not have it, but others cannot have strength if you do not have it. A Catch-4,000 situation. There was no strength left anywhere except in the libraries that stood open. People read poetry and sacred books. Not the Bible, though; not St Paul's epistles. There were no Bibles in Soviet libraries and bookshops. 'Nothing is sacred to the Russians,' said the Nazi officers. 'Even cows aren't sacred to them.' But the Russians called this war 'sacred'. It was a sacred war to them.

They drew their courage from poetry, from Pushkin, Lermontov, Baratïnsky. In one of his poems, Lermontov is lying dead in a dale of Dagestan. (Not in Leningrad, not in the snow.) 'The deep wound still smoked on.' The blood was trickling drop by drop. He is lying on the sand and has a dream. An evening feast, with merry conversation. A young woman looks at his corpse. Leningrad. They were both dead and immortal. An evening feast, with merry conversation, a dream. Perchance a life, a real life. In yet another poem Lermontov signifies his desire to fall asleep. But the sleep he has in mind is not akin to the eternal, cold, grave-provided sleep. His chest rises and sinks; the leaves of an oak-tree rustle overhead. 'But before thee, Thought, trenchant as a naked sword, earthly life grows pale,' writes Baratïnsky. No one can chain up the thoughts of a stoic. 'I've set up to myself a monument not wrought by hands. The public path to it will not grow weedy.' Two corpses, four corpses. Nabokov's translations.

They drew their courage from hate, disregarding the doctrines of Spinoza and St Paul. 'And though I have the gift of prophecy, and understand all mysteries, and all knowledge; and though I have all faith, so that I could remove mountains, and have not charity, I am nothing.' All right. But you are driven mad by destruction and murders, and you may say to yourself and your God-fearing, St-Paul's-terrified cousins, 'Yes, I'm nothing, nothing. But this nothing of mine will kill the Germans who have desecrated my country. I'll kill all of them, not only Hitler and his cronies. There'll be no exception to this rule of mine, to the hatred I nourish towards these butchers. My nothingness is filled up with hatred. Sometimes nothingness is more efficient than fullness. I admit that my present life boils down to hate. Well, you should envy me the fullness of my life.'

'Recompense to no man evil for evil. Dearly beloved, avenge not yourselves, but rather give place unto wrath: for it is written, Vengeance is mine; I will repay, saith the Lord. Therefore if thine enemy hunger, feed him; if he thirst, give him drink: for in so doing thou shalt heap coals of fire on his head.' 'Give place unto wrath' may be translated thus, 'Leave room for God's wrath.' But let us not forget that the Russians could not wait either for God or for the British and Americans, considering the extent of the damage caused by the Nazis and

their will to extermination. So they killed German soldiers, raped German women and razed German towns. They neither fed nor spared their enemies whose cruelty had left psychological, physiological, psychoanalytical and architectural scars everywhere. And had they been acquainted with St Paul's epistle to the Romans, they would have gone on with their revenge, for they were not likely to understand what he had meant by heaping coals of fire on their enemies' heads. Your right hand gives your enemy a drink; your left hand heaps coals of fire on his head. In other words, your right hand does not know what its left counterpart is doing. Anyway, it is easier to shoot your enemy dead and rape his wife. As you rape her you say to yourself, 'What a pity he is not a Muslim – I might rape four women instead of one. Never mind – I'll rape his daughters, nieces and nephews.' Why should you waste your precious coal on your foes?

'We cry no longer, for no tears could quench our burning hate. And hate is our only course. The guarantee of life, the cure for grief, the one uniting, warming, guiding force.' I have no idea who is the author of this poem. Not Lermontov, not Pushkin, not Tyutchev. Never mind, never mind. What counts is hate, not the authorship of war poems. 'Wait for me, and I'll return. Only, wait very hard. Wait when you are filled with sorrow as you watch the yellow rain[...]Wait when others have stopped waiting, forgetting their yesterdays[...]Wait for me, and I'll return defying every death.' According to the English documentary, everyone knew this poem by heart. Even I know a few lines; and yet I was born after the war.

I used to wonder why the rain you were watching had this unusual colour. The yellow rain. Why? Is the sky muddy too? Even muddier than the Earth? German aeroplanes got bogged up in the heavy mud. Revenge is sweet even if it takes place in a dream or in a book. Oddly enough, this poem sounds better in English, especially if it is recited by Laurence Olivier. Wait for me even if there are no more calendars around you, if time has stopped forever or just for a few years. Wait for me even if there's no more space around you, no more room for my body, my corpse. Wait for me even if I'm already in a mass grave. I may rise from the dead and come to you. Don't you believe in the resurrection of the dead? Read St Paul's epistles and the rest of the New Testament. You should know that our body is 'sown in corruption; it is raised in incorruption: / It is sown in dishonour; it is raised in glory: it is sown in weakness; it is raised in power: / It is sown a natural body; it is raised a spiritual body. There is a natural body, and there is a spiritual body.'

And your beloved or wife or bride immediately answers you, 'What are you talking about? I need a *natural* body, not an *unnatural* one. I couldn't care less about your *spiritual* body. What would I do with it? Am I supposed to caress your *spirits*? What for? To push

them to a higher plane of regard? A couple of drinks will raise my spirits as well. We'll be in *high* spirits – I can assure you. We'll be in seventh heaven, providing you come to me in the flesh.' Alas, he turns a deaf ear to her supplications and goes on reading out loud, 'And so it is written, The first man Adam was made a living soul; the last Adam was made a quickening spirit. / Howbeit that was not first which is spiritual, but that which is natural; and afterward that which is spiritual.' 'The Bible isn't obtainable in the Soviet Union,' she shouts. You turn a deaf ear to her shouts.

Whatever you say and conclude means only that you go on thinking and drawing conclusions as if any conclusion could be drawn from what you see around you and in the sky where no angels fly and take care of the clouds and stars. Both must be taken care of, otherwise they would fall or dissolve in the atmosphere, in the air and ether, but they neither fall nor dissolve and you are holding out in spite of starvation, deprivation, privation, privatisation. Whatever happens is painful, even if you happen to swim in the sea, in a swimming pool, within a Japanese bath meant for swimmers and sportsmen in general. Life is nonsensical but you go on drawing conclusions and jumping to them; and the higher you jump the more nonsensical everything grows. What is more, everything you come across is cliché-ridden: life, the human condition, the animal condition, trains of thought, trains and planes. You are weary and disgusted, but you realise that your human condition is rather humane in comparison with what Leningraders underwent in the course of their blockade.

You eat a piece of bread and as your mouth starts to feel it and deal with it you recall the blockade, their bread made with sweepings, cattle-cake and sawdust. You look at a dog and say to yourself that all dogs were eaten in Leningrad and you wonder why the dog you are looking at has not been eaten yet. And you also wonder why you are not starving to death, considering there is nothing more natural in human life: every human being is doomed and sentenced to starvation. And you are also supposed to *freeze to death*. A blast of cold air hits you as you open the window, as you open a box of chocolate and any other box so that you freeze to death without exposing yourself to the outside world and the trials and tribulations it has in store for you whatever happens and whenever you see the light of day. And if a blanket of snow lies on the ground, you say to yourself that sooner or later this snow will melt, disclosing thousands of corpses. And when this eventually happens, you look at these corpses, hoping they will rise and talk to you about the weather and the beginning of a new tether. And you are so happy they are alive again that you let them talk nonsense to their heart's content because there is no other talk in the world and outside it.

Yes, life must go on. After a while – and this while lasted for more than two years – Leningraders got running water and took showers, baths and whatever they could take, and no one said to them, 'Take it or leave it,' for the answer was known in advance. Why should you say anything if you know answers and questions and foregone conclusions and foregone decisions? There were a few trams in their streets and that is what they called 'resurrection' in those days because they still had no Bible in their libraries and bookshops that stood invitingly open. To them the Resurrection was not on the Cross or in a grave; it was a tram, water, another piece of bread, a dog in the street. Schoolchildren and professors of botany helped to plant every open space with vegetables – just another facet of their overall Resurrection. You eat these vegetables now and recall both Leningrad and the Resurrection and probably the Cross, although for once you see a city on it, not a human or a god. Call it 'the City of God', if you wish.

The enemy has not been removed by Ockham's razor. The enemy's cannons go on hitting where it hurts; and it hurts everywhere. And you cannot hit back, whatever you undertake, even though you are convinced that this is one of the largest aid projects ever undertaken. You also undertake remedial work on dilapidated buildings, but there will be no remedies in your city as long as the enemy is nearby; and yet you cannot say his army is a stone's throw from where you are staying, for this army has not been stoned to death. Yes, you would have stoned all your enemies to death, if you were in a position to do so, if your whereabouts were close enough to his soldiers and cannons. Within your reach there are millions of stones but you cannot use them unless you think they might make you forget humankind and its cruelty. A stone falls into the water with a plop; another stone falls into the water with a plop. You count the stones and the plops; you listen to the plops, to their time and timing. Is that what time is about, duration? Is that what killing time is about? Every plop raises time from the dead. Plop, plop, plop, plop. Flop, flop, flop, flop. When you get home from your time excursions, you are so tired all you can do is flop down in front of the television.

You remember a lot of concentration camps, although it is probably enough to remember one of them and single out one body, one member of this body. No, it is not enough. You should remember every body, all bodies, all members, all pains, all chimneys, all wounds, all words uttered and written by those bodies. A lot of rebuilding took place in the aftermath of the war: everything and everybody had to be rebuilt. The Germans were made not to just look at, but to re-bury the broken bodies. That way perhaps they would never forget – that is what the Allies thought at the time. They might have been right. They might have

been wrong. Who knows? No one is skilful enough to probe into the mysteries of human memory. Did they count on so-called tactile memory?

And suddenly you remember that Hitler had only one testicle. Your tactile memory has nothing to do with this memory, needless to say. Do you need this memory? Do you need Hitler's other testicle? What for? To throw it into the Neva? Plop, plop, plop, plop, plop. How do people spend their time? Students learning computer studies spend two days a week in a computer lab and four days in the classroom. You have to spend three months of the year away from home, but there are compensations like the chance to meet new people. What do you need these new people for? Do you think they are new under the sun? Is it really one of the compensations? What are others, may I ask? Never mind, never mind. Talk to these new people if you feel like it. You have dinner with them and see if they can drink you under the table. And if they cannot, you will be disappointed and look for another bunch of new people. But even this pastime is more rewarding than the one I saw on television last night.

The Russians found Hitler's corpse and as they subjected it to unfair treatment, they discovered he had only one testicle. They did not wonder whether it was a kind of sign – like the Devil's cleft foot, for instance. They wished to know whether the testicle they had – the one that remained attached to Hitler's body – belonged to Hitler or somebody else. In short, they were looking for Hitler because they had been asked to find him in Berlin; and Berlin lay in ruins after months of bombing. They found a corpse that did not look like Hitler because it was partly charred, and Hitler was not charred in his lifetime – neither partly nor wholly; nor was he scorched. Perhaps he had always had only one testicle, which may account for his incapacity to have progeny. But what do we care about his progeny and his posthumous incapacities? All corpses are impotent and lack the will to power that every human being – especially the ones who persevere in their being – is believed to have against all odds.

In short, Hitler had only one testicle; at least his corpse did not have the second testicle and the scientists who had been asked to find out whether the world was dealing with Hitler's corpse or a sort of fake understandably did not take the trouble to find the second testicle. After all, they had not been asked to restore Hitler's body, to resurrect it with all its capacities and incapacities. So they limited their autopsy to solving the identity problem related to Hitler's corpse or mortal remains, given that what remained of his body hardly deserved the name of 'corpse'. At least it was not a dignified corpse but no one in the laboratory really thought in terms of dignity, for any autopsy lacks dignity and every specialist is aware of the fact. Well, our specialists and scientists cared neither about their own dignity or about that of the corpse they were dissecting to find vestiges of Hitler's immoral life.

They examined his dentition and realised they needed his dentist's assistance, but they failed to find him, for all their exertions. They found only his assistant – a woman who was capable of talking about Hitler's teeth for hours on end. 'I told him, "Brush your teeth thoroughly morning and night," but he was too busy and often forgot to brush his teeth, hair and even trousers. Almost every day his trousers got covered in mud, but luckily I was always by his side and so was able to brush them clean. Once he fell and knocked a chip out of his front tooth. I can show you the chip, if you wish – I still have it in my private Hitler Museum. Actually he had razor-sharp teeth and could devour all his enemies. But he was too kind, too humane and so used tanks and aeroplanes.'

The specialists ended up showing the corpse's teeth to the woman, whereupon she exclaimed, 'It's him, it's him! It's him all right. Could I have these teeth? No? Just one tooth, then. This one. This is my favourite tooth.' For a while, the woman stood there, looking at the teeth, and one could see she knew the ins and outs of how they had worked in the course of Hitler's life. But she did not know whether he had taken a poison capsule or shot himself and only shook her head when the following question was put to her: 'Did your patient die a dog's death or a soldier's death?' She shook her head and arms. 'Do you know the difference between these two deaths?' She shook her head and feet. 'If you shoot yourself, you're a man. If you take a poison capsule, you're a dog or a woman. Actually Eva Brown took a poison capsule. Did you know that?' She shook her head and shoulder blades. 'Do you know anything about Eva Braun's teeth?' She shook her head and armpits.

That meeting achieved absolutely nothing; it was a complete waste of time. Of course the scientists and specialists knew now that the corpse lying in their operating theatre belonged to Hitler. If, at that point, someone had inquired about Hitler's personal belongings, the specialists would have pointed to the corpse, saying, 'Over there.' And Hitler's biographer might have written, 'He led a simple life, with few belongings, and never owned a home of his own. He was a staunch friend and ally of St Francis of Assisi whose *Canticle of the Sun* he sang every morning. He gave all his belongings to the poor, the needy, the infirm and the underdog. Yes, he gave his corpse to the underdog because the underdog was his only raison d'être. And he could not give the underdog anything else, for he owned only his own corpse. Incidentally, St Francis often spoke about corpses on whom his numerous followers were supposed to model themselves.' 'Let us give his corpse to the dogs,' said the scientists. They did not.

Why did they waste their time on this search and on the identity problem which was far less exciting than the one continuously tackled by philosophers, bureaucrats and amnesiacs?

Because they thought that if Hitler had been spared by poison, bullets and his cronies, he might have created another Nazi party and launched a devastating attack on our peaceful, harmonious and ideal universe made up of democracies, freedoms and liberals. And such onslaughts and provocations should be nipped in the bud, otherwise we are likely to suffer once again under Hitler's dictatorship, his ships or rather U-boats, alias submarines. I do not like the way the drivers whip their horses; nor do I like the way the former chancellor and president whipped humans for more than a decade. But we could have nipped his power and cruelty in the bud without wasting our time on his barbarously charred corpse, teeth, testicles and chips. We might just have thrown a mini atom bomb on his corpse and on his stooges, cronies and mourners – on *their* teeth, testicles and intestines.

Anyway, whoever you face or miss produces what is called side-effects; and they are everywhere, on every side. Even if you are not attacked *directly*, there are side effects and your sides cannot be saved round the clock. You are on the safe side now, but in a few moments you find yourself on the unsafe side and nothing can save you from this side; and you are quite aware of the fact. You are aware of your death and you brave it as long as it makes sense – your bravery, that is – but then you realise it does not make sense any longer, and you withdraw and retreat – either into yourself or into some wood or other. And you bet on your rebirth and on that of the civilisation you have got used to because barbarism is even worse than any civilisation and evolution. Well, there is what they call eternal recurrence or occurrence: you begin to mix up these terms and everything else, although everything is not eternal. Only something is, assuming there is such a thing as an eternal thing or something. But it is better to stop before you go too far; and yet you cannot go too far because nothing is really too far or just far, far away. Everything is near at hand – your right hand, for instance.

There are still many Hitlers around us and one cannot help wondering where they come from. And one will never tire of asking this question because one is not tired of saying the same old thing every day and every night, whenever one cannot go to sleep. One is reminded of Pol Pot or Mao Pot or just Pot. Or just P*l*ot, as Stalin might have put it. Why should one memorise all these names? One just says, 'Hitler, another Hitler, another Hitler,' and everyone understands what and who one is talking about. Marx insisted that by changing the environment it is possible to do anything down to altering genes and swapping them for other genes.

Hitler should be placed in Churchill's environment, if not in his mother's womb which, in the general opinion, would be reluctant to welcome him. So Hitler or rather Churchill was born on November 30, 1874: time is also part of what is called the environment and we

cannot neglect this aspect of our ritual, otherwise the whole thing may fall through. Alas, we do not have a multitude of time machines in our laboratories, factories and depots. So we are duty bound to recreate this sort of environment artificially, using the documents related to the epoch in question and going so far as to rebuild the palace where Churchill was born. And if the palace is still where it used to be on the day of Churchill's birth, we should rent it and put Hitler's embryo – along with his future mother or at least her womb – in one of the bedrooms.

Now in Hitler's veins both American and English blood run and he feels called upon to promote their unity, in peace and war. To each his or her own unity: Marx took care of proletarians, whilst Churchill gave us a rare symbol of pure Anglo-American harmony. And now Hitler was said to be his successor, for he was awaiting his birth in the womb of Churchill's mother and in the bed where Churchill had seen the world for the first time. A wonderful instance of eternal recurrence. Marx must have rejoiced in his grave upon learning about this experiment which was to confirm his theories once and for all: if Hitler could become Churchill, Marx was right and all others – Crick and Watson – were wrong.

So the world awaited Hitler's or Churchill's birth and at some point the world and its journalists realised they did not really know for whom they were waiting. And it was pointless to answer automatically, 'We're waiting for Godot,' for they were waiting neither for Godot, nor for God, nor for any ordinary being, either human or not. They were waiting for a sort of hybrid and their great expectations were at a loss to understand what they were supposed to expect. But, according to the wise, the greatest expectations are experienced by those who do not know what they are expecting and accept whatever comes their way, being happy through their mere existence and march forward. They are going towards some point or other and the process itself fills them with joy and boundless happiness about which so many philosophers spoke at length as if determined to find its whereabouts. And the Buddha says to you, 'Here it is'; so does Jesus Christ, which means that happiness is within your reach and can be found under your very nose. But you do not look at your happiness because you look *elsewhere*: you always look elsewhere and cannot get rid of this pernicious habit of yours. You are such a creature of habit. You always have to have a biscuit and a cup of tea at bedtime; and you only look at the biscuit and the cup of tea instead of looking at your happiness that awaits you under your nose. And if asked why you never look at it, you say, 'My happiness is enclosed in this biscuit and this cup of tea. And also in this habit of mine. Why should I look for it elsewhere?' Perhaps you are right. Perhaps, perhaps.

In the meantime Hitler was born at Blenheim Palace, Oxfordshire, in full accordance with Churchill's biography, biographers and admirers. From his father he was directly

descended from John Churchill, 1st duke of Marlborough, the hero of the wars against Louis XIV of France in the early 18th century. And everyone knows who his mother was and so there is no point in describing her in detail; even her name is so well known we have no need to mention it. Anyway, we are to resort to her services and womb whenever we need to turn an arch criminal into the most renowned hero of the Second World War. But let us leave her alone for the time being: we shall come back to her when we detect a growing need for a hero and for the metamorphosis we have just explained. Socialists think that prisons perturb and pervert human beings who rot in them instead of blooming in their cells, becoming wiser and purer. Apparently we should educate them in the open air or by turning them into Churchill or one of his assistants. On no account should we turn them into Stalin: not all prominent figures suit our purpose, even if they are part of the Second World War.

Churchill was born prematurely; so was Hitler. He did not mind staying in his mother's womb for another month but we removed him from it, saying he had no right to stay there as long as he wished because it was not *his* mother's womb after all. So we extracted Hitler from his mother's womb and looked at him to find out if he looked like Hitler or Churchill or Stalin or Roosevelt. He looked like none of these leaders, two of whom are still regarded as the greatest heroes of the 20th century, whatever we might think about their contribution to human history. Yes, he just looked like an ordinary baby and his screams sounded like Churchill's scream, for all screams of this kind sound alike: babies acquire their personalities in their cradles, not upon leaving their mothers' wombs and bodies. So we may leave Hitler alone for a while – or rather in his mother's company. We should wait for his personality to come into being.

What does his personality look like today? Both Hitler and Churchill passed an unhappy and sadly neglected childhood, and this well-known fact makes things easier for us. We do not really have to keep Hitler at Blenheim Palace any longer because we are short of money and cannot afford to rent this building for years and years, waiting for Hitler to come to terms with life, history and the 20th century. But we should provide a nurse for him and his family – not only on account of Churchill's biography where his nurse, who goes by the name of Everest, has pride of place. We have concerns about whether the government will be able to provide poorer families with viable social services. And every poor family needs a nurse, especially if the poor family in question has to bring up Adolf Hitler who may be led astray by any hooligan, any future Nazi; or any *present* Nazi, for that matter.

'After indifferent preparatory schooling,' write Churchill's biographers, 'he entered Harrow, where his conspicuous lack of success at his studies seemingly justified his father's

decision to enter him for a career in the army. It was only at the third attempt that he managed to pass the entrance examination to the Royal Military College.' And Hitler did not pass any entrance examination; the same goes for exit examinations. Hitler did not like examinations – at least as far as *he* was concerned; I mean, as far as he himself was examined either by historians or scientists. On the other hand, he was delighted when he had enough time to subject either his cronies or ordinary citizens to interrogation. 'Do you believe the Nazis will triumph over the communists?' he asked them. 'Yes, yes,' they answered. 'Do you believe in God?' he asked them. 'Yes, yes. You're our God and we believe in you.' 'Because I'm standing in front of you?' 'No, no. We believe in you because you *are*.'

It is pointless to go any further – as far as Hitler's metamorphosis is concerned: nothing can correct Hitler, putting everything and everybody right. He will never become Roosevelt, whatever environment we offer him; and even if he sees the light of day in the United States of America, he will not become an American, contrary to laws and customs. And even if we manage to inject Churchill's genes into Hitler's veins, the latter is unlikely to mend his ways, let alone his way of thinking. It is easier to mend *fences* with your opponents, isn't it?

Cells can be persuaded to take up foreign DNA by applying an electrical current that opens up pores in their membrane. So what? All right, we put Hitler in an electric chair and apply electric current to his cells but not to the rest of his body, otherwise he may die before our eyes and under our nose. Nothing happens, nothing doing. Perhaps the cells of patients could be taken out, engineered to incorporate a new copy of the gene, and returned. With luck the symptoms of diseases like Anti-Semitism could be cured. Hardly. A friend of mine said recently, 'Why are there still Anti-Semites in the world? After the Second World War.' 'Anti-Semitism is an incurable disease,' I answered. There are high hopes for gene therapy. Already, some very rare diseases are being treated, and even cancer cells might be altered to prevent them dividing and causing more damage. Cancer cells. Perhaps. But not anti-Semitic cells. They divide, cause damage, divide, metastasise.

Actually even specialists admit that the possibility of using genetics to improve the human race has receded with every discovery made. So we have no alternative but to fall back on sacred books that may improve the human race in the future, although they have failed to do so thus far. Even church-goers must admit that the Bible's attempt to turn us into saints has always ended in failure, even though some of us become popes and are therefore worshipped by congregations and tourists, by passers-by and hagiographers. If we have Hitler memorise St Paul's epistles and recite them every morning, every evening and every afternoon, we may hope that Hitler will become Roosevelt or John-Paul II. And if he does not, we shall have him

memorise a few Buddhist sutras, turning him into the Dalai Lama or just an ordinary Buddhist. Even an ordinary Buddhist is unlikely to come up with the Final Solution and raze historic monuments.

No one really needs to remind us that we are not perfect. We are not even *semi*-perfect, for all our virtues, readings and yoga classes. Almost everyone – every human being, every Martian – carries a potentially damaging gene, and most people become murderers because of their own inborn imperfections. And no one will ever extricate all these imperfections from human nature, even if one has laser-guided pincers in one's laboratory. Anyway, it is much easier to read a thousand books, saying to oneself that the book one is reading is sacred and that sooner or later its sacredness will rub off on one's mind, heart and soul. And then one will become sacred – not only to oneself. Robert Frost said once that Shakespeare was not sacred to himself. I, for one, think he *was* sacred to himself – not only to us, his worshippers and clumsy interpreters. He was *sacred* to himself, otherwise he would have written neither *Hamlet*, nor *King Lear*, nor *Henry IV*, nor *Macbeth*, nor *Titus Andronicus* that Auden did not deign to comment upon, pointing out it was just trash.

So once again we are confronted with borrowed sacredness that is said to penetrate our souls as we consume all the books recommended by booksellers and spiritual guides whose only aim is to inculcate a sacred spirit into our quasi-impenetrable skulls. As soon as our skulls notice a sacred nuance or tint, they shut themselves off to the point of turning into impregnable fortresses; such is the nastiness of human nature. We automatically reject whatever is pure, virtuous, immaculate, generous and compassionate. We seldom if ever take pity on our fellow creatures who are ill-treated all over the world. They live like galley slaves and have no idea what destination the ship they are pushing is bound for. In other words, they do not know what to do and when they are to die; and where their deathbeds are located, and if they are located anywhere at all. Perhaps they have no deathbeds to speak of and are destined to die in some field overgrown with weeds – not on a battlefield, mind you. The same goes for us, by the way; and yet no one takes pity on us, on our human condition, sorry plight and dire straits. 'Our commiserations to the losing side!' they shout whenever their favourite team loses a game or a championship. But why does no one give me a look of commiseration as I enter this room, that castle?

To find out more about commiseration, we have to go all the way back to the Buddha or Schopenhauer, and we may forget about Nietzsche for a while: we do not need his superman this afternoon. Let us become *middle*men first: we are decorating our souls in stages so they will not be ready for another couple of months. Actually one should not *decorate* one's soul,

for there are too many frills in it already and consequently one should *remove* these frills before embarking upon a journey to various nirvanas. At least we and one and others know a lot about our final destination and this knowledge permits us to reconcile ourselves to our lot and our destiny which is resolved to turn us into galley slaves.

If you come into existence and see the light of day or anything else, you see Being and not a non-being, for the simple reason that you *see* it, and whatever you see *is*, otherwise you would not *see* it. But even if you do not see this or that, they exist because you say to yourself, 'I do not see this and that,' so you know you do not see them. But you think about this and also about that and, according to Parmenides, 'Thou canst not know what is not – that is impossible – nor utter it; for it is the same thing that can be thought and that can be.' Both this and that appear in your brain, and you call them 'this' and 'that'; and thus it comes to pass that they are endowed with being or the Great Being. Actually there is no such thing as Small Being: we should think big, otherwise it is not worth our while to think at all. We think, therefore there are beings of all kinds; or rather, there is the One and Being which are identical twins because all this cannot be otherwise. There is only one Truth – and whatever is, is this Truth – and so we draw the logical conclusion that there is no such thing as a lie: there is no room for it in the universe. Truth is everywhere and has no intention of withdrawing from where it is because Truth does not like small corners and always opts for centres: we can affirm that Truth is the centrepiece of the universe. But you can also find it in corners, nooks and crannies; in craniums, noodles, poodles, puddles and bubbles. And even if all these bubbles burst, you would find the same truth in every burst bubble. Do not forget that whatever you say exists and so every burst bubble has its own existence – its windowless existence, so to speak. And speaks and specks are also in our midst, and we have no alternative but to welcome them with open arms, open mouths and open souls. We open everything, everybody, and welcome speaks, specks and spooks.

'In a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trump: for the trumpet shall sound, and the dead shall be raised incorruptible, and we shall be changed.' So how *do* we resurrect? The trumpet sounds, and even if we do not hear it, being dead and buried under a thick layer of our Earth, it does sound and God listens to it, saying to Himself, 'It sounds. It is high time. It is high tide.' Metaphorically speaking. Time is a sort of tide and when it comes – when both of them come – you have no alternative but to submit yourself to new rules or the Last Judgement, in common parlance. The tide comes in very quickly here and you can soon find yourself stranded – figuratively speaking. You are stranded and the Supreme Judge – whoever

he is – is about to sentence you to 100 years' imprisonment in Hell. But before going to Hell, you ask this eternal question: 'Who is the Supreme Judge?' What does it matter! You are going to Hell; at least you know your final destination that is really final, for it is the final solution to your life, karma and nirvana. So if a taxi driver asks you, 'Where to?' you will say, 'To Hell' – without the slightest hesitation. Of course you would rather say, 'To Paradise,' but you are not allowed to say anything like that, otherwise you may be sent to yet another Hell – a deeper Hell, a further Hell. There are many hells, if you must know; and you must know or at least you wish to know to which hell you are going now. So the answer comes after a while, 'You are going to the First Hell.' 'Is this the First Circle?' you ask. 'No. It is the First *Hell*.' 'What's the difference?' you ask. 'Don't you know the difference between a hell and a circle?' 'Yes. But some circles are hells in disguise. The vicious circle, for instance.'

The Minotaur no longer listens to you. He takes you first to the First Hell and then to the Second One. 'I can't stop for a cup of tea – this is just a flying visit,' you say to the guardian of the Third Hell as you go on flying through different hells and their suburbs. 'I visited a few hells while I was in the Hereafter,' you say to your friends. 'Did you?' they ask. 'Yes, I did,' you answer. '*Ah bon*,' some of your friends say, for some of your friends are French. All of a sudden, you hear the sound of a trumpet, whereupon you realise that the sound you are listening to comes from the same trumpet – the one you heard before embarking upon your journey to Hell. And you say to yourself and your friends, 'I'm leaving early tomorrow morning, so I'd better pack tonight. I haven't packed my clothes yet.' And then you turn to your wife, 'Could you pack me a spare pair of shoes, please?' She does not seem to hear you or to understand what you mean as if you were speaking to her about Heidegger, Kant or Mallarmé. 'Could you pack a spare pair of shoes for me, please?' you say to her as you raise one eyebrow in a meaningful way. And then you raise the second eyebrow in a way that is even more meaningful than the first one. Well, you just pack your bags and walk out on your wife and children.

So you are standing on the threshold of Hell and still do not know to which Hell you have been invited by God or Satan. Of course some people think that God has nothing to do with Hell because taking care of Hell would be beneath His dignity. But there are others who think and say that nothing is beneath God's dignity and the argument they put forward is not hard to follow, for it is rather simple – as simple as true beauty and truth itself. They always speak of Mozart's simplicity and say that if a work of art is not simple, it cannot be beautiful, however intricate and ingenious it appears at first glance. So their argument boils down to the fact that God is omnipresent and if you are omnipresent, you do not neglect nooks and

crannies and dark corners. It is true that some corners of your kingdom – of the Kingdom of God – are dark, but they make you aware of light and its brightness by contrast. So they serve a purpose and are not just another gratuitous insult. There are people who pretend that the universe is just a joke. It is a joke, it is just an insult, isn't it? Your mother – and father – conceive you and your mother bears you in her womb for nine months during which she is not allowed to do this or that and does not consume wine and even beer. So she suffers serious privations as you suffocate in her womb where you are also deprived of decent food and gorgeous drinks. Both of you suffer and no one – not even religious fanatics – disputes the truth of this logical conclusion. Every human being needs the ability to construct a logical argument, even if the issue you discuss with your friends and colleagues is as simple as Mozart's *Jupiter*.

I shall just summarise the main points of the argument in a few words if I may. God is omnipresent, omnipotent and so on; so He also rules in Hell which is the darkest corner of the universe, according to Dante and other explorers. So you are still on the threshold of Hell and you know now that you have been invited by God Who wants you to describe His dominions in a book entitled *The Tragedy*. Of course you are not the first guest of Hell, even if you penetrate it as a tourist, not as a sinner who will never get out and see the light of day, according to Dante. You are neither the first nor the last; and if you are the last, you are not the least and this fact is a great source of your civic pride. So you feel a great sense of pride as you cross the threshold on which you have stood for some time and enter the Hell proper – or improper, as they say. Never mind, never mind – you are *in* already and no one is about to throw you out.

Gogol said once that it is much more rewarding to talk about Paradise than about Hell because the reader prefers the former to the latter so that those who write about Hell are not likely to be read all over the world. No one will ever say about them, 'His latest book has gone to number two in the bestseller list.' What is usually said about them boils down to this, 'His latest book has gone to number two in the worstseller list.' 'His latest book has gone to the bottom of the seller list.' Actually Gogol was wrong and everybody knows that: he lived in barbarous times when witches were burnt at the stake. What is more, he lived in Russia, in a backward country where all crops were harvested by hand and by serfs. Of course he knew nothing about our bestsellers and horror stories, movies and atom bombs; and our vampires, and our living dead. Actually he did know something about them, but he stubbornly maintained that writing about virtuous landowners was more profitable and instructive.

Well, you are now inside Hell and whatever is associated with Hell comes to the fore and surfaces as if to welcome you heartily, as if you were a local resident, not an interstellar visitor. People like neither foreigners nor strangers and often ask you impertinent questions such as, 'Where do you come from?' meaning that you had better go back to where you have come from because there is not enough room for visitors in *their* fatherland. But the matter stands differently in Hell where there is enough room for anybody, however far this body's fatherland is situated in space and time. There is enough poisonous fruit in Hell; the more you eat, the more you know, and in the long run you are sure to realise you are in Hell *forever* and no earthquake will ever dislodge your body from its furnaces. Of course it is better not to know anything about your sorry plight or any plight you may find yourself in, for ignorance is bliss and even if you happen to be happy, you had better know nothing about happiness. If all of a sudden you realise you are *really* happy, you are likely to grow unhappy in the twinkling of an eye. Why? Because you are likely to ask yourself if you are really *happy*, whereupon you may realise you are mortal and old and not as rich as movie stars. In blissful ignorance, in blissful ignorance.

Enoch says that Paradise is located between corruptibility and incorruptibility. I, for one, have never been able to unravel not only the secrets of genetics, but also the mystery of this remark. Suppose you wish to spend the rest of your eternity in Paradise, which is a commonplace wish and actually you do not claim to have come up with a new concept that Deleuze might have approved of, had he got acquainted with it in his lifetime. No, it is just an ordinary wish you share with every human being or earthling; for once you are not in a class of your own. You are rather as unique as each person's genetic code. Well and good. So what? Where is your Paradise? Where is everybody's Paradise, the gates guarded by St Peter? (For once, we are not dealing with St Paul.) Where is it? Where? Where? Where are you supposed to direct your steps and thoughts?

You believe that God will guide your steps because you believe in God and His bounty, magnanimity, forgiveness – you are an inveterate sinner – and the shortness of His memory. (You cannot really count on His forgiveness, can you?) So you re-read the beginning of *Secrets of Enoch* which is a sacred, God-dictated book in its own right; at least you have every right to believe that this book tells the truth. 'There was a wise man, a great artificer, and the Lord conceived love for him and received him, that he should behold the uppermost dwellings and be an eye-witness of the wise and great and inconceivable and immutable realm of God Almighty –' Of course you would be driven to quote the whole book, if you did not have to write your own book that is still as inaccessible to the reader as the throne of the Lord.

So you stop in the middle of a sentence and reflect upon what you read as you longed to glean some information from this travelogue. But do you really need this piece of information? Sooner or later you will find out what all this is about and your patience is proverbial – according to you. After all, you have lived for more than 60 years and no suicides, no attempts on your own life can be found in your personal book of human existence.

Besides, there is no point in reading about Enoch's journey because you will not be allowed to taste any fruit he saw and described as he went from one realm of Paradise to another. Well, you have a lot of fruit on your dinner table and you may derive great satisfaction from the fact that none of this fruit is forbidden. Some of the mushrooms that grow in your garden and the nearby woods *may* be forbidden, for all you know, but they are not forbidden on the grounds that they will teach you Absolute Knowledge if you dare to eat them. And what about the *partial* knowledge you are likely to glean from *Secrets of Enoch*? As I said a few minutes ago, you do not really need this knowledge because you are not sure to visit these realms, even if you behave yourself and demonstrate to the otherworldly examiners and judges that you have more than a literal understanding of Sacred Books. You were a perfectly well-behaved child, a perfectly well-behaved teenager, a perfectly well-behaved middle-aged man and a perfectly well-behaved old fogey. So what? Are you a member of 'The Elect'? What is 'The Elect', by the way? It is an exclusive private club. Are you a member of this club? You are not; you are just a visitor. But visitors must be accompanied by club members, you know. Do you know any member of this club? Enoch? All right, all right. Do you know him personally? Do you think he will agree to keep you company?

Meantime Enoch continues to speak of the very marvellous elements of the sun and you wonder why you utter the word 'eunuch' whenever you read Enoch's description of marvels, lights and the lack of nights out loud. Secrets of Eunuch you say, repeat, and your words resound in your room and even throughout the house where you have lived for more than a year. There are no eunuchs in this house of yours and the sounds you produce are all the more meaningless and even nonsensical since you are completely alone and even your charwoman cannot hear whatever you say or recite. And even if she *could* hear you, she would be none the wiser: there are no eunuchs in your house and Enoch is far away too, for your house does not look like Paradise and one would be unable to speak of the marvellous elements if invited to share a meal with you. Your house is always in a mess and even when your charwoman happens to come and spend a few hours in this space of yours, she always says, 'I can't deal with all this mess. After all, I'm not Heracles.' And she goes out after picking up a few

cigarette butts and you are left on your own or rather in the company of your own mess and shambles. So whenever you talk about eunuchs, you seem to address your mess, and your mess listens to you, for it has nothing else to do: its only aim is to stay where it is. It is its nature and it also perseveres in its being and struggles for life with cleanliness and order. It struggles with charwomen and cleaning ladies and domestic helps who are said to use vacuum cleaners, among other utensils. So your mess struggles with them too – with vacuum cleaners, brushes of all kinds, dusters and liquids. All messes are in the habit of clinging to dirtiness, for it is their creed and they might lose their personality if this creed or credo vanishes into any air it can find around it.

Yes, you make a terrible mess when you are cooking and you have no intention of denying it because you are not a liar; you are a *messer*, but you are not a liar. Doesn't this mean 'knife' in German? *Messerschmidt*, for instance? Some planes bore this name during the Second World War, but you are dealing with *your mess* today, and even if the Second World War was messy, to say the least – and one is too disgusted and horrified to the say the most – its own mess has nothing to do with yours. And no aircraft will ever help to clear up that mess in the kitchen or anywhere else. It is pointless to recall aircraft, planes and *Messerschmidts*. It is all the more stupid since you have no idea how to write these German names. So you say to yourself, 'I can't stand mess,' and go to the kitchen where your gaze alights on the fridge and its contents. You take something out of it and eat what you have found without bothering to look for plates, napkins, forks and spoons. Nor do you look for *messers* because you no longer wish to clutter your brain with German words – even if you continue to misspell them. Even in *your* shape and form, they succeed in putting a spell on your mind and you have no wish to waste your time on breaking the spell. You would rather break the mess you live in, but it is easier to break cutlery than messes, according to Laurel and Hardy.

'...for since the crown of its shining is in heaven with the Lord, and guarded by four hundred angels, while the sun goes round on wheel under the Earth, and stands seven great hours in night –' Well, Enoch speaks of the sun and he does so from the point of view of someone who walks on the surface of the Earth and looks at the sun from its surface – not from heaven, not from Paradise. You can also walk on the surface of the Earth and that is what you usually do, although you do not always look at the sun as you proceed to gate 26 for boarding. Of course you are not forbidden from walking in the streets, but even if you happen to walk along a boulevard, you are not in the habit of looking at the sun that keeps the same shape and form so one might say, 'There's nothing new *in* the sun.' Why look at it?

Of course if you were in Paradise, you might look at it from time to time, especially since, according to Dante, you do not have to put on a pair of sunglasses whenever you feel like looking at the sun – in Paradise, in heaven, inside one of those heavens you cannot see from where you are standing this afternoon. So, once in Paradise, you will look at the sun to your heart's content but, if I were you, I would look at its guardians, at four hundred angels, for you are unlikely to see them on Earth, even if you take the trouble to put your sunglasses on. You can also cast a glance at the crown of its shining, especially if you like crowns, kings and queens – as every Englishman does. So does every Englishwoman, by the way. You can also cast a glance – not the same glance – at the wheel traditionally used by the sun, for you might think this wheel is part of Apollo's chariot. And you would not miss Apollo's performance for anything in the world.

And what about the elements of the sun? We spoke of them at the beginning of this reading session and they are still there because the sun's behaviour is more akin to Parmenides' theory than to that of Heraclitus: it does not change like rivers and human beings. At least it does not change as quickly as rivers do, let alone our bodies, genes, cells and so on. Where are the elements we have been thinking about for more than an hour? Right here, on the same page. 'Then the elements of the sun, called Phoenixes and Chalkydri break into song, therefore every bird flutters with its wings, rejoicing at the giver of light –' At the *r*iver of light. Of course one can speak about light in these terms because light is made up of particles *and waves*. So it *partly flows*, doesn't it? For once, it is more interesting to speak about slips of tongue than about the text one is reading out loud. The giver of light is God of course and so it is useless to quote Enoch to the end: '...and they broke into song at the command of the Lord.' Of course, of course; it goes without saying. At whose command do we usually break into song? At the Lord's; otherwise we would never sing. Why should we sing? What could we sing? Requiems? Not for an instant do we forget that we are bound to die and no rejoicing can enliven our days irremediably spoiled by this very thought, by this future event. Our sages say, '*Memento mori*,' and we do *memento* this *mori* whenever we are stone-cold sober. Only alcohol can make us forget our death – as long as the intoxication lasts. And while it does, we may break into song and this song of ours may even sound like the song enjoyed by Enoch in heaven, considering that any heaven has whisky galore.

'Of the singing of the angels, which it is impossible to describe.' Can you describe a drunken song? Of course you can and you can even quote it, if you are in no mood for doing anything else – for chatting with your neighbours, for instance. 'I love...love...you...where...not here, with me...your husband...where...why...bitch...a real

bitch...life's bitch anyway...any...way...alone...solitude...o...o...' And how would you *describe* a drunken song? 'In the midst of the heavens I saw armed soldiers, with incessant voice, with sweet voice, with sweet and incessant *voice* and various singing –' Terrestrial soldiers do not drink on duty and that is the only difference between heaven and Earth – the only difference we can detect at this stage of our analysis. Whenever we hear a drunken song, we notice that the voice producing it is incessant to some extent – to the extent of drunkenness. If the performer is very drunk, the voice we are talking about is semi-incessant, for the drunkard is already in the arms of Morpheus. Well, not quite, not quite. But Morpheus' fingers have already touched his shoulders. Morpheus has already patted him on the shoulder. If Morpheus carries on treating his customer like that, it will only be a matter of time before the latter falls asleep. 'Sleep...sleep...where...here, with me...sleep...death...friend...thanks...thanks a lot...'

'These are the archangels who are above angels, measure all life in heaven and on Earth –' What do they measure? Our rivers, our houses, our lands, our sins? The main bedroom measures 24ft by 18ft (24' x 18'). So what? I am speaking of *my* main bedroom. Is it too big, too small? Is it a sin to own such a bedroom, given the sorry plight of the homeless? Should I join them in the streets or elsewhere? In the fields, for instance? And how do you measure sins? What machines do you use? Do you have no machines in your heaven, in your Paradise? You must have very good manual dexterity – no doubt about that. But do you still work on old manual typewriters? Do you know that computer-controlled robots are taking over manual jobs in many industries? Of course you know everything – we are quite aware of that. You know all our sins by heart and can recite them day in day out. You also recite them at night, for there are no nights in heaven, if I remember rightly. If I am not mistaken, rather: I do not remember anything of *this* kind; and of other kinds too, as I am used to saying whenever I speak of my memory. Is there any significant difference in quality between long sins and short ones? Are long sins always mortal? I think it is a sin to waste food, when so many people in the world are hungry. Is it a long sin or a short one? Does this depend on the number of people dying of starvation? At least I think about this sin and my thinking about it is a virtue, isn't it? What is more, I do not *waste* any food, eating whatever I find in the fridge and in gourmet shops. Another virtue, isn't it?

I do not deny, however, that I do not give anything to the needy – neither my food nor any money, in any shape or form. I might give them a few rooms and pieces of furniture, but I have no idea where to look for them. Of course one can say one just has to venture outdoors and find an ordinary tramp either under a bridge on in a street, in a park, in a corner. All one has to do is open one's bag and take out a few sandwiches, a bottle of Coke and a dessert: a

cake, an ice-cream, or candyfloss. (Is it possible to carry candyfloss in a bag?) And one should not forget dental floss, for one – any tramp, that is – needs something of the kind to clean between his or her teeth. And you can give him or her a few banknotes which are always welcome, even though, upon seeing them in your hands, your tramp does not say to you or rather to them, 'You're welcome.' Whether the tramp says it or not, you should give him or her or a child these banknotes, for they are always welcome, whatever they say or do not say. Tramps are not always polite, which is not surprising, given their way of life, their nonstop starvation, and other trials and tribulations they have to put up with as they struggle for life in our streets, in Central Park or Hyde Park. Be that as it may, their impoliteness should not detract you from the beauty of your gesture and deed. For once, you have proved your willingness to be virtuous and even demonstrated your virtuosity in this domain. Now you are ready for your encounter with St Peter, St Paul and the guardians described so vividly by Enoch and the book where one is sure to come across a lot of secrets.

But it is of no help to those whose struggle for life is not over yet – for the simple reason that they are still in the vale of tears; and they do not cry for joy. They mostly cry for help and if no help comes to relieve them of their suffering, they begin to cry and literally burst into tears instead of bursting into song. Before putting this book away, however, we must unravel the mystery that has remained unravelled so far. The point is we struggle for life not only for the sake of our terrestrial life which is of no account, according to many philosophers and all Christendom. So we struggle for life for the sake of Paradise because, if we give up this struggle and commit suicide, we shall not be admitted to Paradise – no admission, in other words. Anyway, this Paradise of ours is situated in Heaven, in one of the heavens that Enoch enlarges upon as he proceeds to yet another heaven or sky in the company of angels, guardians and guardian angels. Actually our Paradise may not be situated in heaven, for all we know; and we know a lot today, thanks to Enoch's travelogue, his frankness and literary precision.

Enoch says that Paradise is located between corruptibility and incorruptibility. What does that mean? And how can you reach this Paradise of his and ours? How are you supposed to proceed? You should find corruption and incorruption. You look for corruption in the East and find out that the old corrupt, totalitarian regimes you used to denounce in your articles and speeches have been overthrown. Reluctantly, you acquiesce to the New World Order, think for a while about your search and realise you have to do it all over again. You come across some ruins or other and call for checks to discover whether corrupt officials are being bribed to connive in shoddy construction. Everything seems to be under construction and

there are ruins everywhere. Many people work in the construction industry, but an even greater number wait for bribes because they are called ‘corrupt officials’ and therefore cannot live without bribes and corruption in general.

So you have got one group of people on whom you can count when in need of corruptibility as such: but for this group and place, you are unlikely to land up in Paradise. Now you are facing an even greater problem; what consoles you, however, is the fact that the solution to this problem is sure to provide you with the only key to Paradise which is more or less identical to the Holy Grail. In a way, you could embark upon a journey towards the latter instead of desperately looking for the former, but one wonders if it is not easier to find Paradise than the Holy Grail: after all, there are a few places on Earth called Paradise, *Paradiso* and so on. For instance, you must have heard about the ‘Cinema Paradiso’ which is partly responsible for your conviction that any paradise is just an ideal version of this cinema frequented by children and adults alike. But you are unlikely to hear about a cinema called ‘The Holy Grail’ because not many people know what it is, for all Dan Brown’s triumphs.

The problem you are facing concerns what they call ‘incorruptibility’, but they may call it whatever they wish; they may give names to the objects and non-objects that Adam took care of a long time ago – even before we were born. People often think that nothing happened before they were born and even history books do not teach them anything because the history they read about is just one of many histories; not real life, not their lives. And they are only interested in their lives and their beings that have to persevere for fear of disappearing somewhere and somehow – either into the air or into the Earth. And as their beings persevere at all cost they inevitably become corrupt and one wonders if incorruptibility can be found only among those who do not persevere in their being. In other words, one must find those who persevere in their non-being and care neither about death nor about life.

We have already laid our hands on ‘corruption’ whose omnipresence strikes one as one goes from one street to another, from one country to another world. All you have to do is go out and make a few steps in any direction, along any boulevard or avenue or river. Open your eyes and look around you. What do you see? Corruption, corruption, corruption. And this is not just a word you can erase, strike out, wipe off the face of the Earth. You cannot wipe the slate clean, in other words. No slate can ever be wiped clean, whatever slate you are talking about this afternoon. No harm in trying, you say to yourself. You see a lot of slates around you and all these slates are frightfully dirty, grimy, soiled, muddy and polluted. You pick one of them up and start cleaning it with a dishcloth. You clean it for ten minutes, for half an hour; the slate is dirty, grimy and so on. Perhaps it is not as *frightfully* soiled as half an hour ago,

but it is still muddy and polluted, and there is nothing you can do about it, even if you resort to your vacuum cleaner and the services of your cleaning lady who can clean everything with the exception of slates.

Well, we seem to be on the right track, but there is no denying that we are still far from our goal, from incorruptibility. Let us look for it in a monastery where we should analyse old monks and their morals, for they are already impotent and cannot dream of young women for whom they do not feel anything except indifference and even hatred: some of them led these monks astray to the point of making them withdraw into this monastery, giving up worldly goods, aspirations and triumphs. Of course you can be triumphant even inside a monastery but your fame remains within its walls unless you look half-starved, have stigmata and see either Jesus Christ or the Holy Virgin every other day. If this is the case, you do not really have to spend your life running after fame and fortune. Stay in your cell and get closer to the window whenever the crowd yearns to have a look at your stigmata, your beard and emaciated body. And if you want all these people to see your lice at close quarters, you can invite them to your cell.

We find a man whose incorruption and inborn purity tower about all the rest – even above his colleagues' stigmata. All around him there reign corruption and inborn – and born – impurity; even in his cell we detect a few dirty atoms which may be likened to the proverbial fly in the ointment. These atoms fall from the bodies and clothes of the monks who are in the habit of holding forth on chastity and perfection. And he cannot forbid them to walk into his cell because he is polite to a fault and the law of hospitality takes priority in his private life and also in his social life, assuming that what they experience in monasteries can be called a 'social life'. At least there are no social climbers among our monks and nuns.

What to do? We have got a piece of incorruption but we are unable to isolate it from corruption; and Paradise is located *between* corruptibility and incorruptibility. Anyway, we had better find out what this definition means and how we are supposed to handle it. Never mind – let us take it at face value and look for a space or a spot located between corruptibility and incorruptibility. We have got both and now we are facing another task which is no less daunting than the first one. Suppose we ask our monk to shut the door of his cell forever and nail a sheet of paper on it: 'No admission to unauthorised personnel. No personnel are authorised.' Suppose he complies with our wish, acting in good faith for his supporters and admirers – for us, in other words. His cell is rather small: he himself is cramped for space inside it. And what about Paradise? Of course what counts is not its *material* size: it can be located on the point of a needle. It is its spiritual dimension that counts. How to live on the

point of a needle? What to do? By no stretch of the imagination could I visualise the human condition of this sort. Or should I *shorten* my imagination instead of trying to *stretch* it? Should I reduce it to the size of a needle, of its sharp point?

All right, I am living now on this point of the needle and feel happy because I am a stoic and believe in my mind which can organise my life in such a way that I may find a lot of happiness anywhere, even on sharp points, in prison cells and concentration camps. I can always look at the clouds that are beautiful and inconstant – as inconstant and treacherous as our fate. But at least they are beautiful; what is more, you can see a few snatches of sky where so many paradises await human beings. You can snatch these snatches from the sky and put them into your inner eye that will see them whenever your thirst for beauty, salvation and eternal home reaches its peak. Now it is at its peak and you see the sky, although you are in a concentration camp and can see only barbed wire and a lot of ceilings that get in the way when you feel like flying off.

You are still inside your prison cell, but your spirits are neither affected nor infected by your *material* conditions. Your immaterial or spiritual condition remains intact and you smile, smile, smile; and yet you see no sky, no clouds, no trees – no proofs of God's existence. But God exists in both your mind and soul, and that is quite enough, as you say to yourself. You often repeat this sentence you came across so often in the books devoted to happiness, nirvanas and serenity in every shape and form. You visualise this serenity and as you try to enter it once and for all, you realise you are in the midst of the garden described by the Koran. As you walk through this garden you come across a great many women hanging from trees and hiding behind bushes and bushels as if reluctant to come into the open and to the fore. But you know that all these women are tailor-made for your body and you speak to them so as not to be accused of impoliteness. It is bad manners to eat with your mouth open, but you eat with your mouth closed and no one can say, 'He needs to be taught some manners.' And you salute the women who wait for you on branches and behind bushes. In short, everything is all right and you say to yourself, 'If all goes smoothly, I'll enjoy these women's caresses in no time at all.'

And what about space? Have you really forgotten your sorry plight, your prison cell, your concentration camp and its guardians? Your guardians, their shouts? Your own screams? At first you deny screaming during their tortures but you later admit to it and even say you are not mature enough to keep silent when they push pins under your nails and gouge your eyes out. Try as you may, you cannot rein in your emotions and their manifestations; you prefer to faint at the outset of their tortures and your ordeals. Your friends and colleagues used to say

about you, ‘He took one look at the hypodermic needle and fainted.’ That is why you finally relinquished the idea of undergoing plastic surgery on your nose that should be straightened if you wish to get married and live happily ever after. The same goes for collagen implants and injections which you rejected on the grounds that you could not bear the sight of hypodermic needles. As a result, your lips remain thin and look as old as the men whom Rembrandt painted at the end of his life.

Today you *can* bear the sight of a hypodermic needle designed to make you look younger and far more attractive. But you still faint – or wish to faint – when you see the needles getting closer and closer to your nails, as if guided by a supernatural force. Actually you do not see the fingers and hands that guide them towards your nails, your torture and suffering: the needles wholly monopolise your attention. Nor do you hear what your torturers say to you as they drive a lot of points home, ‘Modern military aircraft use computers to help them zero in on their targets. But we don’t need computers, do we? Of course we need them in other domains and we do have a lot of computers in our office, otherwise we might have problems locating our victims. But this ritual – ours and yours – should be neither computerised nor mechanised. Don’t you agree? Would you rather face an army of computers?’

You see neither the sky nor the angels who usually hover in it, determined to protect you from torture and nervous breakdown. You know you are supposed to enjoy your life and any other life – in any shape or form, in any prison or camp, during any torture or ordeal. Yes, life is beautiful and God merciful. God is full of mercy; so are humans. One can even say they are merciful to a fault and it is your fault you do not appreciate their mercies and do not say, ‘*Merci*’ day in day out. You do not say ‘*merci*’ when they gouge your eyes out; nor do you say ‘*merci*’ upon feeling their needles inside your eardrums. Is this feeling so unpleasant? Why don’t you say to yourself, ‘This feeling is very pleasant and I continue to enjoy life to the utmost’? Well, you end up saying to yourself, ‘I feel at one with the world and with God, whoever He is and wherever His castle is situated. His castle is everywhere because I am a monotheist and pantheist. His castle is right in the middle of my cell and my guardians are gods in their own right. They’re the Almighty in disguise. Why should the Almighty disguise Himself, by the way? Is He afraid of being recognised and fêted by churchgoers both in this concentration camp and abroad?’

You can get rid of all the fears that have beset you from the day of your birth. But, try as you may, you cannot get rid of the fear of death which is the biggest fear one is exposed to: all other fears are temporary and often disappear of their own accord. Suppose you are in pain

and suffer a lot on account of this pain which you seem to feel throughout your body in spite of its whereabouts. Actually this pain is confined to one of your teeth, but you feel it in your whole body as if it were a gigantic tooth – the source of a raging toothache.

Suppose you are in pain and this pain originates in your tooth and your whole body that is reduced to the size of a tooth, metaphorically speaking. But if you no longer shudder at the sight of a hypodermic needle, in the evening you will say to your colleagues, 'The injection provided temporary relief from the pain.' Incidentally, we are still talking about death because we cannot get rid of it, whatever we write about and however often we can say to ourselves, 'Don't think about death. No *memento mori*, please! *Memento vita*, *memento viva vita*. Remember *vivat*!' Nothing doing. (How often do you say 'nothing doing'?) You remember death and no injection will ever provide a reprieve from this thought and deed. Of course you can go to a funfair and spend the whole day on a rollercoaster. And you can say afterwards, 'The rollercoaster provided a temporary reprieve from the fear of death.' But didn't you fear death during your rollercoaster rides? Didn't you say to yourself, 'What if the whole thing collapses? What if this coaster comes off the tracks?'

Well, after much soul-searching you come to the conclusion that you think about death under any circumstances and almost everywhere: at these latitudes, at those longitudes. The same does not go for the Almighty Who never thinks about death because He is immortal, eternal and omnipotent, otherwise no one would ever have called Him the *Al*mighty. They might have called Him the Semimighty or Partmighty. But they call Him the Almighty and they are absolutely right. They are not *all* right, for they are mortal, corrupt and therefore subject to the second law of thermodynamics. But they call the Almighty the Almighty and some of them even say to their colleagues, 'Why not call the Almighty the Almighty?' And their colleagues answer them, 'All right. Let's call Him the Almighty, whoever He is.'

The Almighty is omnipotent to the extent of being able to undo the past and death which, in His case, is really dead, as if anxious to conform to English poetry and its inner and outer conviction that death is dead: 'Death, thou shalt be dead' or something along these lines. There is nothing above these lines, but there might be a few poetic thoughts situated on the same level, on the same plane of regard. For instance, 'Human beings are divine' or 'Man is the crown on the head of Creation' or 'Man is as perfect as perfection itself, for he is the Platonic idea of perfection, beauty and wisdom' or 'Man is more paragon than all paragons put together'. If you say that death is already dead or will be dead in the near future, you think about Jesus Christ whose sacrifice dealt a fatal blow to death. 'Death has been in bed with the flu and he is still a bit unsteady on his feet,' wrote an English essayist. 'Death's legs are still

feeble and wobbly,' wrote another English essayist. 'Death was standing in the middle of the desert, swaying uncertainly and trying hard to stay upright,' wrote an English novelist.

The Almighty undid death, but for reasons best known to Himself or Herself or to Them and to They, He limited death's death to His own life and persona: no human can take advantage of this triumph. Of course we die, but at the same time we do not because we turn into glorious beings; at least our bodies grow glorious and this glory's progress can be interrupted neither by worms nor necrophiliacs. Yet we prefer our inglorious bodies to anything offered by the Hereafter and our religion that does not seem to care about our ordinary desires. So we deduct our bodies from the notion so dear to Christians and their sympathisers – glorious bodies; and we cling to our bodies and make them persevere in whatever they have got inside them. Half a body is better than none and we accept our human condition that constantly deprives us of the adjective 'glorious' unless we wage many wars and can boast about many a glorious victory. And we always take our hats off as we come to a standstill in front of a memorial to the glorious dead of two world wars. But does any memorial of this kind talk to us about glorious *bodies*?

You continue to live in your cell, even though you are not in the habit of talking about life in the following terms: 'It's a prison', 'a death-sentence', 'a life-sentence', 'a sentence in the Book of Life', 'a letter in the Book of Life', 'a page in the Book of Death'. You look out of the window and say to yourself that life is beautiful in spite of the Nazis who walk under your window every day. And you fear they might notice you if they look up and spot your window, your head, your glittering eyes that consume the beauty they contemplate as they scan the horizon for any sign of deliverance. On their way to the horizon, your eyes see the beauty of life, of houses and pedestrians, of stray dogs and rubbish bins, of this one and only moment. Everything is beautiful and blessed. So many poets sing the beauty of life. What about its ugliness? What about the Nazis walking under your windows? Aren't they the Almighty? Everything is Him, Shim, Tim, Tom. God is your reflection in the water, shimmering in the moonlight. Don't you realise you are as ugly as sin, as guilty as sun? As miserable as God?

'The world is on the brink of a new Cold War,' said Gorbachev in Berlin. Some say we are on the brink of a new *Warm* War, an old *Hot* War, for it is easy to talk as long as you can do it without being taken to a courtyard where a firing squad awaits you, rifles at the ready. So you talk unless a cannon ball hits you in the stomach, making you collapse under its weight and

might. Anyway, you are bound to die, whatever your and others' sacred books might say about resurrections and 'good news' that is as old as any news, any deaths, any gods.

There are many sacred books in store for you – in a bookstore – and you might be accused of being prejudiced against other sacrednesses, their remedies, teachings and panaceas, if you dared ignore them. By the way, sacredness is always in the plural, even if you believe in one God only, for you live in a multi-ethnic, multi-faceted society and one of these facets – one that belongs to this society – may be different from *your* God and *your* sacred books.

Of course all gods converge into one God and if this God stands on a gigantic roof and not in your room, you should take a ladder so as not to lose Him forever, irremediably. Nor should you lose sight of His divinity without which you are utterly powerless, helpless and ludicrous, even if you are a multimillionaire and Shakespeare's peer. So you go to your tool shed, fetch a ladder and prop it against the wall leading to the roof where God seems to have been rooted (or roofed) to the spot as if waiting for you. I think St Paul says something to this effect, reflecting on God's patience and readiness to wait not only for the elect but also for prodigal sons, daughters, latecomers – all those who are last but not least. Not in the least, as a matter of fact. And while getting higher and higher thanks to the rungs or steps on which you step, you realise you are not alone, far from it: there are many ladders all around you and also around the roof. All these people are also determined to reach the Almighty because, in spite of nuances, wordings and translations, they all worship the same God Who is also *our* God; otherwise we would not have taken the trouble to fetch this unreliable ladder and put our slippery slippers on its steps or rungs. Or runes, come to think of it. Are we allowed to forget the people of northern Europe and their ancient alphabet they used to cut into trees, ladders and bushes? Are we permitted to ignore or deport those marks, their secret and magic meanings?

Until the 20th century most human beings allowed no alien sacredness to enter their private libraries, let alone their minds and whatever is attached to them; but such blatant discrimination is now disappearing. So we open a book on Taoism and quote from it so as not to be accused of racism or anti-Taoism: 'Heaven's net is indeed vast.' It is enough to cast a glance at heaven and its canopy – there is nothing new under its canopy – to realise it is so vast you do not need to watch a documentary on the cosmos (Carl Sagan is somehow related to it) to say to any Taoist, however old and venerable, 'I know that heaven is vast. So what? And what about this net of yours? Are you alluding to St Peter who uses a net whenever in need of converting a heathen or a Buddhist and saving the damned?' And the Taoist says,

'Though its meshes are wide, it misses nothing.' 'You're right,' you say, 'Jesus Christ misses nothing. The same goes for His Father and the Holy Ghost. The whole Holy Trinity is in heaven, if you must know. Of course there are a few atheists on our Earth and they manage to squeeze through these meshes, to slip through God's fingers. A punishment waiting to happen. Actually the Chinese also believe in retribution, if I remember rightly.' 'You're right,' says the Taoist. 'This belief formed the basis of popular Taoist religious treatises such as the *T'ai-shangkan-yingp'ien*.'

When you read Chinese philosophers, you realise that death is just a season and the spring will come in due course, even if nothing is due to anything and there are no courses to deal with, not even a five-course dinner. They think that death is as natural as birth and you will be reborn because you were born, and death is another birth or another death, another winter or summer. So you can kill yourself as many times as you wish; the spring is in store for you whatever you do and however often you swallow arsenic or other poisons. But safety precautions should be observed as a matter of course: you are not supposed to kill yourself every other day, as some Japanese do, disappointed as they are with life and the seasons they have always lived through and throughout. In, through, out, in. That is how the Chinese depict our existence or rather their own existence that differs considerably from ours – in temperament, among other things. They say, 'He died from natural causes,' which means that, in due course, he will be *born* from natural causes. From our point of view, death is always unnatural, whatever causes lie at the root of the ritual in the course of which we find ourselves in the Hereafter or within its absence. As a matter of course, of course.

All sacred books are full of contradictions. The more you find as you read *T'ai-sh*...the more you become convinced that the treatise contains nothing else. For instance, its author maintains that people are not afraid of death; and he contradicts himself in the same breath, even if his breath is a yogi-breath or Taoist. Of course this piece of information seems to render heaven's net quite useless and the author is fully aware of this fact. So he says – in the same breath, no doubt – that there are *some* individuals who might be afraid of death and therefore the net is quite useful, given that God can drag them up to heaven and *punish* them in one of His ovens. And they will react to this punishment by screaming with pain and begging for God's forgiveness and the Holy Ghost's anaesthetic, if any: there are no anaesthetics for a haughty sinner. How dare you thumb your nose at death, at God's eternal punishment? At the doctrine of original sin? At St Augustine and Jansen?

According to some theologians, St Peter uses a fishing rod, for the elect are few and far between and one does not really need a net to catch them with a view to conveying their

bodies and souls to Paradise. And reprobates find Hell on their own: they just fall into a hole or rather a tunnel that inexorably leads to Hell, whatever you do and think; and no cars, no rockets will ever get you off the hook, or out of the hole. But one should not compare this hole to a black hole, for once inside this hole of ours, you realise you are in for *eternal tortures*, no matter how quickly you repent and repudiate St Peter's charges. Eternal torture, not a quick, merciful death – the one particularly favoured by Julius Caesar. You may even try to *glide down gracefully on your knees* in the hope that God and His Son will appreciate the beauty of your fall and your prayer's sincerity. Nothing doing: you are *irrevocably* damned and an army of angels drops thousands of stones into the tunnel, aiming at your back, head, stomach and sexual organs. They would stone you to death, but for your punishment: it is to be eternal, otherwise no one would ever take Hell seriously – certainly not sinners and their admirers. Of course I am alluding to those sinners who are doomed for a certain term to walk both night and day. And they are also doomed to live in Hell – everlastingly. Walking, talking, screaming. Not sleeping, not fainting – God forbid!

But even if those sinners flout Christian laws by not taking either Hell or Paradise seriously – they pay attention only to their shallow, earthly delights – they walk in this night of ours amidst the elect or in the crowd of the reprobate that Jansen characterised as 'the mass of perdition'. The masses, in other words. Let us not forget that Christ was popular with those who were prepared to embark upon a spiritual quest, but failed to win the support of the masses. In his book dedicated to St Augustine, Jansen must have talked about everything under the sun and the Earth, but this is none of our concern, for his book was condemned and probably damned by Pope Urban VIII. No one knows where Jansen walks, talks and lies supine, his eyes looking at falling stones. Or does he listen to the *Rolling* Stones instead? In Paradise of course.

Augustinus Cornelii Jansenii...was published without the authorisation of the Holy See (and the Holy Ghost, presumably). Five propositions that Nicolas Cornet, syndic of the Faculty of Theology of Paris, claimed to have discovered in the *Augustinus* were condemned by a bull issued by Pope Innocent X and by a constitution of his successor, Alexander VII. Does this mean that, prior to all these condemnations and accusations, both the book and its author had been damned by God, by *His* bull and constitution? Had all these popes dared to condemn the book, had the Almighty not granted them permission to do so with apparent impunity?

So popes write and sign their bulls, forbidding books and hoping that such and such a thinker will go to Hell and spend a dozen eternities in it. But they are bitterly mistaken and

God or one of His emissaries reminds them of this as they stand on the verge of the precipice at the bottom of which one can see nine, ten or eleven circles of Hell. Do numbers and circles really count in one's life and afterlife? Suppose there are nine circles in Hell but only *one* circle concerns your eternity and suffering. What counts is Hell and nothing else because Paradise may not exist, according to the latest scientific/medical research.

Of course I am alluding to global warming and other global catastrophes which wholly (not *holy*) depend on our folly – not on the sun, not on nature itself. Nature is kind; so is the sun. We are careless, reckless and constantly take a lot of suicidal risks; these endanger our planet, our species and our future that no longer lies ahead of us because it is already behind, far behind. At some point we turned our backs on this future and the point I am speaking about is one of no return: even if we glance back we shall not see any future, however hopeless and less-less-less. We shall see a scene of desolation, annihilation, destruction. Many people are very concerned about the destruction of the rainforests. And what about the destruction of the universe?

What did the popes object to when they unequivocally forbade Jansen's homage to St Augustine? (O my dear Augustine, Augustine, Augustine.) They might have been preoccupied by the problem of free will that had been bestowed upon the human race on the day of Adam's birth. Adam was born at last and God said to him, 'You can choose to be virtuous and wise, but don't forget that original sin is not far away, whatever the serpent, alias the Devil, says to you or your future wife. So I would choose virtue, if I were you. But I'm not you and you're not God. So you'll have to choose between good and evil – God and Devil – between virtue and sin. (Between a holiday or a new washing machine, in common parlance.) I call it free will. Please feel free to interrupt me if you don't understand anything.' Adam understood everything and God's monologue drew to a close, whereupon He withdrew into Himself or into the Universe, leaving Adam high and dry.

Jansen, however, was determined to extirpate free will from human beings and he was doing so in the wake of St Augustine's treatise directed against Pelagius. Our staunch partisan of the saint's doctrine seemed to have forgotten that the latter had not envisaged our fate with such vigour and cruelty, especially if we take into consideration his struggle against the Manicheans. But we should not disregard the context in which all our struggles take place, allowing us to survive both physically and psychologically. St Augustine did not have to struggle *physically* with the Manicheans and to some extent his bodily functions did not hang upon any doctrine, however fallacious and anti-Christian. But his mental equilibrium was partly lodged with all his polemics that might have driven him mad, had he not defeated his

numerous opponents. Indeed some individuals go mad and die if they cannot get their own way. St Augustine was of their number and luckily for him the Holy Trinity was on his side. The Manicheans are known only through St Augustine's works; the same goes for Pelagius. And St Augustine's masterpieces are read all over the world – even in the countries that have nothing to do with Catholicism and Protestantism. Time and God tipped the balance in favour of the saint and his writings. And even if time had been abolished – by Borges, among other people – the saint would have won hands down because saints and martyrs always win – by the grace of God.

As for Jansen, one wonders if his victory – if any – is due to God's grace or the doggedness of time that favours those who do not give way, even if they cannot get their own way. Even if you are wrong, you should not give way and yield because it is written in a poem and on a gravestone – 'And not to yield.' Both the poet and the hero are famous – to the point of abolishing time that is unable to obliterate their gifts and deeds. You may become famous in your turn if you do not yield and show your determination to overcome all obstacles, however insurmountable and terrifying. Jansen worked on his masterpiece for 22 years and rounded it off as follows, 'I leave my work to the judgment of the Roman Church...I retract all that she will decide that I ought to retract.' The Church decided that he ought to retract everything but he died and his book defied time and space, being an *immortal* masterpiece. The Church was defeated for once because, instead of removing 22 years from Jansen's life, she tolerated his presence on Earth; for some obscure reason, both death and Earth tolerated him too. So he finished his book and now we are aware of the fact that some of us belong to what he called 'the mass of perdition'. Mass murder, mass starvation, mass deportation. There is also such a thing as the mass of perdition and we have no alternative but to get used to it. (But there is no such thing as the mass of *salvation*.)

You do not get used to it because you cannot know in advance if you are damned or not unless you are a prophet in your own right. If you are, you say to yourself – not to others, God forbid! – 'I'll go to Paradise because I'm a saint' and, sure enough, you go to Paradise, although no one knows whether you are a saint or not. What does it matter! What counts is that you are in Paradise *already*: you are in the middle of what is called 'Paradise on Earth'. *En attendant*, *en attendant*, as the French point out. Meanwhile, in the meantime. What does it matter! Sooner or later you are bound to land in Paradise because you are a prophet and your free will will convey you to Paradise in due course. But there are many free wills you will have to cope with on your way to Paradise and on any other way; as usual, there are many other ways and things and any things. So you cope with them and they say to you, 'Your will

is not our will. And our will forbids you to go to Paradise.' Oddly enough, all these wills and ills speak to you for hours as if to prove that language is more important than anything, as Lacan put it, said or wrote. He said it, put it and laid it down on his writing desk; and on his chest of drawers. So what? So we think and talk about 'so' and 'what' and Paradise that does not need our quotation marks. Paradise is unquestionable, isn't it?

Anyway, you are not afraid of death and do not think much of Paradise that may turn out to be just another golf course, for all you know or do not know. So you are not afraid of death, as some Taoist treatise says; and so you are not afraid of death. And suddenly you feel fire, a lot of fire, and the immanence of fire means you are no longer on the surface of the Earth: you are *under* it. You are under all surfaces, all earths and under everything else; even under false pretences, although you do not pretend anything.

One wonders if Socrates was still on the surface of the Earth when speaking to his friends on the day of his execution. He was, to all outward appearances, otherwise his friends would have called him the 'underground man' when walking down a mythical staircase that separates this world from Hades. Socrates was eager to leave this world or vale of tears and fears to join the Platonic ideas situated above all the worlds in this world of ours. Even other galaxies and Milky Ways were beneath his dignity: he had always been going up and up before landing up in a prison cell where he was fettered like a run-of-the-mill lawbreaker. On the day of the execution, he removed his fetters, alias his body that was beneath contempt, and talked to his friends; they were mostly in tears. He said he would see the gods instead of just *feeling* their presence and protection; and he rejoiced at this thought, for the gods were superior to his *daimonion*. (They still are.) As for myself, I neither see nor hear *daimonions*, demons, gods, demigods, demiurges, and so on. (Only demagogues.) After death I shall witness neither sos, nor ons, nor eons, nor anemones, nor animas; nor shall I suffer from anaemia. And I would give anything to suffer from anaemia – or anything else, for that matter – *after death*, not in my lifetime. The only suffering I do not wish to endure now is death, whatever Epicurus says about it and its (or his) non-existence; or about a painless transfer from this world to any other world or *word*, as a Kabbalist might say.

So Socrates is on the surface of the Earth, of the world, and he aspires to leave these surfaces to meet the gods and remarkable people who cannot be found on any *surface*, be it that of the Earth or Mars. Only in Heaven does one meet remarkable people and discuss the subjects that are out of our reach with them: we are just surface-people and our subjects are shallow. And then Socrates salutes his soul's departure; now it is on its own and the fetters imposed by the body are no longer de rigueur either for men or women. Philosophers yearn

for death because no life will ever let them enjoy their soul's wisdom and aptitudes to the utmost. And you should take your soul's personal aptitudes and abilities into account not only on your deathbed but also in the streets where you walk and enjoy yourself. Your body walks, jogs and goes swimming, but you should say to yourself that all your muscles and tendons are nothing but a huge hindrance that prevents you seeing the light of truth. And only your soul can reach this light and bathe in it, if divorced from the body and life as such; from the surface of the Earth.

And what if the soul does not exist? Then you die for nothing and your corpse is offered to vultures, like Mozart's. Anyway, vultures are everywhere and everything; so are graves and graveyards. And what if you are not a philosopher? You do not care about truth, wisdom and Socrates who drinks his poisonous cup like Gertrude or anybody else, provided this anybody wishes to die instead of staying on the surface of the Earth. What *do* you care about? About breakfast, brunch, lunch, high tea, middle tea, low tea, underground tea, dinner, high dinner, heavenly dinner. (No heavenly hosts.) About women and men, their legs, breasts, eyes, chins, skins. (No souls.) About all *unphilosophical* aspects of life and all its *unsoulful* aspects. About *the eternity of pleasures* and *the immortality of joy*. About the surface of the Earth and *earthly* powers and paradises.

I am a nobody who yearns to stay on any surface, provided this surface is not situated on the *other* side, *another* side, within another size or dimension, be it the fourth dimension, or the fifth. I will persevere in my being, non-being, anti-being, on condition that all these and those beings are mine and no one else's. 'This is *my* Earth,' says a man in Dovzhenko's *Earth*. This is my Earth, my Plato, my prison cell, my fetters, my hemlock, my time. This is my I, my Own, my Me, my Right Hand, my Left Hand, my Right Foot, my Left Shoulderblade. That is why *I* am forsaken. Socrates was *not*.

You are born, grow, mature, fall in love with one man, one woman. Then you fall in love with another woman, another man. The former hates the latter and kills them. The latter hates the former and kills them too. You have a child who dies because God desires to put him or her in His lap. You cry and somebody else says that he or she understands you; and you sleep with him or her. And you wake with him or her and repent and cry and scream. And they say you have cancer and you realise you have *something* instead of having *nothing*. And something will come of something, as Shakespeare and many actors point out; in due course, in undue course, in the course of justice and injustice, in the course of rivers and rivulets.

Well, you (and I) have THIS moment and no one says *anything* on the subject, even if one could say *something* to the effect that you have nothing at all, not even this moment, let

alone your body and all the nobodies you have left behind. You had better not use the word ‘behind’ too often, because everything is *before* you, *in front of* you, and that is called ‘the future’ unless you call it ‘the past’ or ‘the thing of the past’. No, no, no – there are no things either in the past or in the future. The thing you are facing – even if it turns its back on you – is the present and you are supposed to be happy within this present without paying attention to anything or anybody else. There are many bodies in your past but you should not repent, even if you used to beat all these bodies to death. You no longer do it because all these bodies are dead and some of them are even buried. So you do not beat them any longer – either to death or to life. You leave them alone and they rot on their own; they can rot to death or another life or karma without your help, your hands and virtuous thoughts. You are virtuous and your virtuousness can exert considerable pressure on the world and your own life without ‘being paid’, as they say. They always think in terms of payments and money and land of milk and honey. You do not, you do not, you do *not*.

You are alive and that is what counts; and if it does not, you yourself count and you count this and that, otherwise the world does not exist. The world exists only if all its components are put together and hug each other. All these components are put together and you can see them, even if your eyesight is not as strong as it used to be. The components are before your very eyes or under them: the floor of your room is *under* you and not *above* you, otherwise you would call it ‘a ceiling’ and not ‘a floor’. You do not call it anything at all and all the names you may utter go somewhere because they are useless – as useless as the matches you are holding and looking at. What could you do with them? You could light a few candles. What for? To celebrate your birthday or spend Christmas in your God’s company? In any Other Company? There are no Christmases for you, no Istmases. Nothing at all – try to remember that.

Is, is, is, is; *ist*, *ist*, *ist*, *ist*, as they say in Germany. They do not say anything in Austria, and even if they *do* say something, they do, they do, they do, they do. They do this and that and nothing else. Is there anything? Perhaps. If he eats anything with wheat in it he is very sick. This *anything* is *something*, so the universe exists. Your life is *ist*, *ist*, *ist*, *ist*. Today it is, is, is, is, is. Do we have to speak of tomorrow? About i, i, i, i, i? About s, s, s, s, s? Yes, if we speak to capital letters: I, I, I, I, I, S, S, S, S, S. We always speak to capital, even if some of our dialogues are disappointing, for instance, ‘We’ve put £20,000 capital into the business, but we’re unlikely to see any return for a few years.’ And the business says, ‘Yes, you’ve put your money into us, but we don’t guarantee anything. An economic/financial crisis, you know.’

So this moment is over there – along with life and whatever we think about life and other metamorphoses. This moment is also over here and we can touch it, if we feel like it; and we can feel it if we feel like it; and we feel like it if we are like it. But we are not like it because every human being is unique and in a class of his or her own, in a race of his or her own. He or she owns a lot and all of his or her belongings are now in this room where one is to spend one's life, disregarding other lives and ones. You have to adjust to this life, room and cell because you cannot change the world which is unchangeable, as the saying goes. There are many sayings and they all go in the same direction, otherwise they would make no sense, and they must make something; it is their raison d'être. They are être and raison and so they are, and even if they are on the verge of a nervous breakdown or death, they *are* and one should cling to whatever *is* and shun whatever is *not* unless one is a Buddhist and hopes to reach nirvana in this life of theirs. And nirvana is not, or rather a collection of nots, and you go through these nots, notes, zeros and mirrors, saying to yourself, 'I am not. I am hot. I am cold. I am a grave, my own grave.'

If you are your own grave, you do not have to fear death because you are already dead and buried. And if you are already dead and buried, you should not fear death or any other disappearance you can be subjected to as you go along this boulevard or into that boudoir. You go along, so you go and live; and if you are dead, you do not go. You do not go at all. You are at all, so to speak. You are all, so to speak. And you speak, you speak, you speak. And you say, 'All, all, all. I am all, all. I am, am, am, am. I am m.' You are also a river, even if you cannot bathe in it twice or thrice or any other number of times. You put your foot into it and say, 'I'm bathing in it. This is my swimming pool and I'm the richest man in the world. I've got a few thousand pools like that and my thousand feet bathe in these pools. I'm the Buddha or Gothama or whatever you pronounce or mispronounce. I am you and not.'

You adjust to life and to its flow, for life is flowing even if it seems to be rooted to the spot and to the pot about which you know nothing or next to nothing. You know *something* about your chamber pot; and yet you can walk as far as your bathroom where you can relieve yourselves and others – the figments of your imagination. You relieve them and they relieve you – for once you are not let down by your friends and their friends who can also come to you, descend upon you because they have no time to phone. Had they had time to phone, they would have called you to say, 'We'll come to you at 5 p.m. We hope you don't mind. We'll come and ask you to cook some vegetables because we don't eat meat or anything of the kind. So you'll have to cook vegetables and rice. And we'll need a lot of fruit as a dessert. Oranges, apples, pears and bananas are all types of fruit. And please don't ask us, "Would you like

some fruit for dessert?" Yes, we would. We like fruit and vegetables because they are good for our health. The cherry tree in your garden is in fruit, isn't it? And other trees are in vegetable, aren't they?'

And there are newspapers that are ready to pounce on you with their news and sheets of paper; and you allow them to descend and pounce upon you because you must keep up with the times, otherwise the times will let and keep you down. You do not wish to be down, do you? Of course you wish to be up and this wish is understandable in any context, even if there are no contexts to speak of and write home about. If you are up, you can pounce upon this and that, and win this war, that battle and many games. You can even become a world champion if you are up or even up-and-coming, for you can say to yourself and others, 'I'm already up so I've come. Can't you see me?' They do see you and applaud, and you come down from your pedestal to salute them cordially and show them your magnanimity. You are as simple as all these people; you are an ordinary human being and they should not fear you, not at all. They should worship you because you are both great and simple – like Lenin wearing a cap. He wore a cap instead of a hat and every proletarian understood him or rather his cap. Does it really matter what people understand and why they do not kill you at once? They may understand your cap, your trousers, your smile, one word. They do not understand anything else, but one word and one cap are enough and so you are still alive in spite of everything, of every boulder, of every brick that does not fall on your head.

Newspapers bring you up to speed with yourself and you feel you belong in this day and age, although you do not seem to belong in the newspapers because they do not speak about you: they have other things to do and you are not within the scope of their interests. They do not even take the trouble to say to you, 'I'm afraid your life and trials are beyond/outside the scope of my pages.' Nor do they say, 'Your tribulations don't come within the scope of our news because you're not in the news. Anyway, you're too old.' And if you say to them, 'You could broaden the scope of your enquiries,' they answer, 'We wouldn't like to widen the scope of the enquiry and look at more private matters.' So you remain outside these and other newspapers; but at least you can read them and they even *want* you to read them. At least they want you to *buy* them and it does not really matter whether you read them or not.

You read the newspaper you bought this morning and realise that chip technology has also been a focus of hacking attempts aimed at foreign companies. You realise that, that, that…that there are so many things you have no time to realise what you have already realised during your exertions and excursions into the outside world. You realise there is such a thing as cybersecurity and you ask yourself what this means and you answer you know the word

security; you also know you are not secure in this world or any other world. Even in the next world or the next-to-nothing one you are sure to be insecure. But what does it matter? You are reading a newspaper and so you are alive, even if you are not kicking. Do you really have to be kicking? To be alive, you do not have to be kicking, for you can say, 'I'm alive,' and everybody will understand you are still in the vale of tears. They will hear your words and see your mouth through which your words habitually come and go. That is enough and enough's enough. And to prove that you are in the vale of tears, you just have to shed a few tears: the dead do not cry. Why don't they cry? Because they are happy in the Hereafter?

You are alive and kicking and you do not care about cybersecurity, whatever that is, unless it intervenes in the currency markets today to try to stabilise the exchange rate. No, no, no. You are not on the right track in the network where you found yourself as you began to read your newspaper that belongs to other people, groups and corporations. What does it intervene in? What? This word? What word? Which word? Cybersecurity. Security does not intervene and if it does, one does not mind its intervention because security is our top priority. One does not know much about cyber and even if one takes this word, nothing comes of it – neither of the *word* nor of *it*. Ber, ber, ber. Cy, cy, cy. What can come of it? Nothing except ber, ber, cy, cy. And BBC. That is what you are left with, so to speak. And you do speak so you are alive. But that does not mean you are kicking.

You *are* kicking and you can prove it. You are kicking, aren't you? You see a ball and kick it as hard as you can. And if you do not see one – or two balls – you put a few balls on your only carpet and kick them for a few hours. These balls are not alive but thanks to them you prove to everybody you are alive and even kicking. 'Even kicking,' you say to everybody, especially for the sake of the blind. Of course they can *hear* you kicking these balls but they do not know exactly who is kicking what and you have to spoon-feed not only the blind but also the deaf. And if they do not believe you, you kick a man in the face. And if they still say you are dead, you ring your mother up and ask her to come to your house at once. She comes and you say to her, 'I am your son, am I not?' 'You are,' she says. 'So you are my mother, are you not?' 'I am,' she says. 'And all mothers think and feel that their babies are still inside them. Am I right?' 'You are,' she says. 'Every mother is a mother hen, isn't she?' 'She is,' she says. 'So you are a hen, aren't you?' 'I am.' 'And I am inside you.' 'You are.' 'Don't you feel my body inside you?' 'I do.' So you say to all Doubting Thomases, 'My mother is feeling the baby kicking inside her. Kicking, feeling, feeling, kicking. Isn't that enough?'

It is enough and they leave you in peace, saying to themselves, ‘He’s alive and kicking, and kicking, kicking,’ especially if you have an opportunity to kick them in the face and faces. What will you do now? You must do something now and the next day, otherwise everyone will think you are dead and not kicking at all. So you kick whatever you can kick and do something so as not to die prematurely, on the spur of the moment, of the wrong moment. You had better not die even on the spur of the *right* moment because it is not right to die, even if it is written overhead, in the sky, on the moon, on angels’ clothes. Have you ever seen their clothes? You might have seen them once or twice. And so you know that what is written on them boils down to this, ‘You are to die but we shall help you. We are your guardian angels, you know.’ So you look at their clothes and die in peace. You should not die in war, come hell or high water. Even if Hell comes, you should not die in war, otherwise you may be ill-treated in the Hereafter. And if high water comes, you say to yourself it is low water and your stratagem works because everything is in your mind, even high and low waters; and high hells, and low bells.

And if it is some kind of low water, you can pour it into your bath and take your bath, notwithstanding meteorology and other inconveniences. You take your bath and if your bath is large enough to allow you to swim in it, you swim in it and sing all sorts of hymns to creation, for nothing is more beautiful and rewarding than singing in one’s bath. Even singing in the rain – and one always thinks about rain in relation to singing – is inferior to the baths where you sing. What else do you need? You need the whole world and you need to triumph somewhere, preferably in this world and also in all other worlds you are likely to come across as soon as you leave this world of ours. How to triumph in this world, in our world, in their world? It is not easy and one might say it is rather difficult. Within our Christian world, the last are not the least and they are far superior to the first. So you become a hostage and celebrate your remarkable triumph over appalling adversity. You become a prime minister and sign this agreement or any other agreement: what counts is your signature and agreements. And journalists say, ‘The signing of the agreement was a personal triumph for the Prime Minister.’ And then you say to yourself that you will not have smallpox and the same journalists write, ‘The eradication of smallpox by vaccination was one of medicine’s greatest triumphs.’ You think about changes and modifications, and other journalists write and say, ‘The constitutional changes have been hailed as a triumph for democracy.’ Democracy triumphs; so do you. A match ends in triumph for the French team. You end in triumph, although you are not the French team or any other team. And you return in triumph from the sales with a half-price stereo system.

You are surrounded by triumphs; you bathe in them. Do you need any other bath salts?

And no, and yes. And so many.
So any, any. The last train, the least.
The least and the last.
‘Least’ is ‘leaf’ in Russian.
And a shiiiiit of paper.
This leaf, that one, that.

POSTSCRIPT

What can I do with this? Nothing and so this and that still go there and here. And I sit where I am and look at them, at you, and this alters neither my outlook nor inlook; it alters nothing and nothing alters anything. And everything, sometimes.

So it is over. I am as free as
Winds and windbags and bags
That house the biggest collection of
Myself and other antique toys.

THE TALE OF WOE

GOD IS IN THE UNMAKING

There is something left or just remains and nothing is hidden behind it, before it in time and also in all the spaces one chances upon as one does what one is supposed to do, to live through. And all this goes through and through, and there is no through left because there are no longer throughs on the market and even in one's cellar, fridge, or memory. Whatever comes goes, even if this happens later than sooner, but in this case it does not really matter when it happens and you do not always feel the when and the where, and that is what happens to you and others; and you just happen to be there to witness whatever goes in front of you. And then you turn your back and see what does not go; nor does it stay but you see it somehow and say to yourself it is better not to see it.

You have seen it; you have seen it all and even more than all this and all that, and suffering is still not your cup of tea, which does not mean you will never suffer again. You will suffer tomorrow and the day after, and after, and after; and you do not know what you can do about it, about this pain and some other pains and days that go and come, as the whims take them. You are a screen on which you are projected by this and Him, and Her; and all of them are holy, and some are virgins and fathers. There are sons and daughters; and you are also a son and a daughter, and you behave yourself because you have no choice. If you misbehave, you are likely to find yourself in a corner, and you already know all the corners of the world. Usually they say there are only four corners, but corners are as numerous as the stars and so you ask yourself if there is anything else on Earth. Only corners, corny jokes and cornerstones; the same goes for the sky.

You live amidst the stars, on them, under them, above everything else. Yet you are unhappy because you do not read Spinoza every day and therefore cannot distinguish between adequate and inadequate ideas. Actually you do not read anything; you think and look at stars and corners, even if you have no wish to count them. And if you do count them, you spend a lot of time counting stars and comets and moments. They pass in front of you, above you, behind you, and you turn your back on time and other backs, bodies, corpses and mountains. Why should you count mountains? Or grains of sand? You do not even count out your money because you are not a king, not a queen, and anyway you are going to die like everybody, like every fly. And you know that, whatever you do, you will die and you cannot take anything with you because you are not a pharaoh. You are just an ordinary citizen who dies and lies under the surface of the Earth like anybody else, with the exception of flies who die somewhere in the air and are buried in the air by other flies and birds. Let us not forget that birds devour flies now and then so that flies are often buried in these birds' stomachs, and they are probably happy inside the birds; they are warm and never catch their deaths of cold. (And what about whales and their stomachs?) They get the feeling they are in front of a fireplace and cosiness pervades everything, everybody and every fly. It is true they no longer fly – I suppose they fly vicariously – but this does not matter, considering they feel as cosy as multimillionaires and movie stars who sit in front of their chimney pieces and drink a lot of cognac.

You cannot fly either and so escape neither death nor life that is often miserable and offers only trials and tribulations; and you like neither, which is understandable and logical. We cannot understand a lot as long as we live and only death seems to open doors beyond which we find some bits of knowledge and truth, according to St Paul and others. These bits, odds and ends speak to us about our mistakes and misunderstandings, but it is too late, for we are dead and cannot do anything about life, within life, within its walls and malls. We just look at the truth and say to ourselves, 'It is beautiful, beautiful and true.' It is true that it is true, but sometimes one prefers

untruth to truth, if this untruth is located within life and not elsewhere, even if there are worlds elsewhere; and hereafters, thereafters.

Once upon a time I fell in love and this was a marvellous feeling I cannot forget and forgive. I even wonder if it was just a feeling or something else, something bigger, greater and more important, like religion, God and whatever is linked to the notion of God and His angels. It was probably a huge slice or chunk of life without which I would not have lived for many years, for you are sustained by love and nourished by it. You eat love and drink it as well; and you need no other food and even music is not obligatory if you are in love and can enjoy this event to the utmost, forgetting everything else down to your life and its numerous ramifications. Except your love, except your love. But this love is away and what I recall has nothing to do with it because you are supposed to feel their lips and bodies in general, and if you do not kiss them round the clock, you know nothing about love except a few sayings and poems. And what can a poem or a piece of music tell you about love? O love, o beauty, o your lips, o your hips. But where are these hips – or lips, for that matter? That is what matters and not o, o, o, o, or oh, oh, oh. What matters is not within your reach; there is no matter, only spiritual and otherworldly figments, bits of memory and the memory of bits, odds, nods and nots. And memories are often swarming with ends and worms.

Yet I recall the sentiment of love that used to fill me to the brim; I was always afraid I might lose some quantity of it by spilling it on my silk shirt, down my tie, all over the floor. Of course you do not cry over spilt love because there are many loves around you. There is nothing but love in the universe and it is thanks to this omnipotent love that the universe exists and even prospers to some extent; and it is sure to go on prospering unless it expands beyond any measure, any degree of prosperity and love. So the universe should not expand too much and that is what we talk about in our prayers addressed to the universe *and* God, although we do know they are identical twins, if not the One about which I, for one, persistently talk for the sake of unity and harmony. If the universe continues to expand, I am bound to feel obliged to expand in my turn and thus catch up with it because I have no wish to lose it, given that there is no love outside it, outside its expansion and tension. (Childhood obesity.) And I am still in love, however hard it is to keep love to oneself without spilling it all over the floor and the universe. Besides, you may be forsaken and even ditched – most cruelly, most ruefully. Alas, in the matter of love you are not alone and so cannot keep everything under control; and even if you do succeed in keeping *something* under control – for a while, for a mile – your partner may snatch this something from under your control and consequently your love will become uncontrollable.

At some point you may realise that the only way to keep love in your room, in your bed and also in your heart is to fall in love with love itself, relying on nobody in the domain or rather in the kingdom of this spiritual and sensual adventure. You are on your own and love is just in front of you, at your service apparently, and all you have to do is hug it to your chest and the rest of your body, saying to yourself, 'I'm in love at last. And the love I'm in love with is so absolute I cannot lose it.' Sure enough, you no longer deal with blondes and brunettes, with dark ladies and sonnets, with Beatrices and Lauras, and ons, and forths. You kiss Absolute Love and there is no room for anything else either in your life or in the universe, which does not mean, however, that you are rooted to the spot and cannot go any further, any higher. The higher you are, the higher you go or fly – that is the secret of a bona fide love, the only synonym of elevation, ecstasy and light.

At another point – a higher point – you say to yourself you saw this light and might many, many years ago; and you begin to recollect your former lives, your previous knowledge of light. And you succeed because

love itself is guiding you through the labyrinth of good and evil, taking you to the spot where neither good nor evil are allowed to dwell, not even for an instant. This kingdom is called ‘beyond good and evil’ and you say to yourself that everything falls into place at last, for love cannot be evil and there is no such thing as ‘evil love’. No such thing, no such feeling, no such kiss, no such conception. Oddly enough, the same goes for ‘*good* loves’: all loves are good and our grammarians and philosophers frown upon tautologies. They maintain there is no point in wasting our time on the unnecessary and usually unintentional use of two words to express one meaning. The point is we often use these two words *intentionally* and therefore find ourselves in corners where we are severely beaten by our tutors, gurus, priests and fathers. We cry and shout at the top of our voices, ‘No more tautologies, I promise, I swear, no more wasting of time, time is money, time is honey, time is love.’ ‘You’re wrong. Love is not time. Absolute love is eternity and you shouldn’t think in terms of other loves. They’re just the bottom rungs on the spiritual ladder.’ And we are flogged for breaking the law of Absolute Love.

Actually this law is in a position to flog us itself because our love, however small and short of breath, should not stop short of embracing Absolute Love which is made up of individual loves, of their infinity. So our love may and must coincide with Absolute Love, and if we are negligent in allowing our love to get away from Absolute Love, the latter flogs us as long as necessary to make us realise we are part and parcel of Absolute Love and also of the All-Soul, as Plotinus put it. ‘All-Soul’ contains all souls and that is why we call it ‘all’ and not merely ‘soul’, which may give rise to a misunderstanding; and mistakes should be excluded from the top rung of our spiritual ladder.

We are already on the top of our ladder, but the ladies we are in love with are far from us, being chained to the *bottom* of spiritual chasms. They often look like fallen angels, although they are just fallen women because they are not keen on higher sensations and our absolutism. But our magnanimity knows no bounds: we are bent on saving all those who have been led astray by riches and other allurements of life.

For a while, we look at these women and then our gaze falls on a group of builders who work on wooden platforms, suspended by ropes from the top of the Tower of Babel. Are we doomed to repeat the mistakes of the past? Never mind, never mind. We look at the ropes – not at the builders – and realise we may use them for our own purpose which has nothing to do with the arrogance of the builders and their desire to compete with God. We find a coil of rope and soon our women begin their ascension towards the summit of spirituality, the top of the world and the All-Soul Absolute Love. Alas, there is too much slack in our rope, but we are used to both slacks and alases; our women make yet another effort and reach the platform of bliss in no time at all.

And then we all realise that hugging, cuddling and kissing are not our cup of tea, for there are other cups we had better drink on the tops where we have found ourselves at last; otherwise all these tops are of no use to us and our children whose births are in the offing, so to speak. We do not speak; nor do they think because they are not yet born and the unborn do not meditate and are content to kick their mothers’ bodies. Oddly enough, they do not even kick their mothers or fathers, which is little wonder, considering they have neither mothers nor fathers. They have no one; not only are they not born, but they have no legs, no arms – nothing at all. In short, they have been conceived neither in their mothers’ bodies nor in their parents’ minds that are turned away from physical births, being wholly preoccupied by spiritual ones. No one makes love on this summit of summits; the inhabitants of so-called Paradise just sing and dance and make a song and dance about their existence. But they are bored to death and do not wish to die; that is why they decide to go back to Earth and their earthly lives where sins are as common as sons and fathers.

But they are afraid of sins and punishments and their gurus – St Bernard, for instance – speak to them about divinities who are women in disguise and vice versa. These gurus remind them that the Holy Virgin is just a mental screen onto which a series of personifications was projected in the middle of the Big Bang. And, according to St Dominic, the personifications change the adept's ordinary perception of a woman into a special kind of perception – the Holy Virgin. The man and the woman are both part of a drama to which they conform in perfect lucidity. Their interplay is a complementary movement of thought and feeling. There is no place for abstraction here – only constant reference to a tangible human condition. The experience of the transubstantiation of a woman into a goddess is therefore viewed as a very special revelation of reality which can be seen, felt and apprehended in no other way. And it is only on the Summit that such a revelation of reality, which may seem unreal for a while, is attainable, according to Dante.

Sublimation techniques are based on regulating seminal ejaculation, which is achieved by combined thought and breath control; sexual energy is also controlled through Hatha-yoga. If, by chance, orgasm occurs, the fluids can be withdrawn into the body. The point is the inhabitants of Paradise have no wish to put a brake on further spending of their fluids, for they love children even more than heaven and its dances. 'No birth control,' they shout now and then as if forgetting they can sing and dance these words. 'No withdrawing of the fluids,' they shout after a while.

All these people wish to live an earthly life, an ordinary life, and one of their slogans reminds us of Winston Churchill: 'Absolutely no sport'. Others seem to show to what extent they hate religious exercises: 'No sublimation', 'no withdrawals', 'no souls, only bodies', 'no holy, only unholy', 'no heaven, only Earth', and so on and so forth. And if one and many others do not understand their claims and demands, they sing their songs that resound in heaven because they are still in heaven, although some of their feet occasionally touch the ropes along which they will slide as far as the Earth and their future tombs.

We want to come down, down, down.
We are not downs and therefore
Do not want to stay in heaven where
They bask in the sun and reflected glory.
This glory belongs to God. We want
Our own glory, the glory of man.
So we wish to descend, to come down,
To walk on our Earth, not on clouds
And stars. We couldn't care less
About stars. We care more about stripes
And the fruit of the Earth and vegetables.
We want authorised fruit and in Heaven
All is forbidden, proscribed and prescribed.

So they glide and slide along the same ropes, but in the opposite direction, compared to what they did some time ago. They have no recollection of dates and deeds, and what counts is their downward movement, not their thoughts that are full of revolutionary sounds. They revolt against the rule of heaven and wish to abolish its

government; and establish their own government, the Earth-based administration. They wish to attack all these problems now and find solutions tomorrow at the latest, otherwise it may be too late to attack anything, even the smallest fortress. They look and sound like fallen angels. Sometimes they sound like Satan who used to clench His fists and shake them at archangels and God Himself. It is said he goes on clenching his fists and shaking them at heaven and the army of God; in spite of His age and spiritual weariness. 'Satan shouldn't allow himself to get weary,' He says to Himself from time to time. And those who go on sliding down support Him morally and even physically as they clench their fists and shake them at the Holy Trinity and at the Holy Virgin. They no longer wish to get bored in heaven and laugh at George Bernard Shaw's Don Juan who was looking for spiritual progress and perfection and excellence. In Hell – not in a hellhole – where he stayed for a while they used to perfect their golfing technique, whereas he wished to perfect and polish his thoughts and aspirations; his respiratory technique and system. So he took a lift and went up, looking for Paradise and the pilgrim's progress, not for technological advances in computing and telecommunications. In Hell they played with computers; he wished to play with thoughts and God.

But those who continue to glide and slide – down, down, down, down, needless to say – may think one should not *play* with God because one should *kill* Him on the spot – in heaven, amidst many clouds. They all admire the Che or le Che or just Che who said it was pointless to shake one's fists, pointing at heaven, for God does not so much as exist. Why waste one's time on something – the Che never used 'who', when speaking of God – that cannot even vanish into thin air? Said the Che, 'Shake your fists at capitalists and pick up your weapons, for it's pointless to shake your *fists*. You should shake your *weapons* and fire, fire, fire, fire. The world is on fire, as the Buddha put it. So it should be *on fire*, shouldn't it? Do you want it to be *on water*?'

A BROKEN BONE

Marx said, Marx said – that is what you hear now, for you are already on the surface of the Earth, at the beginning of the 20th century; and even in the middle of it. 'You should be subsumed by the organised Marxist movement because Marx and Engels said –' That is what you hear and do, and you follow the crowd, following in Marx's and Lenin's footsteps. And then you hear the following remark, 'They and the Marxists need to maintain their independence.' You wonder whether you belong in the group called 'they' and if you should maintain your independence or your dependence. It is easier to maintain your dependence, escaping from freedom; at least that is how they explain Hitler's ascent to power which was rapid and unexpected. No, they say 'no'. Why? Because Hitler's ascent to power was both slow and expected. Why? Because people idolise guides, führers, Stalins, Hitlers and even Lenins who show the way and point towards the future, wiping the slate clean. With the s*t*ate wiped clean you march towards this future, away from the past, and your march through the present is admired by students and some writers who write about Mao – not about the Tao, mind you – and also about the Che, Che, Che. '*Chego*?' ask Russian peasants, meaning, 'What did you say?' 'What's the matter?' 'Are you off your head?' '*Niet*, *niet*,' answer the representatives of the intelligentsia. 'We are not. We haven't screamed our heads off, not yet. You have, on the other hand. By the way, you should say *Cheka*, not *Chego*.'

'*Chego*?'

'And you'll go on losing your heads if you don't take up your axes and kill your masters. If you do, you'll never be slaves again.'

'And what about Hegel?' the peasants ask.

'What about *him*?' asks the intelligentsia.

'He says that masters will be slaves and vice versa.'

'But this dialectical process takes time, you know. Broken bones always take time to mend and today's world is made up of broken bones.'

'We want to take our time,' say the peasants.

'What for?' asks the intelligentsia.

'We've got a few bottles of vodka on our kitchen tables. If we take care of our masters' heads and say, "Off with their heads," we'll waste our time on trifles.'

'Do you mean to say that vodka is more important than masters and their numerous deaths?'

'It is, it is,' answer the peasants, drinking a lot of vodka in their kitchens and elsewhere. In the meantime, capital and capitalists sweep across the world, drawing every country into their capitalism, imperialism and even post-capitalism, postmodernism. The intelligentsia points out that neither monopolies nor trusts should be trusted because they divide the world between them and prosper; and even Prospero is unable to do anything about it. He knows that nothing short of a world conflagration will ever destroy these prosperous bourgeois people and their children who inherit everything and continue to torture workers, peasants and the underpoor in general. Nevertheless, neither peasants nor workers nor undercats are willing to budge from where they are – from their chairs in front of TV sets and computers. And if Trotskyites and Chekyites point out that they should swing into action, they answer, 'When there's nowhere left to expand into, imperialists will begin fighting among themselves. Why should we shed *our* blood?' And they sing yet another song. And they *dance* it:

Not our blood's shed.
Their blood? All right.
Let them shed it there.
Not here, though. As
Long as we drink our
Vodka, rum and tonic.

THE UNDERTABLE

They drink each other under the table – workers, peasants, students – and they all are under the table now, under a huge table where the whole world can find a sort of refuge. And the world finds this refuge so as not to budge again, for the world is rather weary, really and unreally weary, and the undertable world is as comfortable as a royal suite in a five-star hotel. But they – whoever they are – offer him or her money under the table to change his or her or its mind. And its mind is altered to the point of making him budge and crawl across the floor to safety and unsafety – to the *real* world, in other words. He crawls, saying to himself he is neither a woman nor a child; he is a man and therefore has to take on responsibility for whatever happens on Earth and even under her or it – in the *under*world where the dead play hide and seek with the quick. They pretend they are not in our world; yet they come to it and we see a lot of ghosts and living dead who live as long as they wish to scare us out of our wits. And they do scare us out of our wits and we leave our wits behind, so the dead pick them up and carry them as far as the underworld. That is why they say, 'He has one foot in the grave.' Actually they should say, 'He has one *wit* in the grave.' But they do not say that and so far we have had only one *foot* in the grave. We jump along the streets, for we cannot do otherwise until we find crutches to support our bodies and souls and lusts.

So this man crawls from under the table and rises to his feet or foot. What counts is not the number of his feet but his desire to get up and become what he is, although he does not really know what he is and how he can become this or that. He *is* already, but he is supposed to *become* what he is and he is *not* what he is, whatever they say and do, even if they do nothing at all. So they do nothing at all: they are sleeping under the table while he continues to rise to his feet and his crutches, for he has already found a pair of crutches and even three, four crutches, and some of these crutches are very emotional. So he says to himself as he goes on rising, 'I am a man and I have my will. And my will isn't *their* will because it is *mine*. Whatever I see is a product of my will and even these crutches and their emotions are my will's products and creations. And if my will no longer wills to have these crutches, I won't have them and I'll drop them then and there, here and now and everywhere.'

He drops all his crutches and goes on talking about his will because he wills himself to talk and think about his will and its ramifications, modifications and creations. And his will says it does not wish nor will nor want to follow the crowd because it is individual and Aristotelian. There are only individuals who are in classes of their own – unique, eunuch, unique, eunuch – and even crowds are due to the fact that individuals represent them, whenever they have nothing else to do and are weary of themselves, of their wills – even of their wills to power, to live. They are even weary of their death knells and all the drives that drive them now to death and now to what is falsely called 'existence on Earth'.

So they think about crowds and even drink to unity and proletarians who unite and disunite somewhere – in the first half of the 20th century. And they find themselves and their crutches under tables where they go on drinking because there is nothing else to do. And they say to everyone, 'Nothing doing, anything doing, everything doing.' And when they are about everything and doing everything, they mean they can drink even under tables, provided there are many bottles under them and even under the surface of the Earth, which explains the phenomenon related to ghosts: they always look like inveterate drunkards as they make their ways through this castle and that field over there. They walk, take wild swings, stumble, fall and sound like drunkards, even if they do not come back from this pub or that brasserie roaring drunk.

But sooner or later they crawl across some floors and rise to their feet the number of which no one really knows for sure. And they and he say, 'This is the purpose of our earthly life, which reason sets before us, and for the infallible attainment of which she is our pledge and security.' '*Chego*?' say others. The other others do not answer them because they have other fish to fry and those fish are so big they have no time to fry anything else and answer the questions that require no answers – according to their minds and purposes. 'There's no such thing as an existence that has no relation to myself, and whatever has an existence has it only through its relation to my own being.' That is what he, she, it and one say to us, and we understand them as long as we listen to what they say and think. All right, all right – we are only your poor relations and exist solely in the light of what you think about our darkness.

Actually I, for one, am also in a class of my own, although I prefer Plato to Aristotle and today's democracies that have already got on my nerves and even on my tendons and arteries. Besides, there are people who go on shouting; yet they shout only in the past and if they shout in the future, they are called 'terrorists' or 'Islamists'. They are called names and words, but for the moment they shout somewhere else – on television and computer screens. And I watch neither televisions nor computers. It is true that I use the latter, but so many things are true and false nowadays. How to leave them behind and even before?

'Colonialists also have to contend with the new proletariat, the "toiling masses of the backward countries"', they shout. They shout in the past and therefore are things and men of the past. They are perhaps women of the future, which depends on their beauty and ugliness. If they are beautiful, they are women of the future, for we shall need them for our bedrooms, beds and brothels. If they are ugly, they will stay in the past along with Rosa Luxemburg and other revolutionaries who go on shouting as they march towards the future, 'We are for the withering away of the state. Yet we also believe in the proletarian dictatorship which represents the strongest and mightiest form of state power that has existed up to now. To keep on developing state power in order to prepare the conditions for the withering away of state power – that's the Marxist formula.'

'It's contradictory,' shout capitalists, imperialists and others.

'So what?' shout our Rosas Luxemburgs. 'The contradiction is vital and wholly reflects the Marxist dialectic.'

'Does it?' shout capitalists. And they shout themselves hoarse. But they do not manage to shout the Rosas hoarse; or to outshout them, needless to say. So the Rosas go on shouting:

'Revolutionary hegemonic change will take time and effort.'

'What are you shouting about?' shout the post-imperialists.

'About hegemony.'

'All right. America, Russia and China compete for regional hegemony. Is that what you mean?'

'No.'

'What *do* you mean?'

'Revolution.'

'But you're under tables. Even women are.'

'Even under our tables we're heading towards revolution.'

'But you're off your heads and off revolutions.'

'Not off tables, though.'

THUMBS

That is what Hegel calls ‘dialectical thinking’ – now you are under a table, now in a gym where you eliminate vodka, worries and tables. Your aim is to find ‘One in All’ and the one you are looking for is either under a table or in a corner where the One spends his time, doing nothing. At least he does not drink anything and for once he is he and not he *or* she. So Hegel thinks he should also become ‘she’, otherwise All will not come to *his* room, to Hegel’s room; and Hegel was not partly ‘she’. Hegel presumes he is the One and after much soul-searching ends up stuffing into his substances a she – you should not confuse this she with a famous Russian soup – and also an it, which means a child, a hermaphrodite and the whole world. ‘One in All’ is a mystical conception and Hegel has no idea how to convey it by means of logic, for without these means and logic itself no conception is ever admissible, acceptable and triumphant within both time and space. And Hegel wishes to triumph everywhere, even in the worlds predicted by Giordano Bruno and feared by Pascal. Hegel has no fear and is rather fearless as he advances towards the accomplishment of his logical dream – by stages, by ages.

As he did so, he came across the word ‘totality’ and immediately opposed it to ‘progress’ traditionally made up of moments, stages, phases and emphases. So, after much soul-searching – and *body*-searching, according to Nietzsche – Hegel decided to overcome moments, seconds, progress, pages, stages and even theatrical stages on which only moments display themselves, leaving ‘totality’ in the wings. In his Totality both everything and everybody are subsumed, sublimated and look like a number of bricks that Karl Marx turned into a red-brick wall – after less soul-searching and more body-searching. Ever since you have been either talking to this brick wall or banging your heads against it or both. And the wall answers thus, ‘You don’t understand Marx. He is different. I’m just one of his spectres. Aren’t you afraid of spooks?’

In his dynamic march towards Totality Hegel overcomes both the undertable and corners, but he preserves what he overcomes – for the sake of totality; so you have both the undertable and a number of corners where some individuals continue to twiddle their thumbs. Marx says to them, ‘You’re under your rulers’ thumbs. Can’t you see? Can’t you feel? Don’t you feel their thumbs all over your bodies and minds? You think that what you feel is worms and tapeworms. Actually you feel your rulers’ thumbs which are much worse than any worms. I call this phenomenon “rule of thumb”.’

For the sake of Totality, these individuals crawl under tables and stop twiddling their thumbs. For a while, they twiddle bottles of vodka and then drink their contents– for the sake of the same Totality. They are both thesis and antithesis; they are both drunkards and teetotallers. Sometimes you drink tea, sometimes vodka. Whenever you drink tea, you fall in love and marry a beautiful woman or a handsome young man. Two bottles of vodka obliterate your family life and push you towards a submachine gun, for the Che said one should not go on long journeys without submachine guns, machine guns and guns. Journeys make no sense unless you keep your guns under pillows or in your hands – if your enemy is in sight. And your enemy is always in sight except when you fall asleep after drinking two bottles of vodka. So you should drink only one bottle at a time, otherwise the total revolution will not take place and its absence may deprive both Trotsky and Lenin of their most precious and precocious dreams. And one should not steal other people’s dreams, should one? That is why Bolsheviks robbed banks, palaces and churches; they never stole their own dreams.

You wake up in the dark and begin to wonder where you are, for you do not recognise anything, not even your body, let alone the brick wall that surrounds you on all sides. You recall your machines and guns and start looking for them everywhere, even on the wall. Your fingers explore your surroundings and find nothing except themselves. You recognise your fingers – not all of them, unfortunately. But you recognise your thumbs and begin to twiddle them to your heart’s content. And you say to yourself that there is nothing in history except a number of thumbs. The devil finds work for idle hands; so does God. The former hold machine guns, the latter roses. You can hold a bunch of roses and twiddle your thumbs.

RUINS AND THEIR UGLINESS

Once again you fall in love because you say to yourself that family life is more important than revolutions and evolutions. There are no chimpanzees in your neighbourhood, but you meet a lot of beautiful women and not all of them are prostitutes, contrary to what your mother says to you and your father. An overview of all conflicts and their eventual resolution is out of the question and the only question you are prepared to ask boils down to this, ‘Will you marry me?’ The answer is ‘yes’ and this is a good thing, since the resolution of all conflicts would result in a stale, rigid society. An ideal would be a pluralist democracy, providing a stable framework for many local conflicts. Your family is a good example of a pluralist democracy.

And what about family conflicts? Your wife disagrees with you continuously. Besides, she is very sociable and likes her parties and other people’s parties, dinners and balls. You say to her, ‘I’m going to make an effort to be a bit more sociable,’ but you do not make this effort, for you make a lot of other efforts and they get in the way whenever you decide to be more sociable. So you no longer decide to be more sociable and your wife

leaves you behind as she dresses up as Artemis for yet another masked ball. Next day she becomes Athena and you continue to stand in your corner where you struggle with equations or rhymes. You know that revolutions either cannot happen or end badly; the alternative is democratic transition. So you do not murder your wife; you just say to her, 'Divorce proceedings started today,' and she comes out of the divorce settlement a rich woman.

As a result of this democratic and smooth transition, you are ruined both financially and psychologically. 'Please wear trainers in the gym, to avoid scuffing the floor,' said your physical guru and he said it once upon a time. And you recall this time because you continued to wear trainers even outside the gym, in the streets and parks of your native city. But your future wife said to you, 'If you go on wearing these trainers, I won't marry you.' So you got rid of them and put on a pair of shoes you bought at Harrods, for your wife-to-be or not-to-be said, 'If you get some shoes cheap in the sale, I won't marry you.' And she looked menacingly in the direction of the sale in question. You spent a lot of money on this pair of shoes and your wife was satisfied on the whole and for a while. And then she said, 'If you scuff your feet like that, you'll ruin your shoes.' Her remark made you nervous and you went on scuffing your feet like this and differently. But whatever method you adopted as you scuffed your feet, you *scuffed* them and that was ruining both your shoes and your relationship with your wife. Your happiness was going to rack and ruin, and you noticed this as you realised that the number of masked balls to which your wife paid her undivided attention and her whole body increased dramatically and even tragically, slowly reaching the point of no return and no eternal recurrence.

In other words, you will never see your wife again, even if you attend nine balls a week. So you do not go anywhere; instead, you twiddle your thumbs and scuff your feet which should not stand idle in view of the exploits triumphantly accomplished by your thumbs. For once, your feet are fully aware of what your thumbs accomplish round the clock. (Ah, those sleepless nights!) The same goes for your hands that are also in the know on account of their united thumbs. Of course you can suck these thumbs and you do now and then; yet you are hungry and have no wish to starve to death, for you like neither starvation nor death. Unlike your ancestors and Count Vronsky, you do not even dream of dying on a battlefield, thinking that neither your fatherland nor Christianity deserve your body. Only your children deserve it and you know you will be able to sacrifice your life only for your child or even for someone else's children. Only, you have no children and others do not deserve your body's veins, tendons, glands and lungs. It is true that they have got a lot of children, but like father, like son and daughter, you say to yourself and go on living in your corner and sometimes not far from Speaker's Corner. Someone speaks and you feel you are not alone in the world and even in Giordano Bruno's worlds that all have corners, speakers and parks; otherwise they would make no sense, making only a lot of nonsense, rubbish and rubbish bins. Are other worlds just rubbish bins? Can't we throw our Earth into them?

You are still hungry and have no money – like Charlie Chaplin's tramp. You are a tramp and also a vamp to some extent, due to your wife's fruitful lessons. She was a real vamp and often said, looking at herself in a mirror, 'The dress is simple and elegant, but I could vamp it up for evening wear with some stunning jewellery.' And she always held her promises; as a result, now you feel like drinking someone's blood. But you are not likely to drink it, given that, generally speaking, you are not very fond of humanity and therefore would not find appropriate blood – not at once anyway – even if you devoted all your time, your days, nights and mornings to this search. And you are thirsty and hungry to the point of willing to collapse somewhere so as not to walk any longer, let alone to live and dream. Let us not forget you have no money and it is logical in the light of what happened during and after your divorce. So you go to McDonald's because McDonald's spends $1.8 billion a year on advertising and for years you have seen its advertisements everywhere, even in your bathroom. Of course you know what is wrong with McDonald's. If you eat nothing but fast food for one month, this so-called diet will ruin your health. Of course your health is already ruined – by your wife, among other things, and men and women and children and dogs. But why should you ruin your own ruins? Aren't they beautiful? Chateaubriand might have fallen in love with them, had he been alive and not just immortal.

So you sing a song, for people like musicals and you wish to conquer their hearts and be loved by everybody – not in return, though. Not in return.

I shan't go to McDonald's

So as not to ruin my health.

Let them sue me and demand

An apology. No apologises.

I'll sue them in my turn, in return,

And our trial will trigger a large

Amount of soul searching.

A large amount of money – that's

What I'm looking for, for, for

I've no money in my purse, in my

Bank, in my pocket, under my pillow.

BOOKS

They say there is nothing in the universe except universal love and friendship, and that is why all sorts of *Millionen* embrace all the time. No one really works because no one has enough time for working. Only smokers have enough time for smoking and they go on polluting our atmosphere in spite of laws and death warnings on the packets: 'Smoking kills' and messages along these lines. But love prevails – not only love for cigarettes and their smokes; and human beings embrace fraternally and even lovingly, and sooner or later you are bound to fall in love with women and men, otherwise you are not a human being. Who are you? they ask and you answer, 'I'm a lone wolf but don't you worry – wolves also embrace every now and then, especially when they're not hungry.' But you *are* hungry and this is the problem you do not manage to solve, for all your efforts and the Big Macs you refuse to eat on the grounds that you love life and do not wish to die, poisoned by these Bigs and Macs and ketchups.

Those in charge of Macs Bigs say to you, 'If you've got any constructive criticism, we'd be glad to hear it.'

And you say to them, 'I don't wish to die. Do you know why? Because I've sinned a lot in my life. And I don't wish to die before I can purge my soul of these sins and also others that I might have committed without knowing it and them.'

'We understand you,' they say in unison. And they go on saying whatever they have to say. And they say it in unison, needless to say, otherwise no one would listen to them, thinking they do not agree and what they have to convey to the outside world is not the truth; it is just nothing. So they say, 'Can't you see this plate?'

'I can,' you say to them.

'Don't you see anything?'

'I see the plate,' you answer them.

'Don't you see this salad?'

'I do. So what?'

'Don't you know that salads are good for your health?'

'What? This lettuce leaf?'

'Exactly.'

'One leaf?'

'Precisely. You shouldn't eat too much of anything, be it lettuce or oysters.'

So you eat this lettuce leaf and the Big Mac from which you removed this leaf one minute ago. Yet you are hungry, notwithstanding the leaf, Mac and even Big that is not as big as all that; but it is really a Mac and you can feel it in your *stomac* – a hundred macs in Russian – and even in your intestines. You eat another Big Mac, starting with a lettuce leaf because you believe it is likely to pave the way for the poison you are about to swallow very fast – fast food, food fast– so as not to taste and realise anything. You realise nothing but your stomach and the rest of your digestive system are much more perspicacious than your mind that is rather slow on the uptake, especially in these matters. So you do not understand anything. Luckily for you, your feelings make up for the sluggishness of your thoughts and they let you know you are ill. And they explain to you that the Buy Nothing Day is an international awareness-raising campaign against needless levels of overconsumption and advertising. And they add that consumer culture is out of control, which means you are out of control too, for you belong to the group of consumers and their culture. But for consumers, there would be no culture of this kind and people would read Shakespeare and listen to Beethoven's piano trios.

What are you supposed to do if you are hungry and have no money? You have only a handful of dollars and so cannot go to a three-star restaurant where they serve molecular dishes. Actually you are so hungry you

really need chunks of cheese and meat and a lot of tuna chunks. And they speak to you about molecules. Luckily for you, you do not have enough money either for their molecules or their atoms that can also be found in their dishes, appetisers and drinks. You go to yet another McDonald's and eat a mouthful of Mac in spite of your illness, nausea and many attacks of diarrhoea. As you eat your Big you have yet another attack and it is unlikely that your forces could withstand this onslaught for very long. It makes you think about the 'shop-till-you-drop' mentality and what this does to the rest of the world, not least the environment.

The point is you often drop before you shop and there is a drop of four metres from your window to the ground; and you are not fond of these four metres. You are hungry and buy nothing with the exception of the Macs that make you sick and disgusted at the way some human beings treat their neighbours. They serve them a lettuce leaf and think this leaf is a symbol of their love and deep religious feelings. But then your train of thought derails and moves on to consider yourself and the way you have been living since your divorce. When did you buy the shoes you are wearing today? And what about your jacket and the rest of your clothing? You have not bought anything for two years so they should not speak to you about buy-nothing days and nights. 'Buy *everything'* would be more appropriate and even in order, but you confuse orders with disorders because you are hungry, unhappy and revolted against this, that and what and not. And they speak to you about the tyranny of brands and the book entitled *No Logo*. They say you should buy things for their usefulness and necessity, rather than for their status. And you remind them you have been wearing the same jacket for three years.

'How so?' they ask.

'That's how it is,' you answer.

'But you divorced your wife only two years ago.'

'So what?' you say to them.

'Did she tolerate this jacket for a whole year?'

'She did not. That's why she betrayed me so often. She always wears the latest fashions.'

'Why didn't you say to her she should refuse to be influenced by the advertising industry?'

'She wouldn't have listened.'

'You should enjoy things without owning them, such as public libraries.'

You go to a public library and choose a book, resolved to enjoy it to the utmost without owning it. You own neither the book nor its author; you do not even own its subject matter. The book is entitled *The Vocation of Man* and you read the following as you leaf through it: 'Shall I eat and drink only that I may hunger and thirst and eat and drink again, till the grave that is open beneath my feet shall swallow me up and I myself become the food of worms? Shall I beget beings like myself, that they too may eat and drink and die, and leave behind them beings like themselves to do the same as I have done?' Do you own this vocation? you ask yourself. And you answer that you neither own this vocation nor that man, for you do not eat and have no children. You drink the water you find in rivers and fountains but you do not eat anything with the exception of Donalds and Ducks. And that is not enough; and that may be defined as 'enough's enough'. So you define it like that and decide not to go to McDonald's any more and never ever. And ever never.

And then you say to yourself that you might beget a few children because you are badly in need of immortality, and you feel this need all the more strongly since you are in the very midst of mortality: you are in the streets of your native city. But what can you do in the middle of these streets? Of course there are many women in their middles, midsts and mists, but you do not know them and you are not handsome enough to appeal to their senses and sexes – to their sexual drives. These drives are prepared to drive them as far as Babylon, but you are not on their maps and therefore have to find somebody else, not necessarily in the middle of these streets. So you go to a five-star hotel and plant yourself on the sofa in front of the television. No, no – that is what you used to do when your wife was still within your reach despite her betrayals, emails and so on. Now you just plant yourself in the middle of the lobby and wait for a woman to come. Let her be a prostitute – it does not really matter. What counts is your son, the one you will have sooner or later if you sleep with a woman; even if you sleep with her in the middle of the hotel where no one seems to mind your presence or absence.

Meanwhile you think about your future children. And you say to yourself they will eat and drink first growths and Bordeaux and Burgundy wines. They will be much happier than you are, all the more so since you are not happy at all. Besides, you have to think about the future of mankind to which you belong, whatever you say; and for the time being you do not say anything. Nor do you say anything for the moment: you just think without thinking out loud. In a way, you think *in* loud and follow the proverbial train of thought that is neither a train nor a thought; it is just another variety of chaos. But you do not mind and that is what counts, considering

that something *should* count, otherwise life has no meaning. It does have a meaning and you know that; you know that for sure.

Once again you are in the middle of the public library to which you also came a few hours ago to enjoy what can be enjoyed for nothing or for something that is next to nothing. So you enjoy it to the utmost, as usual; it would be ridiculous to enjoy it to the least. You read something else and this something as well as else reflect the world and its paraphernalia: 'Thus we see already that we can never arrive at the real nature of things from without. However much we investigate, we can never reach anything but images and names. We are like a man who goes round a castle seeking in vain for an entrance, and sometimes sketching the façades.' You do not understand what this means and so leave the library and go out. You are a born empiricist and trust experiences much more than abstract thoughts and also abstract paintings: Kandinsky, for instance. So you leave the library behind, before and after, and go to the nearest castle, resolved to go round it, seeking an entrance. And you are resolved to find this entrance at *all costs*; yet you have no money. You find an entrance but before using it, you sketch the façades. You have never drawn anything in your life, not even your dog; but you draw these façades to understand what the book conveys to its readers and admirers. You sketch a few façades and hear a voice saying, 'What are you doing?'

'I'm sketching your façades.'

'What for?'

'To understand what the book says.'

'The Bible?'

'No.'

'Are there any books except the Bible?'

'Yes.'

'Where?'

'In public libraries.'

'Not in *my* library, though.'

'What's in *your* library?'

'The Book. In thirteen languages. And *The Winter's Tale*.'

COMMUNISTS, CAPITALISTS AND BREAKFASTS

If you keep on reading books, someone is bound to tell you it is to no purpose because there is only one book, the Book, and nature itself is also a book: the winter, the summer. One wonders if nature is part of the Book or not, if it belongs in the Old Testament or the New One. You read nature – even if you are in the middle of the Library of Alexandria – and say to yourself as you read it, 'It is A, it is B, it is ABC. It is Hell, it is Purgatory, here's Dante and Beatrice.' All right, all right, nature is part of everything and so is the Book; but you read and quote the latter and often overlook the former as if it was a mistake on the part of God Who, incidentally, makes no mistakes and neglects neither nature nor the Book where every comma was dictated by Him in the middle of the Big Bang. Between the Bang and the Big a few seconds came and went, and during these seconds the Book was written, corrected and also published.

Our hero's host was drunk and so our hero thought that in the morning, after a night of sound sleep, he would be kicked out of the hospitable castle, like Chaplin's tramp who encountered a multimillionaire at a railway station. But so far the castle had been more than hospitable, given the quantity and quality of wine consumed by both the host and his guest. There was no hostess, though, for the host was neither married nor fathered: he had no children. That is what he said, by the way: 'I'm not fathered,' meaning he had no children. Of course he was drunk and his words did not always mean what they meant, and anyway his gestures happened to look and sound far more meaningful than his words, especially when he stumbled and fell down and also up: somehow he often managed to fall up so that one person – his guest on this particular occasion – had to climb a ladder and remove his host from the ceiling. (Fred Astaire, no less!) Anyway, every time the host fell there was a big bang and that bang was almost as articulate as the Big Bang Itself.

The host also said, 'I'm not mothered either,' and this time the guest did not catch his meaning. He caught his host's body as it began to fall once again after swinging to and fro, up and down – for a while, once in a while; but he did not catch his meaning. Luckily for everybody, the host was generous enough to explain all his

meanings and said almost at once and even on the spot – he was on the floor once more – 'I'm sometimes a woman, you know. I don't need women to father children and grandchildren. But I want neither to father nor mother them. I don't like children, you know, even if they're grand. Do you? Do you like grandeur in this domain?'

The guest said he did not like grandeur at all because 'I'm a democrat,' he said suddenly.

'Are you a communist too?' asked the host.

'No. I don't like their world.'

'Why?'

'A dullness and uniformity would extinguish all human diversity and excitement.'

'Do you think we're diverse? We're excited but not diverse.'

'I beg to differ,' said the guest, but he could neither beg nor differ: he was drunk too.

Upon awakening, he found himself – like Chaplin's tramp – in a luxurious bed and realised he was surrounded by objects of all kinds; and all these kinds were objects and to some extent they were kind. Why? Because they were not things in themselves: they belonged to you and him – to the guest, in other words, and we always say 'in other words', even if we utter one word and point to one object only. So the so-called tramp pointed to all these things and said out loud, 'I'm surprised, I'm surprised, I'm alive. And life is a big Christmas surprise, if not a gift, because there are so many things around us and they're not in themselves, not at all. In other words, they're not secretive. They tell us this and that. This thing over there tells me it's a chest of drawers and I accept this definition because I know it's a chest of drawers. And I'm surprised and marvel at what I see and can touch. Isn't it a miracle after all? I'm alive and so is the world. And the world could have died many years ago. It could have remained unborn or even unununununborn. It might have been nipped in the bud, in the mud or in the bird many millennia ago. Don't they say the world was born from a bird, from an egg? Or from the primeval mud? Anyway, the world's a real stick-in-the-mud. And we're *stuck* in the mud.'

And then he began to worry about the state of affair he was about to come across as he was walking towards his host's bedroom and the living room where an English breakfast was to await him upon his awakening. But he thought his host was bound to throw him out – or kick him out, rather – because he was sober now or rather teetotal or coffeetotal. In other words, in other worlds. His host was in a morning world now and so his guest might be thrown out, down and up at any minute, for his host must have seen Chaplin's movie many times: there was a huge screen in his bedroom and kinoroom and kinetic-energy room as well. So he – the guest, not the host – was wandering whether he would finish his English and American breakfast before being thrown anywhere – down the drain, among other places and drain and downs. Of course he said to himself, 'I'd rather be thrown *up* the drain, *up* the down and *up*, just *up*,' but no one listened to him, for he was speaking to himself. And had he had been speaking to servants, they would have said to him, 'We don't listen to what our masters say because we're their slaves. And slaves have no ear for music, languages, gossip, Ossip, and so on. We mean we've no ear for Ossip Mandelstam's poetry. If someone reads his poems out loud, we don't hear them.'

So they would not have heard him, even if he had recited the *Divina Commedia* either in the original or in an English translation adorned with a lot of commentaries of many kinds. Anyway, he ate his breakfast with pleasure and a bit of gluttony, for he was still hungry like any Chaplin hero with the exception of his king who criticises America. Why does he criticise it instead of admiring Obama? (My dictionary says, 'Osama.' Not Hosanna, though.) Because he was poisoned by hamburgers and other burgers: there are many of them, as many as hams and hums. ('Hum' means 'cad' in Russian.) Even more, according to specialists and eaters and gluttons and drinkers and drunkers.

He began to worry but his host made his appearance – and not *her* appearance, contrary to what one might think in the light of what and so on – and our guest's and hero's fears vanished into other airs because there are many of them; as many as drunkards and tankards. So they began to talk – the host and his guest – and the host did not say at once, 'Bugger off, will you?' Nor did he say it later, after breakfast, after the first talk followed by the second talk and the third one. So the guest calmed down and realised he could count on his host not only in the domain of beds and breakfasts, but also in that of dinners and enjoyments. It is true that a bevy of bathing call-girls did not pay them a visit and they had no opportunity to admire female nakedness at close range – at least not in the course of the first days and hours they spent together in the castle where our host and guest were to live and spend whatever they could spend and spare for several months. No, no – but there was the rest, the rest of the earthly delights: wine, food and so on. And so forth, which does not always happen; at least it does not happen *automatically*.

They talked about this and that, and the host said, 'I've lived many lives, you know. Did you know that?'

'I didn't,' said the guest.

'Do you want me to tell you what this is all about? If I don't, you won't know anything at all.' At this point the guest realised his host was drunk once again. Actually he was always drunk and it was pointless and even ridiculous to say 'once again' because it was always, always the case, and what is always the case does not triumphantly return to life, consciousness, the unconscious and feelings of remorse. So the host began to talk, longing to put his guest in the picture about what had happened many years ago, in the course of the Big Bang. And the guest would interrupt him in mid-sentence, shouting, 'Here's mud in your eye!'

THE FIRST LIFE

You know, I was born one day, once upon a time, twice upon a time. So were you, I suppose, but I was born thrice upon a time and have no idea if this is your case or someone else's case, adventure and life. Not only was I born; I also attended the performance of the Big Bang. It sounded like a series of bangs; it also *looked* like a series of bangs and one couldn't do anything about it. I wished to do *something* about it because I said to myself, 'Creation is a big mistake, not a big bang. Why should we live? What for? Anyway, we've eaten the fruit and all the apples and peaches we could find in other people's gardens, within their estates. The same goes for God and *His* estate. And He wasn't really pleased with our work that term. Never mind. This is my first life and the first Big Bang doesn't interest me at all. Bing, bang, bung. Bug, bug, bug. Actually, if I remember rightly, there was a serpent, you know. There was a huge serpent or rather a circle, a rectangle. I said to myself, 'This is a rectangle and this rectangle has nothing to do either with bags or bins. Rubbish bins, I mean. Or rubbish bugs. And this square is an egg from which everything will come in due course. A sphere, you know. You just have to pick up a hammer – not a sickle, mind you – and split this egg in the middle or anywhere else. It doesn't really matter where you split it. Do you know I'm a wonderful cook? Do you know what I do? I split aubergines in half and cover them with breadcrumbs. That's what you're supposed to do with the primeval egg. That's what I did with it, by the way. So I'm God. Do you realise that? Have you already caught my meaning and other thoughts of mine?

So there was the egg and I stood in front of it with my hammer. And there was a serpent by my side but I paid no attention to it because you shouldn't pay attention to serpents. Nor should you take notice of them because they're poisonous, all of them. I don't know any serpents outside the kingdom of poisons. And this kingdom and its inhabitants poison our lives, all of them. Even my first life was poisoned by one of the representatives of their species. There are many species and many representatives and all of them poison you now and then; once in a while and all the time. You're poisoned, you know, although you must have lived only one life. But one life is enough for their poison because they take every opportunity to poison you. Even if you live only once, as Kreisler says, you get poisoned – no question about it. By the way, do you know this waltz? We live only once and so forth. No? All right, we'll listen to it later on, later one, later two.

This serpent gave birth to an unauthorised fruit and I ate it, believe it or not. I can't say it was really delicious because it was *un*really delicious and in this case – there are so many cases and they're worlds, you know – unreality is far more interesting than reality and the real world where we're talking now. Of course I appreciate your intelligence and good looks, but I can assure you the fruit I ate was more delicious than our talk, especially since you don't talk too much. Actually you talk very little because you must have lived only one life or half a life. But that doesn't really matter – you have everything before you, behind you and so on. Even your future is somewhere, even if you don't know exactly where it is. Alas, we don't *always* know the whereabouts of our futures. I know all my former lives and I can talk about them like Scheherazade or anybody else. But I don't know my future adventures. I don't see them face to face, you know. I see them back to back from time to time. Not face to face, not brow to brow, whatever St Paul says and does. Is he still on his way to Damascus? Have you been to Damascus? We should go there together. Not today, though. Perhaps tomorrow. Another glass? Another wine?

I slept with this serpent, you know; I slept with her as one sleeps with a woman. And I made love to her, with her and even with her relatives, believe it or not. You just have to make love to serpents, with them, on them, behind them, otherwise there'll be no eggs. And if there are no eggs, there's no world. The Big Bang isn't enough. Actually and eventually, the Big Bang is an egg you should split with your hammer, sickle and whatever. And the world will come into leaf, into bloom, into play. Such was my first life – I was splitting eggs, you know. I'm an egg-splitter and you know that already. But you know nothing about my second life. Should I tell you about it? By all means, by all means? Is that what your gestures and grimaces mean?

THE SECOND LIFE

So I was standing above an egg, on a mountain; and the egg was in a dale and a vale. A cloud that floats on high o'er vales and hills, you know. I was this cloud and the egg and the world were down below. I might have let them go because they wished to leave us behind. And it's better to be left behind than before. Do you know that? Of course you do, of course, of course. You're left in the lurch and you like this lurch much more than the world into which you may be projected or thrown, as Heidegger puts it. And I can assure you it's better not to be thrown anywhere, even if you're thrown somewhere where there are somes and wheres. And this is the world; such is life. It's better to avoid both, once and for all. We missed the mark, didn't we? We missed the boat and the point – on the day of our birth. Let's hope we won't miss anything on the day of our death, on his night, so to speak.

Let's go back to my second life which was full of adventures and ventures, apart from eggs and hammers and mummies. I don't want you to think I was fond of eggs and hammers only. And mummies, and pappies. There've been many loves in the centuries that are about to tell the stories of my lives, deaths and rebirths. I was a shepherd once and even twice, to tell the truth. Back to nature, so to speak. Do you know what capitalism means? And alienation? And Marx with his theories, practices and revolutions? He was partly right, wasn't he? At least his spectres and ghosts were, if I remember rightly. All right, they were right. So what? What so?

In a post-industrial world, classes decompose and degenerate. They neither compose – like Beethoven – nor generate, like generators. People no longer feel their class as the primary aspect of their identity, assuming they have any. I mean, identity and people who have something like identity, not like money that doesn't count unless you count it. So I was a class and therefore belonged to the class of shepherds. I liked this class, you know. I had herds and I just shepherded them so they stayed with me, around me, and didn't wander everywhere, as was their wont. They didn't wander and I was glad and even happy, for a human being *can* be happy, whatever they say. And they're legion, I'm sorry to say. Are *you* sorry? I'm often sorry.

I felt my class, my glass, my muttons – not only my Moutons Rothschild, you know – and I was happy in my second life on account of the fresh air I was breathing round the clock, square the clock. Square the hole, round the peg. Is that what life is about? Or is that just a vicious yet square circle? You might call it 'eternal recurrence'. To tell the truth, I couldn't care less about it, about anything recurrent. Enough's enough, as they say. And even if *they* don't say that, I say that and it and he and she and Natalia. I was in love with her at some point that was situated in another life of mine. I don't really know if it was my former life or the future one, but I do know it was a life of mine and not a life of yours, whatever this life of yours may be or has been. Another glass? Help yourself.

THE THIRD LIFE

For a while I was happy with Natalia, you know. You can't be happy beyond this while or any other while, so I was happy but it didn't last because she had a husband and I wasn't her husband nor any *other* woman's husband or even lover. I was alone in my room and she came to me once in a while. I met her somewhere and my friends might have had *something* to do with it, with our wonderful lovemaking. Wonderful, wonderful. A nine months' wonder. You know, I was a shepherdess once. I don't remember if it was the fourth life or the fifth one. One of my lives anyway. One of my deaths perhaps. I don't know. I don't remember anything except my life, the one I'm living now. I'm somewhere in the middle, like Dante, but I'm not Dante because I was in love with Natalia, not with Beatrice. What am I talking about? I'm talking about my third life. In my youth I was good at maths. Well, I'm waiting for my second youth now. I might remember all my lives, all their numbers, figures and digits. And I'd like to find the equation of my life, of life in general.

Here's the equation of my life: love = unlove, death = undeath. All is 'un' sometimes, you know. Today I am in and not un. That's why I talk so much. She always went back to her husband and other lovers. Never mind, I'm a shepherdess today. This is probably my real third life, not an unreal life of no importance. Let us live till tomorrow or Doomsday. Which do you prefer? As you wish and like it. Tomorrow I'll live my fourth and only life. Do you know that friendship is more important than love? Do you know *that*? Do you know why? Because there's no passion, no sexual drive that drives you crazy, to the Moon, to the Sun and other planets, stars and stripes. To every stripe, you know.

You'll eat my oysters and the caviar I have in my house that is my castle, by the way. You're my friend because of that and other gifts I'll shower on you tomorrow and in the future, generally speaking. Our friendship is a disinterested slice of life. Do you like this slice? Isn't it better and more delicious than a slice of smoked salmon? Of course it is and I hope you realise not only that, but also many other things taking place in my house and home, alias my castle and palace. She had a beauty spot, you know. Do you want me to show you where it was, is and will be till Doomsday? Here, here, right here. Natalia, Natalia, Natalia. Some vodka?

Do you like children? Let us adopt a child, our future child, son and grandson. Let us adopt our future and immortality, let alone eternity. Let us let alone everything except our friendship. Wonderful, isn't it? One life's wonder. One soul in two bodies, isn't it? Aren't they? Where's this soul of ours, I wonder? Do you wonder? You don't, I can see that. What's the matter with you? Why are you frowning at me, clearly annoyed? Yes, you're *clearly* annoyed. I see that very *clearly* unless I'm mistaken. I'm not, I'm not, I'm *not*.

A COMMENT

'Can I comment upon your speech?'

'Of course you can. You're my friend, aren't you? My dearest friend.'

'You slept with my wife.'

'What?'

'You should say "who", not "what". Natalia was my wife. The beauty spot.'

'She was beautiful, wasn't she?'

'She will be till Doomsday.'

'Can't you see her doom? She's betrayed many husbands and lovers. As guilty as sin, as beautiful as sin.'

'What am I supposed to do?'

'I beg your pardon?'

'Shall I kill you?'

'I beg to differ.'

'What *should* I do?'

'You should drink to my health. And wealth.'

'Should I?'

'Now, if you'd all please raise your glasses – here's mud in your eye! – I'd like to propose a toast to our friendship. Like Montaigne and his friend. What's his name? *Servitude volontaire*. Friends are voluntary servants of each other.'

'I'm not your friend.'

'Champagne corks popped as the guests drank a toast to the happy couple. I'll go and fetch a bottle of champagne. You should hear a few corks. You're my guest after all. And a friend of course, as a matter of course.'

'I think I'll kill you on the spot, then and there, here and now. Another beauty spot.'

'No, no, no, no, no, no, no.'

'Why not?'

'You'll repent, you'll repent.'

'I will not.'

'Serpent! Prethee, no more; cease; thou know'st / He dies to me again, when talk'd of: sure, / When I shall see this gentleman, thy speeches / Will bring me to consider that which may / Unfurnish me of reason.'

'You kissed her, embraced her, slept with her, on her, beneath her thighs. You didn't awake with her. Never.'

'I didn't, I didn't. I swear I didn't.'

'You didn't go with her to Hyde Park, Central Park, Gorky Park.'

'I didn't, I didn't.'

'I'll kill you all the same.'

'Should all despair

That have revolted wives, the tenth of mankind

Would hang themselves. Do you wish to hang yourself?'

'I do not.'

'Physic for't there's none;

It is a bawdy planet, that will strike

Where 'tis predominant; and 'tis powerful, think it,

From east, west, north, and south; be it concluded,

No barricado for a belly.'

'A barricade, a barricade.'

'All right, a barricade. Here it is. Some vodka? It's a summer's tale, you know. Not the winter's one. Some vodka? Some summer vodka? No, vodka should always be winter vodka for me. I wonder why the Russians often drink their vodka *chambrée*.'

THE SECOND MONTH

To go, to go, to go somewhere. There are no other worlds, no Brunos and Giordanos and Coriolanuses. But there are mountains somewhere and these mountains are women's refuges, men's refuges. There are shepherds and shepherdesses; and there are herds. Where are they? They breathe and walk somewhere, perhaps under your very nose. You are under your very nose too. You will eat herbs and insects. And you will welcome visions and women and devils and whiles. She will have to use all her feminine wiles to get me to forgive her. Why should I? I should nothing and nothing is nothing, not everything, contrary to what our Taoists think. Let them think what they wish, even if they do not wish this and that. Sometimes I get the feeling they wish and accept anything because it is life and nothing else. Not even death, contrary to what life may think. Life should not think; life should live.

THE THIRD YEAR AND LIFE

The view from the top of the mountain is breathtaking. Yet I can breathe and my lungs are full of fresh air; nothing and no one can take this air from my lungs. Filled to the brim, so to speak; so to do. I do, I do. I dance on this top, on this mountain, on this fountain of youth. On this Purgatory. I dance with water, air, stairs and stars. I have forgiven everybody, forgotten everything except this and that. And now I am living through this, and this is that, whatever they say. I say that this is that and vice versa. I have come back; she has not. She has, she has. She must be dead by now. By and by. By and by a woman turns up and she turns out to be my wife. I turn her this way and that and find the beauty spot I have not felt for many years, summers and winters. But this is a summer's tale and I have found her at last. I have found her tale, her last email, her sail, her boat. Our ship is sailing to China, or Germany. To anywhere. What counts is sailing, not emailing. I count, count, count. I count out loud from one to nine; from nine to three.

Drinking this most beautiful air,

My nostrils distended like cups,

Without future, without reminiscences,

Thus I sit here, O

PROPS, CRUTCHES

At some point you say to yourself you can no longer trust this point or count on it to help you when you lose your equilibrium or equanimity. If a point was able to utter words and carry out exploits, it would tell you: ‘You’re too old now. You need another prop – perhaps even a pair of crutches. Do you remember your childhood at all? Your first childhood, not the second one, not the third one, not the one you’re in now, for all your wrinkles and twitches. In your first childhood you broke your leg playing football and were on crutches for six weeks. Then, after your wife’s death and burial (your second adulthood), you needed an emotional crutch for more than three years, almost a decade. You used it as a social prop as well: but for its unconditional help, you would have burst into tears in every theatre, in every ballroom worthy of its name. You might even have collapsed on the floor, your face contorted with pain and forthcoming death. But death has never come as if disliking your manners, your boorishness and untidy appearance; and even your smell. Many earthlings do not get too close to their bathrooms for fear of losing their stink, their smelly feet and other barriers that seem to ensure safety and eternity.

The Bible is also a prop, an emotional and physical crutch you can trust in your hour of need, in the hour of any deed you are bent on carrying out at all cost. (In an hour indeed, as they call H-Hours.) ‘How are the mighty fallen’ is one of the props you comment upon in order to squeeze as much encouragement from it as you can. It is not the word ‘fallen’ you fall back upon as you try and unravel the mystery embedded in this avowal. The angle you choose at first allows you to judge this observation from *your* point of view and therefore, in the twinkling of an eye, you grow as mighty as a king depicted in the Old Testament. All right, you might have fallen at the end of the road, but for a while, for a few decades, you were almost as mighty as the Almighty. (Does Al really matter?) I recall a king or a royal prince whose body and soul were hanging from a branch – a picture I saw in my mind a few seconds ago. I can still enjoy its outlines, and as I go on enjoying them I realise I spotted it (the drawing) in the book where all and sundry can find Doré’s Bible illustrations. This book lives on a shelf I can contemplate at ease from where I usually sit at my writing table, right in front of my computer.

I picked the book up, opened it and leafed through it until my eyes fell on a tree, on a branch, on a human body and on a mule. ‘And Absalom rode upon a mule, and the mule went under the thick boughs of a great oak, and his head caught hold of the oak, and he was taken up between the heaven and the earth.’ Whose head caught hold of the oak? The mule’s? Luckily for me, I was able to consult the engraving that showed me the mule peacefully

fading into the background, whereas Absalom was still hanging on the tree like Judas or some other traitor. ‘What a pity I’m not my mule!’ he must have exclaimed right before Joab’s three darts perforated his heart forever, for all eternity. He had no time to think about mules in terms of the symbols we lean upon to decipher whatever lies beyond appearances. Had he not been assassinated by Joab, on the spot, he might have realised he ought to have chosen an ass to fulfil his mission in this world of ours. Apart from being ridiculous and devoid of symbolic overtones, mules may be mistaken for those who agree to carry illegal drugs into another country in return for payment. And you would not ride such a mule, would you?

But you would ride a she-ass because she reminds you of Jesus Christ who rode her on his way to Jerusalem. Besides, if you do ride this symbolic animal, you are sure to be taken for an imitator of Jesus Christ or even a new Messiah. Alas, Absalom had no time to go into details and even the basics of history escaped him as he went on clinging to his favourite branch. Even the basics of esoteric lore were all Greek to him; or all Sanskrit. He did not know that in India the ass was the steed of death-gods, especially Nairrita, warden of the land of the dead; otherwise he would have crushed his enemies in no time at all.

Getting rid of your enemies is one of the fundamental tasks you face almost every day and night, even if you spend them at home, neglecting your duties, your office and secretaries. Your wife often becomes a spoke in your wheel – evil incarnate, as you put it in your diaries unless you are afraid of keeping your notes in your desk for fear of your wife’s snooping and the conclusions she is sure to jump to upon perusal of them. You speak of Spinoza, Leibniz and Hindus, but your wife finds herself because she is always looking for herself either in mirrors or in the world that, according to her conjectures, is HER mirror and other people’s horror. So, from time to time, you think of asses that might help you along the road you took one day, one night, as you left your mother’s womb you know by heart (and you are not the only person who knows your mother’s womb, for your mother is all mothers and Wagners and Goethes). You embark upon roads, adventures and your asses jog or scamper along as they do their best to spot our God amidst the idols that everyone sees everywhere, even in deserts. And everyone asks himself, herself and everybody: ‘Is it the Almighty or just an idol?’ They all pray, just in case, and they wish every case could pray for them too, otherwise none of their prayers will be answered either by return of post or by any other return. Most of the time this case (or any other case) is returned neither by post nor by word of mouth unless you see the mouth that Samuel Beckett created for his play entitled *Not I*. I would have entitled my play *Not Others*. And also *No Mothers*. What did they offer us?

You might and probably should ride a she-ass because you are an ass yourself, and soul mates count in our history and also in everyday routine where tins of all kinds have their say. They say 'tin' and you open a can of soup or a Chinese dish that reminds you of Taoists who are far more helpful than any dish, any ready meal you can purchase any day, anywhere. And your ass, if any, rides you to God or at least to Jerusalem where you will find whatever you wish including God and friends. You are on your ass's back and the cars you see all around you do not count: they are getting them anywhere, whoever these gettings and goings are and will be till doomsday.

Your ass makes a strange noise and jerks to a halt. What is the noise you heard? Doesn't matter. Why did your ass jerk to a halt? Did he see the Devil in the flesh? In what flesh? In the Devil's flesh? But often the Devil makes his/her appearance in God's flesh. And then you embark upon a discussion with your favourite theologian. You say to him: 'Do you think God has flesh?'

'All I know refers to His beard. He has no beard.'

'But does He have flesh?'

'He does. But He doesn't have its way.'

'What way *does* He have?'

'He has nothing except Himself.'

You ride on your ass and give no thought to theological discussions. You cannot say (and you do not say) that this ride of yours has any parallel to Jesus' return to Jerusalem. (Your ride is not even perpendicular to this event.) At some point you might remember both our Absalom and his tree – the one on which he failed to hang himself. And you might feel yourself on the horns of a dilemma: Should I continue my ride or stop forever? Of course you cannot stop *forever*, whatever decisions you make either on the spur of the moment or in the course of your immortality: even eternity is not motionless as one often presumes. Eternity moves away from time, from its boisterous, vociferous child that leaves no one in peace, not even its mother. If you leaf through all the books you can lay your hands on in your library, sooner or later you will light upon an image where time sucks eternity's breasts, for time does not need any second childhood: it will remain a baby until the definitive end of history.

But you are not at its end. What is more, you are not even at your wits' end as if no one and nothing have ever driven you to this extremity; not even human history. You may wonder where you are and what animal you are riding as you cross one wood after another without being tempted to put an end to your wanderings and sufferings by grasping the branch of Scriptures' fame. What are you driving and aiming at? What are you hoping for? Only a huge

quantity of hope can incite you to go on with this rigmarole to the bitter end where only odds and ends await you.

> *There is a tree that excludes all its potential colleagues from the picture of the world where we live, die and rise from the dead; in dribs and drabs, not all of us at once. Its name is Yggdrasil (can I memorise it? Should I? Can't I live my death without names?) and Germanic people regard this ash-tree as the World Tree (the World Tree Centre). The universe spread out in the shade of its branches, not on them, above them; not hanging from them either. A lot of mythological creatures took shelter in that area and from their brains and bellies all living things derived their beings and fates. It was eternally green because it drew the power of life and renewal from the spring, Urd. (In my youth I drew the power of life and renewal from the Moscva River.) Yggdrasil drew life from its waters and through them gave life to the universe. (A fateful blunder.)*

I must have spent my whole life under this tree, twiddling my thumbs, twiddling a knob on my remote control, looking at, looking for, listening to. My soul needs no legs to walk up and down this tree to make sure the link established by Chinese emperors and shamans a long time ago is still on the agenda. I switch from heaven to earth at will, calling it 'their marriage' or even 'my marriage', for the freedom I experience has no bounds and consequently allows me to travel from Hell to Paradise as Jesus did many centuries ago. Some theologians affirm he carries out this ritual every other decade and I am advised to follow His example, otherwise my legs might grow too lazy, not to say paralytic, which would preclude them from leaving Paradise at short notice for a new fashion parade they announced in the lowest circle of Hell.

Then I get rid of my visions, illusions, and set off on my up-and-down journey along the trunk of the tree I seem to have espoused for the sake of the experiment on which my life, death, karma and dharma depend daily and even hourly. I climb and fall so as not to spend too much time on staircases, trusting banisters that give way to their own laziness and do nothing to keep me from falling to the bottom of myself where I discover the bottom of the cosmos, as they usually say, affirm and write. Actually I discover nothing at all with the exception of hunger pangs that I do my utmost to placate and pacify until my next visit to the lavatory – a real problem for an old man. And no old man knows exactly when he may need either a lavatory or a bathroom; nor do *they* know anything about his needs and deeds. 'What are you

doing?' they might shout now and then, but it is too late and I feel duty bound to go down on my knees and remove the vestiges of my shame and horror, to restore my honour.

On your way to your bathroom you often feel yourself on the horns of a trilemma: whether to desecrate your floor, your clothes or your soul. You opt for your soul's salvation and the rest goes into the washing machine that grumbles, jangles your nerves, and you say to your colleagues and relatives, 'Please excuse my stomach rumbling – I haven't eaten all day.'

The visits I describe in minute detail prevent you from choosing the right tree you are to climb or fell or worship to the end of your life. You choose to walk it up and down to make sure your union with heaven and earth is in good working and walking order. Now I need to twiddle my legs (not my thoughts or hair) to make sure I am in touch with heaven, earth, mirth and whatever they call death. Am I supposed to touch death with my toes? I can say my legs are out of control so my toes cannot reach death, even if they wiggle everywhere, even under the earth.

They wiggle, wiggle and my coffin makes its appearance as if I was prepared to do anything connected with coffins, mourners and wreaths. They kiss me on the forehead, flouting the cancer I keep all along my body to scare crows, vultures and Napoleons away. Neither vultures nor Spartan dogs are about to maul you as if allergic to your condition that cannot be defined unless one says to one's superior, 'He's in no condition at all.' And that is the best condition you can dream of, for every condition is conditioned and so on and so forth. So you fly like a flock of birds whose knowledge of hunters is rather limited. Pif-paf-pif-paf-pif-paf-pif-paf. No birds, no Greeks, no esoteric knowledge. That is what it amounts to:

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⊤

You can go up even if you see ┬. You see ↑

You go up ------

The point is they praise highly the smoke issuing from your funeral pyre, and they go so far as to measure it to find out how close you get to angels and their master. So you begin to take care of branches and even trunks as you construct your funeral pyre, your future smoke, your communication with the celestial army that is prepared to save you from tortures, provided you go up in smoke high enough to tickle their bodies, to caress their crotches. Everything in the universe boils down to caresses and that is what they call love, for want of another, more appropriate appellation. You caress a crotch and suddenly a rainbow appears as if nothing had ever happened. It seems to bless everything, even concentration camps that cannot and should not be blessed in the dimmest corner of creation, of our mental and physical confusion. 'How come? How come? How come?' resounds under and above clouds and you give no answer because there is no answer to atrocities, even if you succeed in minimising their effect by saying: 'Trocities, rocities, ocities, you know.' And then you begin to shout 'Why?' And when they ask you what you mean, you show them the tree in the middle of which you hang as you wait for several bullets or cannons that are sure to wipe you from the face of the earth. But what do you care for her face? It is *your* face you should nurse day and night, looking at yourself in mirrors or looking at mirrors in yourself. And then you add another branch to your funeral pyre and activate your remote control and also your remote protection and resurrection. You watch the flames and obediently (you press a few buttons) they go higher and higher, and you see your own figure in the smoke that grovels under the Almighty's toes in search of forgiveness and a new élan vital; or a sleeping pill.

Life goes on and of course you are tempted not to follow all these 'ons' which can only lead you astray: only through meditation and a straight path can you reach what they call nirvana. Sometimes they do not call it anything, your gurus, and you just sit in front of them listening to their breath, to the air they inhale and exhale more or less rhythmically. You ask them, 'What's this rhythm?'

They answer, 'This rhythm corresponds to the breathing of planets and stars.'

'I don't care about stars, planets, comets and their dust. Could you please cure my legs?'

'What's wrong with them?'

'I can't walk as far as the highest branch of my tree.'

'Don't you worry – in an hour or so you'll be put out of your misery by lots of enemies.'

‘I don’t have any.’

‘They have many.’

There are painters who study their techniques either in Moscow or in New York, and after a while they show you your inner self for which you have been looking all your conscious and unconscious life. All you see amounts (or descends, descends) to this:

MISERY

exit

You look for the exit – feverishly, as one might presume, even if this one is neither Doctor Livingstone nor the journalist whose name escapes everybody, even if this body is a doctor himself. You go to Africa, walk barefoot for miles and miles to find a doctor who can remove your blisters from your happiness. They say, ‘New shoes always give you blisters.’

You answer: ‘My old shoes are full of holes so they also give me blisters.’

‘So you should walk barefoot.’

‘My feet are also full of holes.’

‘Do they give you blisters?’

‘They do.’

‘At least your life is submitted to the laws of logic,’ they answer.

What is life? And what are the laws of logic in the framework of life, assuming it has any frame? You look at a naked life, at a quantity of raw material in some museum or other. You ask yourself, ‘Is it life I’m looking at?’ An attendant comes to your rescue and says, ‘This exhibit is not finished yet. We’re looking for a frame.’

‘Do you need to frame it?’

‘We do.’

‘Do you think life is framed?’

‘It should be, otherwise it’s not worth living.’

‘Do you live your life?’

‘I think I do.’

‘Where’s your frame?’

If you insist (and you seldom do, given your experience in the domain of communication), attendants invite you somewhere and show you their wives, children and fridges, saying, ‘They’re our frame and fame.’ And then a political discussion takes place, if you are in Europe, not in the United States where they live, let live, let die, let relive, let resurrect everything and everyone; where they let, let, let, let. And if you ask them, ‘What’s life?’ The Americans answer, ‘Democracy.’

‘And what’s the American way of life?’ you ask.

‘Let, let, let, let,’ they answer. And then they build a wall around these lets.

The same question is asked again and again: What is life? Life is a sacrifice, they say, and they show how this sacrifice works because there is no point in speaking *abstractedly* about sacrifice: you need a few torn-to-shreds bodies to realise how important it is to get rid of life before it is taken from you. If you die in your sleep, in your bed, your relatives might think you have been designated as a ‘Chosen One’. In picture galleries these Ones caper in the midst of angels or even sit by the Almighty’s side, looking radiantly at the painter whose honourable task enjoins him and her to show us the sentiment of bliss or joy of which we have a vague, inconspicuous idea, spending our time mostly on the horns of dilemmas, trilemmas and quintilemmas. But actually these peaceful dreamers are conveyed to Hell where a battalion of devils roast them in ovens and baste their mortal (moral) remains in oil and lemon.

So you listen to Tertullian’s admonition (the word ‘martyrs’ resounds in it even more triumphantly than in days of yore) and ask your friends to set your body on a tree stump with a calf’s intestines round your neck instead of a rope. Your best friend stands behind you and says, ‘I give you to God,’ while lashing you mercilessly with his long, inflexible whip. In the long run the soft intestines turn into a tough rope looped round a young tree they are holding behind you. Your worst friend takes a spear and does his best to pierce your immortal (immoral) remains through. The young tree shoots upwards, with your remains or what remains of them hanging from it. And once again your eternal soul remembers Absalom and his disgraceful death.

As if there were nothing else to recall, as if your destiny’s call could only lead you to a tree (to the Tree of Death), to a mule or rather its back, its buttocks and a man whose life is

about to be switched off like an ordinary computer. You press a button or shoot an arrow and a human body falls in front of you on the grass or a number of stones, pebbles. And not one single stone has any characteristic of the philosopher's stone which might reveal to you your real identity. It is not for nothing that alchemists say even now, today, in the 21st century: 'I'm the stone, I'm my own stone.' Of course they are misunderstood, misinterpreted and a drunken or insensitive oaf giggles and says, 'I see, you're stone-deaf. Can you hear what I'm saying to you? Or are you already stone-dead?' And a Freudian broaches the subject focused on death and his instinct. And try as you may, you will never make him understand it is the *philosopher's* stone you have in mind. A Jungian, on the other hand, would catch your meaning at once: no time to twinkle your eye to measure his speed of reaction. But if you really feel like twinkling your eye to pay homage to time and the representative of Jung's squad, he will recite to you an excerpt from an alchemical treatise.

> *When the Mixt is dissolved, because of the weakness of the corruptible elements which compose it, the ethereal part abandons it, and returns to its native country. Then derangement, disorder and confusion take place in the parts of the corpse, because of the absence of that which preserved order in it. Death, corruption, take possession of it, until this matter receives anew the celestial influences, which reuniting the scattered Elements, will render them suitable for a new generation.*

If you are eager to pursue your investigation into the nature of the stone, your own nature and discomfiture, you may question the elect on the subject of the Mixt that seems to decompose before your very eyes. No matter how slowly you twinkle them, you see now a substance and now its mortal remains which may return to its original version, provided the celestial influences are kind enough to tackle the problem and put everything in order. But your guru departs without so much as a by-your-leave and you are left in your guessing games' company. You have no alternative but to attribute the richness of human life to this notion, the Mixt, where you find multifarious pieces of beauty and multi-faceted snatches of knowledge. They endow you with a vision you have been looking for ever since you heard the word the 'Grail' (in your adolescence, in all probability). It is harmony you are attracted to in the course of your ride – no matter what animal or car you are driving this time – so that you use the analogical method and even re-read John Duns Scotus who, at some point, seems to have given a helping hand to Heidegger.

But first and foremost you are struck by the words ‘corruptible elements’, and I am also struck by them: in the Soviet Union I heard the word ‘corruption’ almost every day. Apparently in China they are also keen on this word which crops up now and then either in papers or just in the air. When you see a cloud you say to yourself, ‘They are preparing yet another trial in China or in Bolivia.’ Even in Bologna such a thing can happen; and yet you pay your taxes and corrupt neither societies nor computers.

What strikes you most, however, is the corpse you encounter in the Jungian speech, for now you have a pernicious tendency to see relationships in terms of a power struggle between corpses and living matter. First I say I am too old to pursue my studies of the universe, of its evils, harmonies and decays, and so I do not mind identifying with the corpse they talk about all day long: corpses have their advantages and these advantages are not confined to alchemy only where death and black *materia* play an all-important part. (I recall some alchemists’ smiles saluting the word ‘disintegration’.) But then I realise I am one of the very few living creatures available in the world-structure: there are mostly cadavers around us. It does not really matter whether they are spiritual or poetical or ethical or just aesthetical. They are ‘cadavers’, and I, for one, am very fond of this word on account of its pronunciation. In French we say ‘*cadavre*’ and inverting the two last letters provides a linguistic comfort to my cabbalistic soul. I say to myself it is enough to invert the word order and the world will put on display a Kirchner piece, a Mondrian masterpiece.

And sometimes it is enough to stay in your bed and say that worms (*vers*) must already be working on you because you are not only dead but generous to a fault: you offer your body to the creatures on whose flesh you can count in the course of the ‘Universal Exchange’: you become everything and everybody after your disintegration. It is a pity you have to wait for the arrival of worms to accomplish this task or rather duty: before their meal you are in no mood for exchanges, gifts (*potlatchs*) and even changes, as far as I am concerned. Why should I exchange my bed, my slippers and the twitter of *my* birds for my neighbours’ mess and less? But after my death I am supposed to exchange my sinews with others, creating an overall harmony or disharmony – something ‘overall’ anyway. They call it ‘principle’ and ‘return’.

> *Everything returns to its principle. Each individual exists in potentiality in the material world before appearing in its individual form, and will return in its time and in its order to the point whence it has departed, as the rivers in the sea, to be born again in the turn.*

What bothers me is this return or restitution: I have no wish to meet all these people somewhere. Only in Vienna during their annual opera ball could I put up with it. But after death you are supposed to mix with a wide variety of people – the phenomenon they call Mixt; at least in the 'second sense'. We all know everything about second hands and second honeymoons; and the sixth sense to which we usually confer an honorary doctorate. But the second sense, its meaning rather, escapes us continually; and yet we speak of other sides, of double edges – of doubles as such and even of doppelgängers. A doppelgänger comes and I say, 'Hello, how are you?' And he answers, 'Hello, how are you?' And I get the feeling I am in a good mood – only because my doppelgänger deigns to ask me a question. Does my answer matter? Does anything matter at all, at all, at all?

Of course they say you should not do your utmost to be born again either as a human being or your own cat. I would not mind being born in the shape of my cat – not only in his shape, mind you. In his body, in his mind, in his poems, in his visions, in his analysis of what is going on, which goes on when nothing else does. What could I do to ensure my resurrection? If you hang yourself on a cross, you are not automatically conveyed either to Paradise or Hell – for a short visit. You just hang on a cross or on a tree, as Absalom did (Spartacus hung on a cross). Then you cross your heart and say, 'What's next?'

The point is there are always a lot of nexts, an avalanche of nexts. No point in going to mountains: no winter sports, no summer sports, no nothing, as they say somewhere. What one must avoid (not at all costs, though) is the vicious circle. Let us not forget that it is vicious not only on account of its sterile infinity, but also through the presence of viciousness as such, materialised by Absalom or another criminal. You drive an inconspicuous car and have no idea why there are so many mules on the road you took a few hours ago. You realise that these mules have no wish to commit suicide by throwing their bodies under your car. You worship animals and for nothing in the world would you run any ass or donkey over, unless a set of unfortunate circumstances (we call such a set '*fatum*') literally lay a doomed, pathetic animal under your wheels. You brake, you scream, you think the accident was removed from your life, from your conscience and its pangs (in the nick of time, in the nick of time), but *fatum* pushes both your wheels and your victim's bones, and you hear a few cracks or just one long crack that lasts much longer than Bruckner's *Eighth Symphony*. That is what comes under 'vicious circle' – not only because you are to hear this crack throughout your life. (Not Bruckner's *Eighth*, mind you; nor Mahler's *Sixth*.) You scramble into your car, drive a few miles and see a mule in front of you. Your brakes have been applied regularly ever since you squashed that mule, the landmark of your vicious circle. In other words, for years and years

you have been doing your utmost to escape from your vicious circle, from the serial killing of animals and men. And yet, whenever you settle in front of your steering wheel in the hope that the trip will do you a lot of good, you see a mule or a tree, and once again you say to yourself: 'I wish it could be the Forbidden Tree. I'd rather eat a dozen pieces of forbidden fruit than set my eyes on Absalom again.'

You do not *always* see Absalom in the flesh, life-size, death-size, nirvana-size. Sometimes it is his name that reminds you of your pre-destination, of your personal determinism. Instead of a road sign you spot either ABSALOM or CONSPIRACY or POOR DAVID. You shout: 'I don't mind meeting David in the flesh. Why can't I meet him?' But if you happen to meet the biblical hero, he gives you a reproachful look and says, 'Why do you pursue me? Why do you persecute me?' David cries and you plunge your hand into one of your pockets in search of a handkerchief. Suddenly David stops crying and moaning, wipes his nose on his sleeve and says, 'What do you take me for? Do you think I need your handkerchief? I'm a king, you know. Who are *you*?'

You obliterate the visions that crop up whenever you are to be reminded of your vicious circle, of your eternal recurrence, and once again your attention glides towards branches, trees and their symbols. On some of them there are Absalom's mortal remains (the charwoman is not always up to divine standards), but in general the landscape you traverse is affable and displays its benevolence at every opportunity. The road you follow spares you its own asperities so that no holes pester you and your tyres. But *fatum* is unpredictable. Suddenly a sort of physical, spiritual blackness descends upon your journey and when you eventually come home, you say to your niece: 'Driving on those rough roads has really done for my car.'

Exhausted and outraged, you head for your room and hear the name that somehow has weaved its way through your veins and nerves to take up residence in your skull. 'Kircher' resounds now under your skull's vault – for no reason at all, it seems to you and also to your niece with whom you willingly share your discomfitures and disclosures. But you believe that whatever happens in your life and even in your skull, inside it, is relevant to your destiny, future and discomfitures that are in store for you. Anyway, I have a book on Kircher and his engravings so I am in a position to shed light on the appearance of this name in any skull, however remote from my bones and tendons. Once or twice I flipped through the book where I found a lot of Adam Kadmons and other figures standing in the middle of the universe, their bodies surrounded by zodiacs and archangels as if to keep them company and occasionally guard them against diseases, falls and bad omens, evil eyes.

Astrological Man shows a scheme of planetary and zodiacal influences on the parts of the body. A biased bystander looks for his or her diseases and remedies, otherwise no point in looking at engravings, however beautiful and instructive. Thanks to them, you may get acquainted with parallels and perpendiculars, but if your cancer is conspicuous by its absence (not from your body, mind you), you shut the book and either throw it out of the window or burn it, wondering why Jesuits have not done it yet. But if your cancer is depicted in graphic detail (blood, metastases and all), and if moreover you see a remedy by its side, you blow the engraving (or rather its photograph) up and hang the picture over your bed – to keep nightmares at bay. You say to yourself that your cancer is nothing but a picture in a book or on your wall, and so your worries and your doctor's warnings pale into insignificance beside Athanasius Kircher's art and astuteness.

You rejoice whenever you see yourself in the centre of the universe, especially if the signs of the zodiac and all other signs of your cosmic nature accompany you during this odyssey. The picture where you stand shows the correspondence of macrocosm with microcosm (human organs and ailments). Each sign is entabulated with its characteristic illnesses, and herbal and sympathetic remedies, some of which have still not been improved upon, for all the leaps and bounds performed by our progress in medical science. This picture joins the previous one on the same wall, not far from your bed, and now you feel secure against Alzheimer's, strokes and other calamities arranged by *fatum* and its associates.

I look at Noah's Ark and once again am nauseated by the presence of humans amidst birds to whom we are supposed to talk about the Scriptures; as if they did not know them by heart. The engraving exhibits the canonical three storeys, each divided by a corridor. The upper level (as I pointed out earlier) contains birds and the humans' cabins (and their carcasses); the middle is devoted to storage of food, wine and other supplies such as carafes, champagne glasses, Burgundy glasses, Claret glasses, a number of books, a number of LPs. The quadrupeds are housed at the bottom. The serpents are consigned to the bilge. One may wonder (one should not) why God permitted these venomous varieties to survive the Flood and its consequences. Apparently He did it to remind mankind of the Serpent that caused the Fall of Adam and Eve. I, for one, am loath to be reminded of Adam and Eve and their offspring.

I may relish my relative solitude in a picture where all sorts of zodiacs, animals and symbols circle and turn in a majestic Zoroastrian dance. But the matter stands differently in everyday

life: you can stand in the middle of it on your own, for the simple reason that you have no idea where this middle can be found and enjoyed to the utmost. Anyway you are surrounded by clothes, shoes and also heads; and these heads turn this way and that, looking either up or down or askance. They turn the world upside down so that half-wits take centre stage as if they were double- or even triple-wits. They squeeze through the eyes of needles and keyholes, and you bear with them for the sake of political correctness or sociological politeness.

You are no longer God and the only way to find a crutch in the middle of this motley crowd seems to suggest a medieval approach to the problem of multiplicity and singularity. It is sometimes easier to illustrate an abstract concept by analogy with something concrete. The point is no abstract concept or notion leads us anywhere because it leads us only to abstraction – Adam Kadmon whose life is just a picture in a book you find on your writing desk for some obscure reason. The reason is not all that obscure: you are still looking for a prop, for something or someone to lean upon. If you try and lean upon a living shoulder, a real man or woman, you may find yourself in Brueghel's famous picture where a number of blind men hobble along a road, heading for a ditch. None of them have got that lean and hungry look you often spot on a go-getter's face. They *are* lean and hungry, but even if they eat a few pounds of caviar, they will not ward off the danger lurking at the bottom of the ditch.

So you lean on a friend you trust absolutely and this prop of yours directs your steps towards a ditch. If he said, 'Welcome to the ditch,' you might answer, 'Thank you. I don't need a ditch right now. If, some day or other, I feel like falling and spending my eternity at the bottom of a ditch, amidst Gorky's characters, I'll let you know.' Of course you are in no mood for blowing your brains out or rotting in the ditch magnificently depicted by Brueghel, but your friend might ring you up and ask, 'Ready for the ditch? Not yet?' If he does – the situation is *not* beyond belief – you can answer him thus, 'None of your business. And if I do get a ditch-urge, I'll deal with it on my own. I'll find a made-to measure ditch.'

'Are you sure you'll be able to tackle this problem? Only from the outside can one see what is suitable and perfect. When one is face to face with one's own destiny, one doesn't see how this destiny can be manipulated.'

'I can assure you I'll find the most suitable ditch in the world.'

'How do you propose to set about it?'

'I'll walk around in the areas renowned for their ditches. I'll look at them and I may even go so far as to lie down in them for a while to find out if they suit me both physically and spiritually. And then I'll make my choice after kneeling down and praying to God for at least an hour.'

‘Don’t you know that two heads are better than one? Or do you think you’ve got two heads?’

‘I don’t know how many heads I’ve got. But I hope I’ll recognise my ditch, the one I’ll adopt and cherish as my grave.’

All these discussions are almost endless and sometimes one is tempted to throw this yoke off and lie down somewhere, not necessarily at the bottom of a ditch. And one should not always dream of two and three – of a company, whatever this company looks like, whatever its smells and colours. Analogy is the notion that crops up from time to time to remind one that one is not the One – or God, in other words, in another word. One does not take pride of place anywhere, and many people realise it is better not to take any pride, whether one deals with places or other attributes of life, because it is its absence (the absence of any pride) that can ensure one a place in Paradise – no pride, no blabbering.

But one is manifold somehow; at least you come across this notion (and emotion) in John Duns Scotus’ writings that Heidegger enlarges upon, coming up with the following announcement: ‘*Was real existiert, ist ein Individuelles*.’ At the same time (and on the same page) he says that ‘*Homogenität und Heterogenität in einer eigentümlichen Weise verschlingen*’. In my copy of Heidegger’s book I underlined the word ‘*verschlingen*’ because I was not aware of what it meant. Am I aware of what it means? Today? You have to be born in a German-speaking country to understand not only the language that all those individuals speak but also their ways and days. Heidegger speaks of the mixture one encounters when dwelling on the multitude and oneself, himself, herself, myself that stands in the middle of any picture, even if the picture in question does not hang on any wall, either above a bed or a chair.

I suppose you mix with a wide variety of people in your job. She mixes very well – perhaps that's why she’s so popular.

You open a dictionary and find a lot of examples of this kind, which tell you you are lost (once and for all, mind you) if you do not say hello to all those who happen to smile in close proximity to your face. If the distance exceeds four yards, you can pretend you see only the stars one can see if one takes the trouble to look in the direction of the nearest window. But if the interval shortens and you literally find yourself face to face with an important client, you begin to smile from ear to ear. And if you think your smile is not broad enough, you add another ear to your head; and you might even put a few ears all over your body.

Suppose the Almighty was set apart from the creatures He had welcomed in His kingdom either by receding into the distance or putting a few building blocks together. Does

He take care of His creatures? Does He leave them alone? ‘She mixes very well – perhaps that’s why she’s so popular,’ our staunch believers say. (What is more, they *believe* what they say.) How does *He* carry out this ritual? If He stands in our midst, we cannot say how many of us take part in a war or in any other project of humankind. We say, ‘One, two, three, four, five,’ and suddenly an angel interferes, saying, ‘What are you doing? Number Three is God. He’s the best of your bunch and actually He’s another kettle of fish.’

‘But we don’t count fish,’ we answer.

‘You count. That’s what counts, unfortunately. There’s only One, just One, the One.’

Many of us say this way of reasoning has no bearing on everyday problems, on the pizzas and sandwiches we have to buy, otherwise only the rats we nurse under our roofs will survive to tell the tale, if there are any tales to tell: he died unhappily ever after is not really a tale one usually sends home either by email or registered post. Anyway I am an individual and they (the angels) allow me to mistake myself for God as long as I pray every day, even before meals, before business deals and before turning in. And then I am supposed to take into consideration another individual, instead of saying, ‘All these others are a gelatinous mass of stupidity and nonentity.’ And even if I manage to say ‘nonentity’ and encompass these nonsensical creatures in one of my essays, someone is sure to come from nowhere and say, ‘Who are you? Couldn’t find you in *Who’s Who*.’ Whos, whos, whos, whos, whos, whos, whos – that what you amount to today.

And then I fall back on the word ‘analogy’, but whenever I utter this word, someone says, ‘He drew an analogy between the brain and a vast computer.’ And they drag in Alan Turing or an army of consumers whose brains have not been in proper repair for years, if not for centuries. If I say, ‘I am God,’ they will laugh their heads off. Unfortunately you cannot play football with all these heads rolling under your feet and flying overhead. So it is not enough to fall on this word, although it is through this word you can establish a link between you and your neighbour. You have nothing in common, but analogy helps you find a few social-life-inclined atoms in your body and hook them (as the French do) on similar atoms in your neighbour’s substance. After a while, however, your neighbours’ atoms wriggle off their hooks and leave you stranded in town with no car and no money for a bus, as they usually say.

FALLING BACK ON

The question itself presupposes the common view that a divine person is constituted by a relation. This is not discussed here since it is more difficult than the issue raised, but in these questions it has been presupposed as commonly conceded, for there is no need

> *to call everything into doubt when the question at issue can be settled on the basis of what is commonly admitted.*
> *This is not a general question of whether it is possible for some person to be constituted by a relation, but it concerns the first person specifically. For there appears to be a special difficulty in his regard, since his priority to the other persons seems to clash with the nature of correlatives.*
>
> John Duns Scotus, *God and Creatures*

To begin with (and you have to begin, otherwise you will never finish anything) I would eliminate the word 'Creatures' from the title of John Duns Scotus book. God might need His creatures because, as they say in many treatises, He was bored in the middle of the sky and longed for company, to put it bluntly, which does not mean He was about to commit suicide. It is unthinkable, as many theologians say. And often they enlarge upon the size of the revolver the Almighty would have to resort to, if determined to sell His soul to the devil. Even in this case (and it is the case, it is the case, my soul), you may say that God cannot take His own life: He did not offer it to Himself. There was another God Who did it, and this God's name is probably Cronos, but we do not have to go into detail, not at the moment. Generally speaking, it is better not to go into detail because the details you go into kill you slowly but surely. No details, please! You just say, 'God, Thou art in Heaven,' and that's it, that's it. According to modern psychiatrists, 'that's it' is the best way of coping with predicaments and life itself as if you did your utmost to follow the precept '*amor fati*'. You do not follow it, not in the least. You joke when hearing: '*O fati, fati*, / *O mor amore*.' You say love is fat and looks like a Moor – like Othello, in other words and names.

As I said earlier, now I do not care about order, about subject matter that matures, grows and outgrows the book as it goes from one page to another. Nor do I count these pages and just open any book at random (St Augustine's way) to see what happens, what truth comes to the fore, prepared to settle in my brain, if only for a few minutes. When I read the above text, I thought about myself, as I usually do when looking at something or someone. I say to myself, 'These are not others. Just myself, my doppelgängers. I don't have to listen to whatever they utter, to their teaching, rambling and stumbling.' Naturally enough, if I open a book and light on the words 'the first person', I think I am offered pride of place and even if there are no pictures to corroborate my hypothesis, I visualise my Adam-Kadmon-like body (*haecceitas*) in the middle of the page – in the middle of the book and of the universe, to be exact.

What do I care about their common views that view all and sundry gregariously! I might refrain from using the definition attributed to Nietzsche and other misanthropes: ‘Herd.’ Once upon a time, I saw an old woman herding the goats up the mountainside. I shook my head and said, ‘Thus the Almighty strains every nerve to elevate our spirit and status, to bring us nearer His throne. For all his efforts, however, neither these goats nor humans will ever reach the top of the mountain, let alone the stars. There’s no need to call everything into doubt: it is commonly admitted that the crowd is a herd, and almost every human is a member of this herd. As for relations, I am not constituted by them, contrary to what might be hastily supposed. Suppose I walk with an enemy of mine and an unbiased observer says to himself, ‘They’re walking together. They must be related somehow. Either they’re friends or brothers. They don’t look like father and son. I think they’re uncle and nephew.’ The observer is wrong *sur toute la ligne* – from start to finish. And if he is unable to put an end to his interior monologue, he will be wrong after the finish as well. That is how the notion of infinity takes root, and it is preferable not to uproot it in the hope that immortality is somehow related to it. Anyway I am for this kind of relation and agree wholeheartedly to our union. In other words, I agree to be constituted by it once and for all. Such is my constitution. Clause 4 of this constitution of mine is thought to be the most important section: ‘Death does not so much as exist. So much for death.’ *Dieses-jetzt-Hierheit*, according to Heidegger. And death is neither this nor now nor here. Nowhere, nohow, wow!

Only by dint of building monuments to yourself can you cope with those (and those ‘those’ are everywhere) who are impervious to arguments, metaphors and mental doodling in general. (I even wonder if there are a few ‘these’ in the midst of these ‘those’. Few and far between anyway.) Horace and Pushkin did nothing else: just building monuments to themselves. And people are supposed to head for these monuments and bow and scrape to their authors. Instead, all those and these amble past them, their hands in their pockets, a sort of mumbling on their lips. No bowing, no scraping. A sidelong glance perhaps.

I recall those days and nights when I would meet beautiful boys and girls on the square where our poet (Pushkin, not Horace) looked at his admirers; and also at those who deplore his unfortunate duel, saying, ‘He should have spent more time in shooting galleries.’

‘But he had no time on his hands. He was writing poems and dancing with his wife, when she was available.’

‘Shooting galleries, three times a week. Just to keep his hand in.’

‘But there was a quill in his hand.’

‘In his right hand, I suppose. He should have kept the left hand in.’

‘You can’t simultaneously write a poem and aim for the dead centre of the target.’

It is hard to turn our national poet into a monk whose vacation is centred upon religion, discipline and spending several hours a day on his knees. But on his deathbed, the poet I read at the age of five seemed to have adopted a more appropriate attitude towards God: it is more appropriate to adjust to the tenets of Christianity (instead of rejecting them) in the Hereafter or even in its neighbourhood.

Usually your deathbed is surrounded by your relatives, and their eyes often bespeak their impatience, especially if your last will is on a par with their great expectations. A well-wisher asks the ritual question, ‘What about the last rites?’

‘Am I already on the threshold of –?’ you ask.

‘Of course not,’ answers the well-wisher. ‘Just in case, you know.’

‘What case? Could you please describe this case in minute detail?’

‘Why? It’s no use crying over spilt milk.’

‘What milk? Do you think my life was just a jug of milk?’

‘A carafe, rather. Mouton Rothschild, I suppose.’

‘Could I have a glass of wine?’

‘The last rites, first.’

And you say to yourself that Pascal was right: you have nothing to lose (apart from Paradise which you might lose forever) if the rites are *not* carried out. No one is about to sentence you to hard labour. All you have to do is listen to the priest’s words that you might know by heart, being used to other people’s deathbeds and other priests. And if you are an inveterate traveller, you know these last words in several languages. But you should not be too fastidious about how the priest utters them, and in what language he does so: it does not really matter, given that God is a polyglot. Even most of His angels are. So you say, ‘All right, the last rites, in English, in French, in Russian or in German. Please, suit yourself.’ The sign of the cross, you know it too; by heart, *natürlich*. Two fingers, three fingers, from the heart to the right lung, from the right lung to the heart (the Russian way). So you open your eyes, see a priest and do your best to put a smile on the nether half of your face. If, for all your efforts, you do not succeed, you just say to the priest and to those who continue to listen to your death rattle, ‘Sorry, I can’t smile any more.’ And the priest assures you it is not necessary: the moment is too solemn for niceties and facial beauty.

Apparently Pushkin who was used to poking fun at almost everybody did all he could to repent, without giving any thought to Pascal and his famous bet. He was certainly sincere and did nothing for the sake of Paradise about which he might even have forgotten in the course of

the 46 hours he suffered atrociously in his sledge and on his bed. He cried ‘bravo’ when his adversary, Monsieur Dantés – I must have misspelled his name; not Dante anyway – collapsed on the snow after receiving the poet’s bullet. But he died at the ripe old age of 98, and I am not sure Pushkin would have rejoiced at this news, had he lived forever – physically, realistically, not only poetically.

So you say, ‘All right, the last rites.’ You may even say that you forgive everybody and ask everybody’s forgiveness: no point in repeating, ‘Bloody fool, bloody fool, bloody fool.’ It is all the more superfluous since the bloody fool you have in mind is not necessarily bending over your half-corpse. And no one is likely to say to this bloody fool after your death, ‘You know, on his deathbed Alexander thought about you.’

‘Really? What did he say?’

‘Bloody fool.’

‘His last words?’

‘He repeated them several times. But I don’t remember if the very last word was “bloody” or “fool”.’

The Russians say, ‘Only the grave can cure a hunchback,’ and I must already have resorted to this saying many, many times, over the years, for there are many hunchbacks around me, on my way, behind my back, and I say to myself, ‘No use talking to them. Let their graves take care of their hunchbacks.’ Sometimes, however, I do take the trouble to improve upon their deformities, but in spite of the words I pronounce, looking them straight in the eyes, the shapes remain stubbornly the same and once again I visualise a grave inside which a hunchback undergoes a metamorphosis. After a while you see a few straight bones and you heave a sigh of relief as if these bones, their straightness, were a good omen, a message from Paradise. Well, many criminals have straight bones; and yet these bones are roasted on the open fire or in a hot oven.

So, on your deathbed, you might think that all the hunchbacks you have come across in the course of your existence are as stiff as a ramrod, on condition that they have been dead and buried for several years. One might tackle this problem (getting straight in the grave) to find out how long it takes to acquire the shape associated with ramrods, but your well-wishers usually say, ‘The last rites are over. Now, instead of saying “bloody” every five minutes, you’d better read a sacred book.’ And you read Clement of Alexandria:

> *How great also is benignity! ‘Love your enemies,’ it is said, ‘bless them who curse you, and pray for them who despitefully use you,’ and the like; to which it is added, ‘that ye*

may be the children of your Father who is in heaven,' in allusion to resemblance to God. Again, it is said, 'Agree with thine adversary quickly, whilst thou art in the way with him.' The adversary is not the body, as some would have it, but the devil, and those assimilated to him, who walks along with us in the person of men, who emulate his deeds in this earthly life. It is inevitable, then, that those who confess themselves to belong to Christ, but find themselves in the midst of the devil's works, suffer the most hostile treatment.'

At school you acquired a bad habit. If asked to read a text, you would start at the end, and shortly afterwards your teacher heard your voice, 'I'm finished.' 'Could you say a few words about the end of the text?' And you recited the two last sentences by heart. You subjected the above text to the same treatment and realised it is better not to belong to Christ, for confirmed Christians suffer more from the devil and his claws. (Is the devil a woman?) The Father says, 'It is inevitable,' but he might be wrong: if you are not Christian (at least you do not go to church every Sunday) you are sure to escape not only the devil's claws but also his poker and frying pan.

And then your glance starts gliding upwards: you should not forget that you are on your deathbed, on the very threshold of the Hereafter (the Thereafter, given that the here is over there now). And on this threshold you are entitled to the whole truth, otherwise your last act, will and thought might remain unfinished. And for once, the word 'unfinished' has nothing to do either with Schubert or Musil or Kafka. 'The adversary is not the body, but the devil.' You suffer from cancer and as you wait for the aftermath of your forthcoming metempsychosis, you curse the metastases and their network situated in your body – not in the devil, as you are inclined to believe. Thanks to Clement of Alexandria, you have just realised that everything is the devil: your cancer, your words and also the nurse whose wrinkled hands pick up your bedpan and take it to the lavatory. As it turned out, your body is your best friend, and you wish to reward it for its loyalty – in spite of your overall weakness that prevents you from stroking it from head to foot. You have to content yourself with your left shoulder and collarbone. Never mind – *c'est l'intention qui compte*, and your body is aware of this triviality.

Upon seeing this bodily caress, your uncle shouted, 'Hold that thought!' He conjectured you were on the brink of the sentiment habitually defined as 'universal love'. You were caressing your body because there were no other bodies within your reach. Besides, somebody said, 'If you wish to experience the radiance of love, you should first and foremost

love yourself.' The mixture of conjectures and theological lore incited your relatives to queue for your caresses, for your love. They would stretch out their hands, often pressing them against your lips, and one middle-aged woman (her name and status slipped your mind) even put her foot on your pillow. And when you refused to move either your lips or your hands, she said reproachfully, 'Forgetting your manners, are you?'

For want of anything better, they recited another excerpt from Clement of Alexandria's *Summa*:

> *'Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself.' And 'if he that loveth his neighbour worketh no evil,' and if 'every commandment is comprehended in this, the loving our neighbour,' the commandments, by menacing with fear, work love, not hatred. Wherefore the law is productive of the emotion of fear. 'So that the law is holy,' and in truth 'spiritual,' according to the apostle. We must, then, as is fit, in investigating the nature of the body and the essence of the soul, apprehend the end of each, and not regard death as an evil. 'For when ye were the servants of sin,' says the apostle, 'ye were free from righteousness. What fruit had ye then in those things in which ye are now ashamed? For the end of those things is death.*

When you read the first quotation from the Father, your uncle smelt a rat: he realised you were doing everything upside down or in reverse order. Yet you are not supposed to read the end before applying yourself to the study of the *whole* of the sacred text. The chain of reasoning does count and you should on no account single out a link and dissect it to your heart's content. That is what specialists and purists call 'out of context'. This time you begin with the love you owe to God, and the same love (not quite) you owe to your parents: but for their energy and sacrificial patience you would have seen neither the light of day nor the darkness of night. (And indisputably the latter is not inferior to the former in terms of beauty and mystery.) If you turn a deaf ear to God's oratorio, you are not likely to love your neighbour whose tendons, sinews and nerves are on an equal footing with the Divine Essence and His or Her constituents. But if you read the above instruction from its bottom, going up by stages, you will nourish your fear of death, which is already out of proportion with any teaching, be it the Scriptures or a sutra. Sure enough, the Scriptures look quite small in comparison with the horror you experience whenever your train of thought runs headlong into your forthcoming disappearance.

Your reasoning and comments often disregard the text you are engrossed in, but life goes on and sometimes it does not really know how it goes and whether it goes forward or backwards or sideways or in the ways unknown to anyone with the exception of God. And so the best way of dealing with your worries is to follow the text from top to bottom because the maxim ‘as above so below’ is not always true and of a divine origin. The origins of maxims are often obscure and you cannot know for sure where they come from. All you know is their coming: they are there and you have to decide whether they are true or not, whether you can lean upon them to persevere in your being.

As you read the text you come across yet another variety of fear as if there were not enough fears in this world of ours. I fear death, life and everything else – that is how we talk to ourselves, when left alone or in our wife’s or husband’s company (in whom we have that absolute trust we are always reminded of when watching *Macbeth*). The loving our neighbour, the hating our neighbour. Something works love, something works hatred. Anyway, if something does work we cannot sleep like a log or dog. (Work, work, work, we hear. Not wok, wok, wok, mind you.) We hear a strange noise and say to ourselves, ‘It’s working, it’s working. Nothing will ever leave us in peace,’ as if the workings of governments or deities were always directed against our will and wellbeing and bank accounts. ‘Wherefore the law is productive of the emotion of fear.’

On television you watch a programme in the course of which they say, ‘The law forbids the sale of cigarettes to people under the age of 16. We’re campaigning for a repeal of the abortion laws.’ And suddenly the emotion of fear begins to rise within your being, even if you neither smoke nor have a baby in your belly. Your fear continues to rise and you realise you cannot breathe any more as if there were no more breathers in the world. And you say to yourself, ‘The law is productive, but I’m not sure I like and accept its production. So from now on I’ll vote against our government and its laws. And also against the Almighty, if the laws I’m allergic to are *His* laws.’

What else? What else? What else do I have to cope with before I die peacefully in my bed, amidst my pillows and sleeping pills? According to the apostle. There were twelve of them, if I am no mistaken, which happens very often, considering my age and the stage I am performing on; an old crumbling and mumbling stage. ‘I am, I am, I am,’ mumbles the stage. ‘I still am but I’m dying, as you know, my dear Egypt.’ My dear Israel, my dear Russia. But do I apprehend the end of my body and that of my soul? Where is my soul’s end? Its beginning is Russia. What about its end?

You might assume that your soul is a road you follow on a rainy day, on a sunny day, squelching through the mud or picking up flowers that fill your lungs with an unparalleled fragrance. Where does it end? Beyond that hill over there? Over there, over everywhere. The beginning is lost in the mists of time, at the dawn of your own era. And your own era is in the palms of your hands as if you did have a pair of hands. You have nothing of the kind: only your soul allows you to breathe, to inhale the fragrance of the stars, to exhale the fumes of hell. All this is as old as the hills you cannot see because of the mists you touched upon at the beginning of the paragraph. But the paragraph is lost either in one of your drawers or in the depths of a rubbish bin.

'So that the law is holy.' Everything is blessed and holy and melancholy, as Milton put it in the mists of time, in the midst of time; and of space. He built a monument to himself and his body towers over melancholy and joy, whereas Keats presides over the autumn and a Grecian urn you saw in some museum or other. Or other, or other. And this and other lie scattered all along the road you took one day, along the road you might have taken. You did not. You are not or you are full of knots and tangles, of questions and half-answers. And what about 'spiritual', its knots and tangles and angles? From what angle do you contemplate your own spirituality? You stretch out your arms and the stigmata of St Francis fame – there are so many fames (and flames, and fumes) you get lost in their midst – come to the fore or rather to the *peau*, to your skin. When they say, 'The Almighty skinned him alive,' it is the stigmata they have in their minds; and sometimes on their hands too.

'For when ye were the servants of sin.' A few years ago you were in dire need of help (penniless in a merciless space), and the devil knocked at your door, which happens in some Russian and German novels. You opened the door and did not recognise the devil, although you knew that Dostoevsky depicted him as a shabby gentleman. You opened the door and saw a gentleman, not necessarily the devil's stooge or the devil himself. You said to yourself, 'He looks like a shabby, not wealthy, not healthy gentleman and, according to Dostoevsky, he's the devil incarnate or even the devil himself. But does that mean I have to give him a push and watch him glide on his bottom down the stairs leading to the bottom of the building?'

Anyway this gentleman of sorts asked you if you could become his servant, adding that he was not Don Quixote and so you would never become Sancho Panza, which might hurt your feelings. You said, 'Yes,' because you had to pay your rent and buy a few lamb chops in a nearby shop. For all that, you are not 'free from righteousness'. This unfortunate episode – your life is full of episodes: you are no monk – took place (and space: the devil's house) a long time ago. And yet the Father says you are a servant of sin, one of them. (There are many

sins and so there are many servants.) As for fruit, the word reminds me of a Russian story about a saint and a sinner who devoted his time to stealing a few pounds of apples from the saint's garden or rather from the monastery where he prayed in his cell day and night. The saint left his books and icons, made his appearance in the garden, and the thief made a dash for it. The saint said, 'What are you doing?'

'Nothing.'

'Aren't you making a dash for it?'

'No.'

'What about the apples you left behind?'

'I didn't.'

'What are you talking about?' asked the saint. 'Or rather: What *aren't* you talking about? You wished to steal a few pounds of apples from the garden we keep in working order, didn't you?'

'No.'

'How do you explain these apples on the ground?'

'They fell from the tree on their own initiative.'

'You're right – everything is alive and active so that even apples have initiatives.'

'Is evil alive?'

'Of course it is. And it often shows a lot of initiative.'

'I'm quite aware of that.'

'And its initiative has across-the-board support.'

'I beg your pardon?'

'Do you know that evil lectures on evil almost everywhere – in universities, at Speakers' Corner?'

'Does he?'

'He does. And usually he begins its lectures by talking down the initiatives of a rival company.'

'Of good?'

'That's right.'

The story goes on; all stories go on unless another flood is called upon to abolish all stories, all storeys, lies and so on. And once again we are bound to realise that too many people survive our floods, however merciless and flawless; and the same people provoke God into unleashing His energy that can be expressed through liquid or fire or brimstone. So the story tells us the saint we are talking about helped the thief pick up the apples he had scattered

all over the ground when attempting to fly the wrath of God. And in the wake of this unfinished crime, the saint sent three pounds of apples (to remind the thief of the Holy Trinity) to the thief's hut. And the thief would come to the monastery and bow before the saint, before stealing a pound of pears they (the saints) grew in their garden.

I am not sensitive to instructive stories. I heard too many of them in Moscow, after my birth in 1947. I am weary of instructions, lessons and teachers, be they gurus or morons or just mo, mo, mor. Or Moors, as Shakespeare's admirers often point out. But I read this story with pleasure and this pleasure may point to an aspect of my life I ignore almost totally – my union with others who do not steal anything from my garden and my house in general. To hit it off with them, I should let them steal a few books from my library, a few bottles from my wine cellar. And then I shall say, 'Go on, go on. You haven't yet stolen *all* my bottles.' And if they forget a bottle of Latour '26, I shall run, catch up with them and give them this bottle, sweating like a pig: it is a real scorcher today.

The grand duchess of German origin. She married a grand duke, settled down in Russia and learnt the Russian language rather quickly to talk to ordinary and extraordinary people; and read Gogol perhaps. After the Revolution they (no idea who they were) suggested she should leave the country. That is what I did, although our communists had no intention of submitting my body to the onslaught of a few bullets. They killed the Emperor, his family and their doctor, and I know who these 'they' were; I even know their names, their first names. And if the Russians could have several names in their passports, I would memorise all the names of these assassins: you should know assassins, even if they do not ring your doorbell.

The grand duchess said she would not leave Russia because 'one doesn't forsake a sick child'. The Soviet Union I left in 1974 was sick and I was aware of its sickness (and of its tiredness); and yet I did not know it would die from its cancer a few years later, in 1991. Should I have stayed in my native land? For the sake of the sick (and tired)? I think everyone was sick inside the Soviet Union, even the members of the Politburo and their families who, however, took advantage of every crime committed in their more or less submissive country. Crimes are better than gold: you get rich in no time at all. Just a few bullets, a number of appropriations, whereas the gold or rather its value goes up and down, up and down. You shoot an aristocrat and install yourself and your family in his palace.

It was *her* palace they got into. No point in emptying her pockets: there was nothing in her pockets, in her handbag on the day they took her to a quarry and shot her; and down she went, singing. Apparently she sang hymns for several days. When I told the story to a scatty

friend of mine, she said, ‘You’re a mystic.’ Perhaps I am. Why not? She went on singing, singing, singing. Down, down, down, to the bottom of the page. Up, up, up, up, up, up.

I left my native land and now I study the books where you light on icons, monasteries and cathedrals. (You always *light* on them.) If you go sightseeing, you often walk amidst a lot of strangers who take photographs without even looking at palaces, churches and icons. Even one stranger can put me out; the same goes for the people I have been acquainted with for many years, if not for decades. They say, ‘Beautiful, isn’t it?’ and I feel like contradicting their statement, even if this statement coincides with the statements I might make on this and other occasions, on the same day or night. I may not like *that* tone of voice; or *this* tone of voice. And that gesture of course – even more than this tone of voice, this voice, its tonalities, its major and minor keys. But I adore and even worship my cat’s tonalities, pitches and gestures. And the illustrations I am looking at tonight.

‘So that the law is holy.’ Does that mean I had no choice whatsoever? Did I *have* to leave my country forever? Go West. That was my destination, my predestination. Why didn’t I go as far as California? If I had, I would have much more gold in my pockets. All this is spiritual, I suppose, and gold is spiritual only in alchemists’ laboratories. Elsewhere it is nonsense, as mystics and monks point out daily, nightly and even hourly, provided you listen to them and their tones, words and pitches. ‘Gold shot up by 25%,’ they are told. ‘Nonsense, nonsense, nonsense,’ they answer. They are shown a lot of sheets of papers and numbers, calculations and even gold bullion. (And billions.) ‘Nonsense, nonsense, nonsense,’ they say shaking their heads and giggling.

What is the end of the soul? It might be easier to deal with the body because you often see it torn apart, blown away – at least on television. And you know that what happens in real horrible life looks exactly like the images you relish or abolish by switching your TV sets and computers off. You were wounded and they had to amputate your leg because gangrene had set in. Had they taken pity on you, leaving your leg and mind in peace, it would have been devoured by gangrene and by the devil whose love for gangrene is well known and on the record. So much for your body. In the final analysis, it is not worth the time and effort involved. You concentrate all your energy on this body of yours and it crumbles under your very eyes. This procedure reminds us of Buddhists and their methods, but the aim we are pursuing has nothing in common with the crumbling we get as the result of our experiment. All right, we can say that our investigation has disclosed to us our body’s *prima materia*: crumbs. That is why bread is so important to human beings: in Mussorgsky’s *Boris Godunov* the chorus shouts: ‘Bread, bread,’ while looking at the tsar, at his eyes and beard. And women

shout, ‘Brioche.’ That is why they point out, ‘The female of the species is deadlier than the male.’

What about the soul? Is it also a crumb, a spiritual crumb? A Russian mystic used to answer this question thus: ‘Do you really need to know what the soul looks like? Look at our churches, at their onion-shaped domes or just at the little onions scattered around their domes. Don’t you like onions? I always cry when I’m chopping onions. Don’t you? Do you know why we shed our tears on this occasion? Because our soul is made up of tears, only of tears. And she is onion-shaped. By the way, lightly brown the onion before adding the tomatoes.’

When I first heard the word ‘monad’, I thought it might resemble the onions we admire (or disregard) on Russian churches. We should not forget that this word goes with the notion ‘windowless’ and onions are like prisons, which give rise to an old memory of mine connected with a prisoner’s song: ‘The sun goes up and down / But it is dark in my prison cell.’ Soviet prisoners held out only by recalling the state of monads that cannot communicate with each other, not even by tapping on their walls.

As soon as you embark upon a heart-rending message in Morse code, a guardian comes in and kicks you in the groin. No point in complaining to the director or any minister: they would not listen to you, not even for a second you need to utter the word ‘kick’ or ‘groin’ (not enough time for both of them).

Anyway the guardian would have guffawed and said, ‘He just pulled a muscle in his groin.’ And let us not forget that every Soviet citizen mirrored the universe, alias the Soviet regime, the communist party and its slogans. At this point Leibniz’s and our paths diverge: he thought that every monad mirrored the universe not because the latter affected the former, but through God’s beneficial influence: He had given it a nature that produced this result *spontaneously*. (‘Leibniz’s works have a refreshing spontaneity and sparkle,’ as a Soviet scholar put it.) We think that the Soviet tyrannical government did affect our lives – to the point of no return, more often than not. But our rulers assured us that Lenin had given us a nature that produced this result quite willingly, not nillingly. The Soviet rule and rulers fitted in perfectly with Leibniz’s pre-established harmony, except that in his opinion it was evidence of God’s (not Stalin’s) existence. Whenever we asked a simple question – and many of those questions boiled down to ‘why?’ – a person in charge would say, ‘The pre-established harmony, you know.’ In a way, Soviet existence *was* harmonious.

As I re-read Leibniz’s works I realise I might use some bits of them in my discussions with those who accuse me of indifference and even hatred towards humankind. ‘Some time ago you withdrew into yourself and it’s not good for your health, according to psychologists

and general practitioners.' 'I don't believe,' I answer, 'that any system is possible in which human beings interact, for there seems no possible way of explaining such action.'

'And love? What about love? Don't we need love above all?'

'Moreover, such action would be superfluous, for why should one human being give another what the other has already?'

'How do you mean?'

'For this is the very nature of substance, that the present is big with the future.'

'And what about the poor? Wouldn't you give them a loaf of bread?'

'A particular substance never acts on another particular substance and doesn't suffer from it either.'

'Didn't you suffer from Soviet dictators?'

'I also suffered from Soviet doctors – from our dentists, in particular. Their drills worked slowly, noisily and nauseatingly. Not nostalgically in the least.'

'You mean you don't suffer from homesickness? And the onions? Don't you miss them?'

Leibniz thinks that monads or human beings have everything they might resort to in their hour of need. What is more, they have in abundance what they may discard from their existence, even if they are not determined to pray in monastery cells for years to come. They mirror the world into which they were literally cast (Heidegger called them 'castaways') and they also mirror themselves, for they are part and parcel of this world. We are surrounded by mirrors. We also carry a number of them inside our body and that differentiates our plight from that of Orson Welles who hunts high and low for Rita Hayworth, finds her in a funhouse, in a gallery of mirrors (nothing to do with Versailles) and shoots, shoots, shoots to kill, for his hero is trigger-and-murder happy. He murders Rita but happiness does not come, and that is all the more understandable since, at the time of the shooting (of both shootings) he was married to her.

I mirror these onions, monasteries and churches; they mirror my Russian soul, assuming I have a soul and this soul is of Russian origin. I also mirror the saints I find in the books that lie scattered on all my tables, writing desks and armchairs. I mirror the books, armchairs, writing desk. I shoot at the man sitting in that chair, in front of a computer. I shoot to kill, I kill to shoot.

THE NINTH REVELATION

I saw eternity the other day, and there are days and nights, and I cannot tell a day from a night, eternity from a second. Do you know what it looked like, brethren? Listen to me, brethren, and if you do, you will also know what Jesus Christ looks like. And His Cross, and His Cross. Do you know what His Cross looks like? Do you think it looks like a cross? You are mistaken, my brethren, but never mind, never mind – I shall tell you everything, every cross, every Jesus.

I have been privileged to receive from His hands and eyes as many as eight revelations – so far, up to now; not up to eternity, mind you. There are many more revelations in store for me. The fifth relates the pleasure that the Blessed Trinity has in the grievous passion of Christ and His pitiful death. In this joy and pleasure God wants us to be comforted and cheered along with Him until we come to our fulfilment in heaven, in His mansion where there are many dishes, tables, wines and carafes. I saw Christ's precious crowning with thorns, and to see His crowning you have to see every thorn in great detail. And of course you must receive every thorn and enjoy it in your flesh, otherwise you must admit you will never have any revelation of any kind. And if you see in your dream that your new car awaits you in your garage, you must realise it is no revelation at all. No revelation, no elevation. It is DEGRADATION, my brethren.

Do you know that the Fiend is conquered through Christ's pitiful passion? God allowed me to look at His body: at His legs, at His collarbone and even at His bones, His bare bones. And He said to me, 'By this is the Fiend overcome.' 'By what, my Lord?' 'By my bones. They're beautiful, aren't they?' 'They are, my Lord.' 'Upon seeing them the Fiend will realise he is ugly. His awareness of his ugliness will kill him once and for all.'

And God asked me, 'How do you deal with your sins?'

And I answered, 'I wash them away.'

'How?' He asked.

'I use my eau de cologne.'

'Don't you know that my blood is much better than eau de cologne?'

'Of course it is, but I don't dare use your blood.'

'You shouldn't use it when going to a ball or any other social gathering. But you should use it whenever your sins grow too monstrous and invade your whole being.'

After listening to his discourse, I saw His body and said to myself, 'This body has been bleeding copiously for many hours, if not for eternity.' The fair skin was broken and here were deep weals in the tender flesh of that dear, smitten, humiliated body. So copious was the hot flow – I was touching His boiling blood – that neither skin nor bone nor wound could be

seen: it was all blood and suffering and the cry, ‘Why have You forsaken me?’ ‘Thou, Thou, Thou,’ He said, and I listened to His Thous on my knees, brethren. He also said, ‘Wow, wow, wow,’ but I still do not know what He meant by this particular and thunderous wow. But my Tenth Revelation is coming and I am sure this new Revelation will tell me what wow means and how I should interpret it. Not vow, mind you.

I knelt down in front of His body and scooped His blood into a bucket with my hands. Then I picked up the bucket, lifted it, tilted it and poured His blood over my whole body. Brethren, I am duty bound to tell you I never sin with *a part* of my body. And yet the part you are thinking about is the most sinful part one can imagine, visualise and despise. It is my *whole body* that sins and continuously transgresses all our commandments. And so His blood washed all my members and tendons, and now I am as clean as a clean white shirt. And I smashed all the taps I could lay my hands on, and I shall never open anything unless I can receive His blood through these taps or by tilting my kettle, my teapot. The water we drink and use for other purposes is unclean and we should shun it wherever it makes its appearance.

I looked at Christ’s face and its colour changed whenever I twinkled my eyes so that, at some point, I decided not to twinkle my eyes any more. Christ has a naturally pale complexion and dark hair, but as my eyes continued to twinkle he turned bright red. I thought He was on His way to Pontius Pilate and I wished to get him off the hook. And then I saw the hook in question and I said to myself, ‘This hook is too big and I’ll never manage to move it this way or that.’ So I burst into tears and knelt down once again as if I could not bear my body’s weight and sinfulness. You kneel down and realise that a lot of your sins are gone, and I think they just vanish into thin air. The air believes in God and receives our sins as if it were Jesus Christ in the flesh. Anyway I think that everybody is Jesus Christ and everything is His flesh, otherwise the world would already have been destroyed by its own iniquity.

What else do I think about? I am not sure I think or do anything: Christ does it and His thoughts traverse all my spirits to such an extent I do not think anything myself because I am not myself any longer. All my thoughts are His and that is what I am thinking now, ‘His, He, His, He, His, His, His, His.’ And I know the Lord our God is the being of all that is, but we should not disregard what is not – the poor and the miserable. We should *regard* them. We should not discard them; we should *card* them. Anyway God is the being of all that is (and not, not) and He is supreme. And supreme means supreme and nothing else. You can be sup, but that is not enough. Sometimes you are reme, but that is not enough either. You should be SUPREME like God because you are His image, deeds and all and everything.

Do we greatly value all His works? We do, even if some hurricanes spoil the fun because they are spoilsports par excellence. They are wet blankets, you know, even if there is no rain and its drops. Do you know that Jesus' heart is riven in two? You think I am alluding to a sunny day and a rainy day as if God's heart were centred on rains and beams. Actually He died for us and lives for us as well, and that is why his heart is riven in two. And it is also riven in three on account of the Holy Trinity. At some point, He said, 'Behold and see that I have loved you so much that before I did actually die –'

'Don't speak to me about your death, I beg of you,' I said.

'I speak to you about my death because I love you,' He said.

'Do you?' I asked.

'I do,' He said.

We spoke for a while and then He removed His clothes, and I saw everything, everything, everything. 'See how I have loved you,' He said. Then He opened His mouth and showed me His teeth or rather His dentures that He cleaned with a toothpick. 'See how I have loved you,' He said.

I saw how He loved me, and I also saw how He has compassion upon us because of our sin. If we do not sin, there is no compassion, but if we do (and that is what we do all the time) Christ's compassion overflows His receptacles and we receive it everywhere: on our muscles, on our nerves, on our genes. The more we sin, the more compassion we win, my dear brethren, my fellow Christians. For the Holy Church shall be shaken at the world's sorrow, anguish and tribulations, just as men shake a cloth in the wind. Do you shake a cloth in the wind? Any cloth whatsoever? If you do, you can easily visualise a church or a cathedral shaken by the sort of turbulence you might experience on a plane, when flying from Moscow to Singapore. A stewardess is about to offer you a glass of champagne and suddenly everything shakes, down to the stewardess. Down she goes and goes on shaking on the floor 'as if she's got the shakes'. Five minutes ago, I watched her hands as she prepared coffee and she definitely had the shakes. Five minutes later she had them too, the same shakes, the same hands. The same woman with the shakes.

Our Lord gave me an answer about all this. 'I shall make of this a great thing in heaven – a thing of everlasting worth and endless joy.' I could now understand how our Lord rejoiced in the tribulations of His servants, though with pity! And compassion. To bring them to bliss He lays on each one he loves some particular thing, which while it carries no blame in his sight causes them to be blamed by the world, despised, scorned, mocked and rejected. You reject a stewardess who collapses in front of you instead of serving you a glass of champagne.

You say, ‘You’re a whore, my dear stewardess. You’re not a stewardess – you are a whore.’ And then you help her up and she sits down by your side to share your wine and other pleasures one is entitled to enjoy when flying First Class which our ladies call ‘Classy’.

And our Lord God showed me that He was going to perform this deed, and were I to do nothing but sin, my sin would still not prevent His goodness from working. His goodness works and I sin – what else do I have to do? Can do? ‘The deed will begin here on Earth, and it will be worthy of God, and abundantly beneficial to His lovers.’ ‘I am your lover,’ I said. ‘So the deed will be abundantly beneficial to your sinews and thoughts.’ And God said to me, ‘The deed I’m talking about will be performed by myself, not by my servants, because this deed is very important, as important as my creation.’ But what His deed was going to be was kept secret from me.

> *Choose a suitable time for recollection and frequently consider the loving-kindness of God. Do not read to satisfy curiosity or to pass the time, but study such things as move your heart to devotion. If you avoid unnecessary talk and aimless visits, listening to news and gossip, you will find plenty of suitable time to spend in meditation on holy things. The greatest Saints used to avoid the company of men whenever they were able, and chose rather to serve God in solitude.*
> *A wise man once said ‘As often as I have been among men, I have returned home a lesser man.’ We often share this experience, when we spend much time in conversation; it is easier to keep silence altogether than not to talk more than we should. It is easier to remain quietly at home than to keep due watch over ourselves in public.*
>
> Thomas À Kempis, *The Imitation of Christ*

> *No one is worthy of heavenly comfort, unless they have diligently exercised themselves in holy contrition. If you desire heartfelt contrition, enter into your room, and shut out the clamour of the world, as it is written, ‘Commune with your own heart, and in your chamber, and be still.’ Within your cell you will discover what you* will *only too often lose abroad.*
>
> Thomas À Kempis, *The Imitation of Christ*

And they always talk about eyes, about these mirrors of the soul. What *do* they mirror? A colour, nothing else. And my soul goes from one soul to another, and it mirrors too many souls and moles and doles so that I cannot take everything and everybody in. And yet I have

to, otherwise I would not be a human being. But I have no wish to be a human being or any being for that matter except a cat, my cat whose eyes I have looked at for almost three years. And I saw these eyes in the icons dating back to the 11th century, if I am not mistaken. But, for once, I do not mind being mistaken because, in my opinion, all these eyes date back to the beginning of the Christian era, to the beginning of everything, everybody and everyone; and the One. These eyes do not understand where they are because they are elsewhere or nowhere or where, where, where, where. And if you think they look at you, they say, 'Why are you looking at us? Why are you painting us? What are we doing here? We belong –.' But they do not belong, that is the point. They do not even belong to that point. They are pre, pre, pre, pre.

Are they surprised? Do they say, 'To my astonishment –'? Nothing of the sort, nothing of the kind, nothing of anything. They do not say, they do not talk. They just look because they cannot help it: they are eyes after all; or rather *before* all. My cat's eyes were like that two years ago. Now he knows we are all bastards and he is a castaway or just away, away, away. From what? From CAT. We all go from humans, cats and dogs to this valley or call it what you wish. And it is better not to call it at all, not even names, not even Adam, Andrey, Audrey. Not even Hepburn.

You *are* surprised in your childhood, in your first childhood. In your second childhood you are blasé about it, about them, about your childhoods. But your élan vital seems to be on its last legs, and that is where languages come to the fore because you begin to count your legs; at least in English. How many legs do I have? you ask yourself or God; but God does not answer this question of yours, for it is beneath His dignity. So you count your legs: one, two, three, four. Then you ask yourself if you are not a cat or a dog, and you answer this question thus, 'I am a cat.' And suddenly you realise you look at the world exactly as my cat did only one year ago. So do the saints I see in the book devoted to Kiev and the early Russian Christians, their churches and icons.

What am I doing here? What is here? What is where? What is what and not? My wife compared my cat to an owl – because of their eyes, of their resemblance, similitude and tunes. Not only were they attuned to each other – they seemed to play the same tunes, over and over again. How? By looking at the air. Is that what they call the Aeolian harp or landforms? And everything begins to sound, and even if it is not everything but just a thing, you are happy; even if it is th. When I look at these saints' faces I say to myself and probably to someone else that I understand their sorrow. But this sorrow of theirs and ours and everywheres is probably the only sentiment we can enjoy in this life of ours and theirs and everyone's and where's.

This glance I saw in my cat's eyes and body. A pleasant surprise? An unpleasant one? You are thrown and pitched into the world, and the world does not mind – that is the difference between you and the world. You do mind. What am I to do here and elsewhere?

Money is the subject matter of another film shown on the channel I am watching out of nostalgia. A man takes a wad of banknotes out of his pocket and hands it to a boy.

'Keep this money,' he says.

'This is my money anyway,' says the boy.

'You're a stupid jerk,' says a man to the first man.

'Shut up!' shouts the first man, pointing a gun at the second man.

'It's not easy to kill a man,' says the second man.

'Let's wait and see,' says the first man, firing a shot. The second man crumples into a heap on the floor.

'Why didn't you wait?' he says.

'No time to lose,' says the first man. 'Give me the money back,' he says to the boy.

'It's my money,' says the boy.

'I'll wrench the money from your grasp,' says the first man and he keeps his promise. The second man scrambles to his feet and kills the first man.

'It's my money,' says the boy, wrenching the wad from the dead man's grasp.

'It's his money,' says the second man, pointing to the dead man. 'He won it.'

'When? How?' asks the boy.

'Leave him in peace,' says the man, putting the wad on the dead man's chest.

Murders, money, sex symbols: this immobile quality, that makes each dreadful day in the very minutest detail like its brother, seems to communicate itself to those external forces the very essence of whose existence is ceaseless change.

There are eyes and they look somewhere – not to see anything; to see nothing. The only eyes I wish to see: they see nothing. And yet they are not blind like the blind's eyes: they do look at nothing but their nothing and nowhere are different. They *see* the nowhere. And they realise

they do not belong, do not belong, do not belong, do not. I do not belong, that's it, that's it, that's it, that's it. That's it, that's that, that's everything and everyone. The One, as usual.

I leave my mother's womb and see whatever I can see, whatever surrounds whatever and ever. I have no idea if it is ever or where; I am confronted with all of you for no reason at all because there are no reasons anywhere. There are only unreasons or just un, but I do not care anyway, and I wonder why I have to care or not to care or do not or care or where. I *am* surprised, there is no denying it, but I wish to know *how* I am surprised. Positively or negatively? They think every baby discovers the world, saying to himself or his mother or her mother or her, 'O, how wonderful! What is it?'

'It is a table. We call it a table in English.'

'And what do you call it in Russian? I am Russian, Mother.'

'Are you?'

'I am. Am I not?'

'Your father is French, you know.'

'Really?'

'Really.'

'So please tell me what you call this object or subject in French.'

'In French they call it table, my son.'

'Really? What's the difference?'

'They say, "*Une table*."'

'Am I "*une*" or nothing at all?'

My cat looked at anywhere, and I really wonder whether he looked at all – at any where, Thee, he, she, it and myth. He just looked and one might say, 'To his astonishment,' or 'his astonishment,' or 'I wish you wouldn't keep springing surprises on me'. (Talking to the world. Don't we talk to the *word* all the time?) The people showed no surprise or anger at their treatment. The people did not because they are human beings, not animals. Animals always wonder why they were cast, must, adjust, holocaust into the world that, for some reason, we call ours.

These eyes mirror whatever there is to mirror in this and other and many others. They reflect the not-knowing or why or when – when will you deliver me from this torture, prison, cell and mall? And mail? And a positive glance tells us this, 'I'm happy to be with you in this world of ours. The dolls you offer me are magnificent and the landscapes I see all around my body testify to God's presence everywhere, even in my bedpan.' I am not sure my cat thinks

along these lines or any other lines I could offer him as a birthday present. In two weeks' time.

> *And then, all of a sudden, the C Major yields its prerogatives to the Tristan chord and you become the poor Soul about which Jacob Boehme speaks in Discourse between Two Souls.*
>
> *'How can I forsake my will,' asks the poor Soul, 'so that the creatures which lodge therein may die, seeing I must be in the world, and also have need of it as long as I live?' And the enlightened Soul answers thus: 'Thou must seriously consider, that in the course of this worldly life thou walkest in the anger of God and in the foundation of hell; and that this is not thy true native country; but that a Christian should, and must live in Christ, and in his walking truly follow him; and that he cannot be a Christian, unless the spirit and power of Christ so live in him, that he becometh wholly subject to it. Now seeing the kingdom of Christ is not of this world, but in heaven, therefore thou must always be in a continual ascension towards heaven, if thou wilt follow Christ; though thy body must dwell among the creatures and use them.'*

Was my cat surprised at seeing my wife's face and fingers? And then I came – not out of the blue, I'm afraid. I am not a cloud, not a bird, not even a colour. I am an entity, as my wife puts it. I *was* surprised when coming out. But I was not struck by the beauty of the world, of every twig, of every *mig* ('instant' in Russian).

And then all of them came and shouted, 'A postman has just delivered a package for you.' The package was wrapped in plain brown paper. You unwrapped it and realised it was a monastery they had sent you with all the icons you had been yearning for. So you put the icons on the floor of your flat, knelt down to pray to them as long as you could without losing either your breath or your élan *religiosa*. You asked yourself, 'What's a prayer,' and you answered, 'Everything is a prayer, this glass of wine, this whine I hear. Leo's (Tolstoy's) dog was sitting by the door whining, so I thought I'd better take it for a walk. I took it for a walk and it stopped whining.'

I, for one, am not disposed to say ‘good afternoon’ even to those I have known for many years because I do not like humans; I like neither their words nor their grimaces. My late cat had a fight with a savage cat I ought to have killed prior to their hostile encounter, to their fatal encounter, judging from the disappearance of the savage cat. Mine died in his sleep in a hospital – not at the ripe old age of 93, I’m afraid. His age was in its first childhood and my love for him was as intricate and simple as the *Missa Solemnis*.

Positive surprise is depicted in many books that talk to us about the beauty we come across everywhere, provided we take the trouble to come and cross something, somewhere. ‘Mummy, what’s this?’

‘It is a flower, my son.’

‘How beautiful this flower is and always will be unless I pick it.’

‘You can pick it, my son.’

‘May I inhale its odour?’

‘When dealing with flowers and Chanel perfumes, you should say “perfume, scent”.’

‘May I inhale its scent to my heart’s content?’

‘You may by all means. And I do hope your heart will be content.’

‘It is content, Mummy.’

‘Did you realise how magnificent our God’s creation is?’

‘What? Who?’

‘Do you think these flowers came to us out of the blue?’

‘No. I think our Daddy planted them along our path – on purpose.’

I salute the negative surprise that shows how disgusting the world is, even if a number of daddies plant bushes, lilies and roses all along our paths. We walk along them and, if necessary, kick them or smash them: their odours are unbearable, and the world should be bearable, at least to some extent.

No, I love neither *amor* nor *fati*. I might fall in love with Patti who crops up in a Mussorgsky song. But your mother goes on talking to you about Jesus and His death and His Cross: your flowers inflamed her passions/feeling further: she is always bent on the Church and its teaching, but today she can hardly withhold the outpouring of her teaching, mission and all-too-human tendency.

And she says to you, ‘He was born and he’ll die tragically – that’s what all these flowers and icons I’ll show you at home express, manifest and teach.’

‘What about our cat’s eyes, Mummy?’

‘What about them?’

‘They’re surprised.’

‘They discover the world and marvel at what they’re seeing and inhaling.’

‘Do eyes inhale anything, Mummy?’

‘Yes, the world, its creator, the Almighty.’

‘They’re horrified, Mummy.’

He was not born; he did not die. And that is why nothing is born and nobody dies. The dies are not cast: everything happens as it should happen and come to pass. You may cast as many dies as you wish, and they will show your eternal life, whatever the image you see as you pick this or that die up. You see an image and you know it is your eternal life. What else do you need to know about all this and that?

Another world altogether. If you do not forsake your mother, father and nephew, you do not follow the word.

I am here because there is nothing else. I am here but there is theprogress they speak of everywhere, their new speak speaks of this progress. I am stuck, stack, stock somewhere and if I want to live (I do want to live) I have to go from one second to another. And this is another second, I suppose. I suppose nothing: every supposition is nothing, anyway. So no suppositions, no conclusions.

There is a road, a mode and whatever it is, and I go through R, through O, A. I am not sure I shall ever cross A. I talk and I am answered:

‘Why can’t you cross AAAAA?’

‘Because if I don’t cross A, I won’t cross B.’

Why should I cross B? ~~BBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBB~~

Just your face, no scenes from your life. No clothes, no folds, not even Deleuze’s *plis*. Statues, rough stones, eyes, their eyes. No pioneers, no conquests of space, no Towers of Babel. Stay where you are, and you are where you stay. A church is a place of protection, not a historical monument. (Every historical monument is the Tower of Babel.) My church is my castle, my home is my castle, my bed is my castle. Nothing is historical. No birth, no death,

no life. It is the moment you will always live through. There is no through, only it, it, it, it, it. Or He, He, He, She.

My onion does not communicate with other onions. But we are on top of the same cathedral. Not a Gothic cathedral: we do not go up. We do not go. We stay, we are flat. On our knees, on our body – do not matter. Flat, flat, flat. The Earth is flat, so am I. This flat is my castle. An archetype, a triumphal *arch*. Just a church.

> *You'll be taken to another plane situated in Australia or New Zealand where there are no kings, no potential husbands who can wrench Isolda from your embrace.*
> *I've got no Isolda in my possession and no kings interfere with my desires. So why should I follow the Tristan chord and its allurements, its dark beams and lascivious dreams?*
>
> *'There is some physiological evidence to support the view that long-term and short-term memories are stored differently,' writes G. J. Whitrow, 'the latter probably being located in the hippocampus, two elongated prominences just below the cerebral cortex, whereas it is thought by many neurophysiologists that long-term memories are stored in the cortex itself.' I should do away with my cortex.*
>
> *I permit myself to remember films and even embroider upon them. No real life please! No real past. I am doing my best to reduce the past and even the present to a cliché-ridden text: sooner or later, the present will become the past. And clichés are timeless.*
>
> *Isn't the fire in the grate our religion? (It has not died yet.) But for our God's presence, our teeth would chatter so much we could hardly talk. And we always feel like talking to each other, don't we? Haven't we enrolled for the course on communication skills?*

Just a flat. Just a cell. Just an ale. A male? A female?

> *Whatever I undertook to kill myself was undone by my destiny which seemed to have been written at the moment of the Big Bang or even earlier – in ineffable singularity or primordial chaos. Indeed I was immortal in both directions: forward and backward. All around me there were only infinite lines along which I was doomed to walk or sail or ride on a horse or drive in a car.*
>
> *I preferred flora and fauna to humans, but that was not enough and I ended up casting my avid glance at the books I had stored in my various libraries.*
>
> *I trust HIM because I have to trust* somebody *in this world and in the Hereafter. Humans have lost all their yardsticks and can no longer measure anything or be relied upon in the domain of ethics and even aesthetics.*

We do not need masterpieces; we need homes. My castles and even my muscles. To keep away, away, away. Can you settle down in the *Mona Lisa*? Her ambiguity, her smile? What do I care? I can settle down forever in the *Missa Solemnis*. Should we make an effort? We should because every armchair is far away. But once you settle in it, you can live happily ever after. That armchair allows you to hear everything, to listen, see and

> *Ruled by Mars. Cardinal. Fire sign. Equinoctial. Male. Eastern. Governs the head and brain. In the plant world rules lichens and seaweed type plants that prepare the ground for other kinds of vegetation. Those born under Aries are alleged to suffer with nervous disorders, headaches, depression, dyspepsia, and are thought to be deficient in phosphate of potassium. Because of this they are advised to eat tomatoes, dandelion leaves, lemons, celery, grapefruit, parsnips, and apples. Herbs to benefit their health include broom and wild cherry.*

I was not born under Aries and so this excerpt concerns neither my life nor my state of health; and yet I do eat tomatoes, celery, apples and grapefruit.

> I am still and what is still
>
> Does not move. Yet God does move

> And you watch His movement, even if do
>
> Not.
>
> Not anything. Just move; not.

I am not under anything but my birth entitles me to images (if I am not blind), to sounds and scents and many, many other things. I see something and I do not say to myself, 'I wish I saw nothing.' I see this something and they say it is beautiful: 'Leonardo, Palladio.' They say and they are beautiful and it lasts for 72 years. Does it really last? Or does it dwindle away?

> *Virgo. Ruled by Mercury. Mutable. Earth sign. Nocturnal. Feminine. Southern. Governs abdomen, hands, and intestines. In the plant world rules sedges, cereals, and grasses. Those born under this sign are said to suffer from pneumonia, colds, coughs, catarrh, pleurisy, and need plenty of potassium sulphate. They are recommended the foods suitable for Aries, with, in addition, the herbs rosemary, valerian, and motherwort.*

I *was* born under Virgo, but I suffer neither from pneumonia nor pleurisy. As this sign governs hands, it might be responsible for my piano playing. Nocturnal, féminin.

> *Once this sign was thought of as a young maiden, but later she became an older woman with rather pedantic views. Intelligent, precise, clean and observant. A practical supporter of order. Usually critically inclined and patient, with none of the flamboyance of the last sign.*

What was the last sign, I wonder? Leo. Ruled by the sun. Was I mistaken about the importance of the sun in the domain of astrology?

I do not recognise myself when reading about my sign: I am certainly not a practical supporter of order.

ST PARASKIEVA PYATNITSA WITH SCENES FROM HER LIFE

ST ALEXIUS, METROPOLITAN OF MOSCOW WITH SCENES FROM HIS LIFE

What scenes? What life? I have never lived. At least I have done my best not to.

I AM THE CATHEDRAL. RING THE BELLS.