

VALERY ALEFF

PROSTHESIS

PRO

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 graphomaniac 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 words 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 a series of 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 Paeon 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 *cannot* 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 underearthy 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 wrath 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 wrath – 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 this bed 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 and 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 so on. 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 sometimes 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 about 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 precocities. 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 puts 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 papyrus, made-in-China sheets of paper 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 one of our and their Oscars 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 and diverse 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.'

Let us analyse the last sentences of the above paragraph, although one might think and even say that they deserve no analysis, being situated outside the trajectory of our ideas, if we are to reach our goals and hold out until next Monday, as the Russians put it. Actually we should not care about what the Russians say and where they put their words; anyway, we should prevent them putting anything in our heads which are already cluttered with so much nonsense we are hardly capable of coming up with new or even old ideas. All these sentences reflect the din we touched upon in the same sentences or somewhere else; and we must get rid of all these dings and dongos one may define as utter chaos. There was chaos in the theatre when the bomb went off, as our newspapers put it, and one might suppose the same goes for our brains where a sort of chaos reigns, precluding our participation in the life on Earth, in the Darwin-celebrated evolution. We watch a documentary about the story of human evolution over the last three million years and we say to ourselves, 'We have to go on for another three

million years, otherwise we'd better commit suicide and forget about it. About evolution, Darwin, about winning, defeats and *dar* which means a "gift" in Russian.'

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*. Basil, on the other hand, speaks about the same point thus:

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, if any. 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 Prophet*? 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 darkneses 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 this book 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 updated 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 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 about Russia at all, they speak about 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 were 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 hope: 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. Chirrup, 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 – with the exception of the Almighty – and consequently can take part in the competition the aim of which may appear bizarre to those accustomed to other competitions and compilations. The latter group of contests is devoted to beauties whose bathing costumes, skins and so on gleam and shine in the sunshine or even outside of it. The former group has 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 saw 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 skinings 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 Luneire*. Sure enough, this riding hood, if any, is blue in accordance with the work where Pierrot Luneire 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 be frightened:

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 – which does not happen often, given that we are monotheists and do not believe in *many* Almighties – 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 corpses 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 *darkvoyant*, *gloomvoyant*, *hellvoyant*. You wish you were not voyant at all but you *are* voyant and *fearvoyant*, 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. And it is unquestionable and so 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 stocsaks 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

An explosion and the screen you are looking at is 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 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 cramped 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 out the stone, 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.