

VALERY ALEFF

RITORNELLO

Dear Chikako,

Yesterday I received your friendly, highly emotional letter. From the bottom of my heart I thank you for your support.

What is going on in Ukraine can be only felt, for any description would fall short of the horrors we watch on screens of all kinds. I was born in Russia; the first syllables I uttered were Russian. I discovered the feeling of love in Moscow. And it is in the house where I was born that I said to myself, 'Death is incontrovertibly true.'

Russians and Ukrainians are engaged in a fratricidal struggle, and we continue to murder our brothers and sisters, our mothers and their embryos instead of putting an end to this despicable praise of folly. I constantly ask myself whether it wouldn't be wiser to switch off all screens and try to fall asleep without pills, implicitly trusting Morpheus and his hypnosis.

There are many dupes, a lot of propaganda on both sides. The news is so contradictory – I watch Russian *and* Ukrainian programmes – that one is tempted to say, 'It is heaven,' when looking at the Earth, at one's own grave. One thing is certain: attacking one's neighbours is a crime, and Putin is a brilliant representative of this murky kingdom. The King of the Night, to paraphrase Mozart. Listening to his arias would be a horrible experience. Actually I wonder if it is not after all his arias we are listening to: bombings, cries for help.

Even music is powerless, let alone poetry and philosophy. I wish I could spend the remainder of my days in Japan, far from Russia and her history from which I shall never awaken, alas. The most powerful sleeping pill, upon my word!

Looking forward to our future, music-permeated meetings.

Your Valery

PART ONE

THE EARTH

You go on as if you were a show. And yet you are probably not a show because you stay at home and have no intention of going anywhere and dancing in public, showing your tongue or even your gums. You stay where you are and you are even tempted to say you have always been where you are now, meaning you are immortal and Roman soldiers sat exactly where you are sitting now, according to an English poet whose name I do not remember. That is how I always start my works: I recognise my inability to remember anything with the exception of my penname and the house where I sit, write, eat and dream almost eternally. I am almost as immortal as all other beings, including wasps, ants and anthills.

Suppose I *were* a Roman soldier, an ancient Roman soldier, not one of those soldiers who fought under Mussolini's regime, dying for nothing or a utopia or Ethiopia or any other country situated on another continent about which no one knew anything. I am a Roman soldier and I sit in the same armchair, listening to the wind that displays its abilities and powers in my garden where trees, my trees to some extent, bow and scrape to show their admiration for the wind or even a tempest: one never knows what blows in one's garden and also in one's brains, minds and souls. You say at some point, 'It's the Western wind,' but then you change your mind and your heart, which results in yet another statement of yours, 'It's the Eastern wind I'm exposed to.' And someone says, 'If it's the Eastern wind you admire in spite of everything, you're a communist or a Chinese billionaire.' And both are wrong and condemned irrevocably unless you are commercially linked to China and also to some former Soviet republics.

But you are looking for guidance; so am I. Of course I could die on the spot and so no guidance would be needed: the spot is the same. And so is death: I seem to believe that death is the same everywhere, in spite of the diversity we face, whenever looking out of any of our windows. And even upon opening one's eyes, one can see the world differently, only because one has a splitting headache or any other splitting pain that splits everything, tearing one's members and thoughts apart: neither this one nor anyone else recognises one's members, thoughts and manners in the aftermath of this onslaught. One is no longer one; one is two, three, four and five except that one's members do not work properly: they are halves, halves, halves. And thirds, thirds, thirds. And if someone asks, 'What's the matter with you?' you may answer, 'Half of the matter, a third of the matter.'

Not to do things by halves. You learn a few maxims as you go along; and you apply these maxims to whatever you see in front of you and also behind your spine and thoughts. At the back of your mind. If you are not supposed to do things by halves, you eliminate all the halves you have at your disposal. (Do you really have anything at your disposal?) For instance, you remove one half of your being, even if you have no idea what your being means in the context. Perhaps, in this particular context, your being means your *non*-being, but what you are preoccupied with comes down to halves, halves, thirds; and not beings as such or nonesuch, nonsuch. You see a being in front of you and say to yourself, 'This is not a being. It's just half a being, otherwise I wouldn't be able to combat it and reduce it to this and that. So I reduce this half to a half of this half and so on and so forth. At the end of so forth there will remain nothing of the being I wrestled with at the beginning of the world.' That is how the world goes on or round and round and round. It starts with a beginning and goes on in search of an ending which does not come, in spite of the calendars we come across when digging in the Earth; or when flying over her, anxious to photograph everything, every monument, every Roman and Spanish soldier.

So I just sit somewhere and think that all my writings and doings are centred upon this spot and thought which I do not distinguish from another thought or gesture. What difference does it make, all of it? I need a sort of clarity, a sort of charity, a hymn to humanity that dwindles to a speck, whenever I think about it in earnest. Then I try not to think about it *in earnest* and I say to myself that all the objects I see and study, whenever I feel like it (and I wonder if I *really* feel anything and if there is a 'like' I can rely upon and use in the course of my studies) will disappear forever; from my field of vision at least. Well, suppose I am dying and the object I can touch is no longer, for the simple reason that I am dying. So I cannot touch it any more as if it were no longer there. Where, where, where? I am asking myself. There. But I no longer know what 'there' means and where it can be found, after a short and fruitful search; or research. Where is 'there'? This kind of question is usually frowned upon by lovers of clarity who are, however, inferior to lovers of light. We should not confuse these lovers with those lovers, should we? Lovers of light speak of their illuminations for quite a while and then, eager to illustrate their discourses, draw all their curtains apart and say, 'Here's the light we're looking for and at, you know.'

What is light? Of course you are likely to ask yourself another question, algorithmically connected to the previous one, 'What is life?' You can say, 'Life is the light you see upon coming out of your mother's womb whose hospitality you took advantage of for several months.' But any bystander can ask you whether you had no notion of light in your mother's womb, during your stay in this hospitable abode. 'Yes, from time to time I saw light in my mother's home, in the house provided by my mother's nature, substance and movements. Suddenly I would see a host of celestial beings whose presence enlightened my seclusion.'

You seek for any enlightenment you can profit from during your stay on the surface of the Earth and also under its crust, when enjoying your afterlife to the utmost. It is true that this stage of our lives – whenever it comes under *their* (the poets') scrutiny – is painted in gloomy colours: no one really believes that our underground lives are full of colours, lights and Christmas trees. Yet every Christmas is celebrated with candles and toys – in the underworld and outerworld to the same extent. And sometimes their extent is much bigger than ours, although many humans think that nothing can be bigger and more magnificent than what they see around them; in the United States or Dubai. What do *I* see at this particular moment? Is it really as particular as all that? As all *what*? Yes, I must admit I see a sort of light on which I could rely in my direst moments, it seems to me. And then I begin to analyse this 'seems to me', saying to myself, 'Whatever seems to me doesn't exist because I can't touch it either with my fingers or with my legs that played football for many years, when I was young, assuming that I *was* young at one time.' I know I was younger at some point which I cannot really see and recognise. But was I really *young*, once upon a time and space? Did I run from one corner to another, hoping to fulfil something that does not exist? Perhaps I thought that everything existed, even life on Mars about which they talked a lot on Soviet television. Perhaps I thought I existed unconditionally; and yet I am not sure I questioned my own existence that was beyond any doubt, as Descartes often said and wrote.

What do I doubt now? Do I take the trouble to doubt, to put anything anywhere, bent on dissecting anything and anywhere and also the where, the when and the who? You question 'the' and then you realise, after much searching, that there is only 'the', nothing, nobody else, which means there are no subjects; there are only articles. You say, 'The H.' or 'The Q', and then you take a few steps, leading you somewhere – from where you contemplate at ease whatever you designated as a representative of our species. But no one, not even 'Q', represents our species today, let alone tomorrow. So you hold up a glass of vodka and say, 'This is to humanity

which I vote for.' You do vote for humanity, but it loses. You vote for it another time and it loses again because humanity is a notorious, monotonous loser.

Many get the feeling they live in a painting or a novel, but this conclusion is rather trite and does not merit our investigation. Why not say we live in a room, on the moon, in a house, in a forest? No longer do tautologies satisfy an austere intellect that continues to search for truth or at least for some glimpses of the Absolute Revelation. If you venture to compare your existence to what happens inside a work of music, you may attract some attention on the part of those who wish to remain conspicuous (by their presence) in human society, being notorious among its members – for their wit or their wrath or even recurrent suicidal urges.

Italian "return" also spelled *ritornelle*, or *ritornel*, plural *ritornelli*, *ritorellos*, *ritornelles*, or *ritornels* a recurrent musical section that alternates with different episodes of contrasting material. The repetition can be exact or varied to a greater or lesser extent. In the *concerto grosso* the full orchestra (*tutti*) has the *ritornello*; the solo group (*concertino*) has the contrasting episodes. This morning I am probably within some *tutti* or other because human existence seems to resound in my room as if I were living in a concert hall where Bruckner's *Te Deum* is performed day in, day out. So I might hope this sensation will last for some time, overlapping my breakfast and even a traditional walk around our district. I wonder why I write so often about Bruckner's *Te Deum*; at least I touch upon it in every work of mine. Sometimes I really have the feeling I *touch* it: its affinity with the Buddhist instrument continually used during prayers and other rituals is unquestionable; although I am not sure there are any rituals outside an ordinary or an extraordinary prayer.

What is the name of this instrument? It looks like a wooden rattle. They turn it, turn it, turn it as if it were also a *ritournelle*; in its own right, as I say almost every week. Well, it is probably enough to think about *Te Deum*, singing a few bars from it inwardly – in C Major. Of course you are allowed to kneel down if you feel like it and I often feel like it, to tell the truth; and that in spite of the pain which traverses my knees, sometimes slowly, sometimes pretty fast, as if to remind me of lightning and even of *King Lear*. Anyway, whenever I hear the ritual question, 'Have you pray'd to-night, Valery?' ('Have you pray'd this morning, Valery?') I either sing a few bars from *Te Deum* or go down on my knees, which is incidentally a good exercise, not only in spiritual terms. And sometimes I let my body sink even deeper, getting closer and closer to the carpet: for almost two years I have been taking advantage of my piety which enables me to sleep for another hour – on the floor, at some distance from my mattresses and other contraptions widely used for human comfort.

Of course one day I might remember *everything* on condition I devote some time to this pastime – the remembrance of things past – to the detriment of my other projects and temptations. Recalling one thing per day – a wonderful pastime except that you would not know when to stop. And also *how* to stop, which is even more problematic. Nothing is easier than triggering off an avalanche of memories. Anyway, it is much easier than dealing with mountains and their snow, although you are seldom buried under your memories: they are less dangerous than avalanches and cliffs. And clefts are dangerous not only on account of their depths and bottoms: let us not forget that eagles often nest in clefts in the rocks. You can be devoured by an eagle before you notice anything, the pain being too arrogant, too domineering. Well, I suppose I did remember something this morning, when carrying out my prayers or singing the opening bars of *Te Deum*. Incidentally, it is much easier to sing these opening bars than the counterpart one finds at the beginning of Mozart's *Requiem*: you just sing C,

occasionally repeating it. And any professional musician will realise you are singing Bruckner's masterpiece that some of them – some conductors, I mean – append to his *Ninth Symphony*. But you do not have to sing, hum or whistle this symphony: producing a few repetitions of the opening C is quite enough for your praise. Anyway, a host of angels can fulfil this duty much better than the Vienna Philharmonic.

Well, let us return to the memory I might have enjoyed this morning. Once again I have to cope with my memory's proverbial weakness – I have created a few proverbs in this weakness's honour – because I do not remember what I remembered. This reminds me of a stupid anecdote I heard in Moscow many years ago. A man comes to a woman, presumably his wife; in other words, he comes back home, *regagne ses pénates*, and speaks to his wife in French – for the fun of it.

He says, 'You know, my dear, I don't have this disease.'

'What disease are you talking about?'

'I haven't talked about it in detail, have I?'

'No, you haven't. Could you please enlighten me on the subject?'

'I don't have this illness, the illness that affects, attacks and kills a lot of old men and women.'

'What illness?'

'Wait a minute. I wrote its name on a sheet of paper. But where on earth did I put it? I didn't put it on the ground, on the surface of the Earth. Did I?'

'At least I'm quite aware you didn't put it on the floor.'

'What about carpets and doormats?'

'Let's drop the subject, shall we?'

'I might have dropped it somewhere. I wonder where, in what part of the city I could have dropped it.'

In short, they did find the scrap of paper – after much floor-searching – and it greeted them with the word 'sclerosis'. And for a while (it might have lasted the whole day) he kept saying to himself it was the best solution to all his problems: forgetting his identity, parentage, the country of his birth, the bed of his birth. Even his body had to be forgotten, he thought as he looked at his fragile, unreliable, fatally ill muscles and tendons. How to forget the pain he felt day and night? One cannot say he spent only sleepless nights at this stage of his deplorable existence, but whenever he woke he felt the pain I am talking about, the pain about which he was always talking to his doctor who was fed up with pains and patients, the indefatigable sources of these pains. At such moments you are yearning for eternal rest, but the only rest, the only result you can achieve in this domain, lies within the *tutti* I mentioned at some point, when speaking about my *ritournelle* (let us resort to its French version, if only for a while). But the rest embedded in this respite is not eternal, contrary to what might be painted by a wounded, fatally wounded imagination and hope. Let us not forget what I wrote some time ago. Generally speaking, you should on no account forget key points, the ones on which you can rely throughout your life and even death. In your lifetime you do not rely on death, on its repose; in deathtime you rely upon life, upon its divertissements and even pains.

So you advance towards this *tutti* after indulging in what they call 'concertino', and you remember with horror what you felt in the very middle of this concertino of yours, when you realised that no bodies, hands, no torso could be found during your walk through this valley of death. You began to shout, 'Where's your *tutti*? I'm longing for your *tutti*! My horse for a *tutti*! My kingdom for a torso! My kingdom for my mother, my father, my brothers and sisters!' For a while you hesitated as to what you could offer to the *tutti* and its owners. Did they

prefer horses to kingdoms or vice versa? Perhaps it was a dream, a hallucination: suddenly you saw a horse, in front of you, within your reach, at your disposal. And you said to yourself, 'As for me, I prefer horses because the kingdom I'm thinking about is whatever I see and feel around me – an enormous chunk of pain and despair. Sure enough, this chunk is made up of both pain and despair, but I can't tell you whether its key-factor is pain *or* despair. I'm inclined to think and conclude it is the atrocious pain I'm feeling right now – everywhere, throughout my body and the cosmos. A famous Russian dancer, Maris Liepa, said, 'When you dance, your space is not limited to stages and theatres. It's the cosmos you must feel under your feet and overhead.' No one listens to this Russian dancer with the exception of my pain. It can be found and felt in every nook and cranny of every cosmos. (Suppose there are lots of them. After all, we must pay homage to Giordano Bruno; from time to time.)

And then you hear a concerto grosso or rather the solo group you can see from where you are standing in the midst of your pain. And then you begin to walk in spite of all the pains you can feel and talk about, and suddenly (out of the blue, for the *tutti*'s colour is blue) there comes a piece of solace, and you write in your diary: '*Tutti* is God and He must have heard my prayer. And yet, according to my recollection, I haven't prayed for almost 20 years.' And what if you continue to feel your pain as if it did not believe in God; as if it did not obey your God, any god? What if even pagan gods are beyond its field of vision, in some vicious, perverse and decadent Beyond? You continue to walk through the blue you encountered on your way and then you see a chunk of red colour – coming out of the blue; as if the world computer had switched to another channel, another program. And what about your pain? It is constant and you write in your diary, 'Colours do not affect my pain so I cannot count on them when in dire need of help. If I had the privilege of listening to Scriabin's *Final Action* or whatever it's called in the Russian original, I might be cured by music, not by phony colours.'

Sometimes it is easy to get out of your pain, of its domain, saying and repeating, 'Pain, game, pain, game.' You do not even have to specify they are identical (twins, as I usually say); they are just interchangeable, and pain is annihilated through your inborn, incurable optimism which turns everything into a game, including your death and the hellish tortures waiting for you in the wings of life. So you direct your steps towards these tortures which are carefully and colourfully described by Dante (but not by Doré whose illustrations are devoid of colours; the same goes for Botticelli's drawings, incidentally) and you see all those fires and brimstones inside which your future colleagues writhe in agony and in a cacophony of cries and coughing fits. You say to them rather nonchalantly, 'Your dances are beautiful, my dear future colleagues. I'm burning to join you.' And you begin to burn. A nice game, isn't it? What would you call it? A bonfire? Then you spot Jean Cocteau carrying this bonfire on his back, saving it from the fire he talked about in days of yore. Saving fire from fire? What does that mean? Does that mean there is not enough fire in Hell and therefore you have to save some for the future or for another hell? How many hells are there in the Hereafter? (And on Earth?) Does their number have anything in common with Dante's *Inferno* and its ritornelli? Every vicious circle is a hell in its own right or rather wrong: we are talking about hell and not about virtues and their final destination – Paradise. (Not on Earth – in heaven. Earthly paradises are worthless.)

There is another linguistic game rooted in the previous one, in the pain-game motif. Detractors of this particular motif or leitmotif say that the rhyme displayed, even shamelessly exhibited, by this Wagnerian leitmotif is shaky, lame and downright ludicrous. *Their* version, the one they propose and propound, boils down to the following couple of words and notions: pain-gain. Its closeness to Christianity and its insistence on the importance of suffering either on a cross or somewhere else is obvious and needs no Talmud-like comments; let

alone comments on comments on comments. So, instead of engaging your interest in the numbers provided by stock markets and brokers, you had better suffer both physically and psychologically, bent on imitating the New Testament or just the workers about whom both Marx and Lenin thought day in, day out: those who worked in Russia or England. When? Throughout Russian history; unless we decide that there were centuries when there were no workers on the surface of the Earth; no workers, no factories. Only peasants and their wheat. And also farmers, according to a number of newspapers; unless there were no newspapers in that day and age. Incidentally, many people think there were no days and even no ages in those remote, obscure, non-existent times. And we are tempted to ask what could be found in those steppes and ravines in those vague, uncertain days which were so barbaric that we wonder if we should study their contents at all, especially if we get no money for our pointless labours. What *do* we get from those times, days and nights? Just a few lines, a few books written during sleepless nights. The absence of Scheherazade becomes more and more ostentatious and painful. Just another pain, you know, as we say to our friends.

So what is our *tutti* after all? That is the question we ask incessantly so as not to grow utterly indifferent to whatever happens around us and even in our heart of hearts. The point is we shall never grow indifferent to what happens in our stomach of stomachs which is far more important than our hearts and their contents, as gourmets declare all the time. And what about our concertino? We need a dinner table for this kind of thing, for the concertino to which I am devoting my time and even space at this particular moment. (I am sitting in front of my computer.) First we go shopping or we ask our servant to run this sort of errand for the sake of our wellbeing. The point is there are *many* wellbeings at our disposal, and it is useless to point out that the number of our ill-beings is much more *elevated* than whatever we can picture to ourselves within the opposite pole, in the anti-seamy side of life. Well, we play our games and decide that everything else – whatever remains outside the scope of our games – is also a game, an extended game directly related to our everlasting happiness. It is not a game of chess, contrary to what might be presumed: whenever a bad writer speaks of life, he (it is usually a man: women are far more intelligent) talks about chessboards and pawns, queens, officers and so on to intimate that our life is manipulated from afar or from close quarters. In short, there is a player who moves our human pawns and towers or whatever they are called today: chess terminology has undergone a lot of metamorphoses in the course of a few centuries; unless this game was invented by Napoleon or Gandhi. Isn't it an Indian game after all? (Indian or Persian?) After *what*, one may ask? After the First World War, after the Second World War, after the Third World War.

We should decide once and for all – and once and for all is also a ritornello – if death or life is the subject under discussion; or above it. If it is the subject *under* discussion we are almost duty-bound to speak about death, otherwise our discussion would be divorced from tombs and Hell as depicted by Dante and his followers. I think that even cavemen thought that Hell was situated under the Earth. One may wonder whether there were curtains in the under-terrestrial abode uncompromisingly buried in the pit of times, days and epochs. Buried but not dead, as we say to ourselves, whenever we itch to penetrate the gloom of their caves and thoughts, itches, inches and desires. We do penetrate all of them and many other things, longing to find out if our ancestors were different from us, not only in terms of our science, gadgets and skyscrapers. They *were* different from our skyscrapers unless we attribute to anthills the same or almost the same qualities which permanently characterise *our own*

skyscrapers, especially those built in Dubai, if my memories do not betray me utterly and irremediably. I might say that everything and everybody betray me always, irremediably and inescapably, but I do not have to voice whatever I think inwardly; at least I have no intention of making public *all* my thoughts and doings.

Anyway, if a subject is *above* discussion, we might say, 'It is so lofty that no discussion, however scientific and spiritual, can reveal its intricacies, secrets and absurdities.' For a while, we think in terms of clouds and daffodils, for poetry is never too far from our meditations and conclusions. We wander and wonder, and poetry follows us hard on the heels of our thoughts. Clouds, daffodils, Dubai, Siberia, Hell. It is not always easy to cope with the mind's truant disposition, and sometimes the only remedy we can lay our thoughts upon rejects us and despatches our bodies to our final disappearance, alias death. We say to ourselves that we have no time for nonsense because our souls – there are many of them – have not been saved, in spite of our prayers and visits to churches and priests. And this nonsense will never save us from ourselves and our sins unless it is logically bracketed with negative theology, with its eternal ritornello, 'neither this nor that nor that nor this'. Of course we can always resort to pantheism, even without quoting Spinoza and his followers. We just say that whatever we do or see is divine and every word we utter or write is a divinity in its own right. So words cannot be defined and we are duty-bound to cloud the issue by wrapping every word in a sort of cloud so that you do not really know what you see – a cloud or a meaningful word. Soon you come to the inevitable conclusion: even if it is a word you are reading, it is not a word created by a cloud; and it is pointless to evoke both Polonius and Hamlet in this connection. Instead of a connection you would anyway see a cloud, and you cannot connect anything by means of a cloud, given its cloudy, vaporous, unreliable texture.

'It looks like a crocodile.'

'I disagree with you completely. It looks like a cat.'

'But this cat looks like a cloud. Don't you agree with my assertion?'

'This cat looks like a cat.'

'I beg to differ. It is a dog.'

'What kind of dog, in your opinion?'

'How do you mean?'

'A breed of dog/cat/horse/sheep/cattle. That's what I mean.'

'It's a kind dog – it doesn't bite you if you dare touch it.'

'And if I don't?'

'Then it is sure to bite you viciously.'

'He or she or it?'

'What's more, it will eat you alive. Or it will eat your heart out.'

Clouds are not as straightforward as they may appear at first glance, and even endless discussions which turn them into animals or rudimentary objects do not exhaust their possibilities and virtualities. Apparently there is such a thing as a radio cloud, which does not mean you can tune in to this cloud via a local radio station. They have their auras and some of us think they are angels in disguise; or just angels, archangels or other divinities that inhabit not only the heavens but also the Earth, strange as it may seem to us today. Of course there are traditionalists who continue to think of them in terms of animals: now and then you can hear a dialogue along the lines of what we actually hear in *Hamlet* and some other works. People say that radio clouds behave like animals – like cats and dogs who fight for their survival above our heads, within our field of vision. Two clouds are cats

and one cloud is a dog resolved to exterminate these cats as if its struggle for life included the utter annihilation of other species, with the exception of the human race. Who indeed could supply so many bones to our dogs in our absence, in the absence of human presence? We consume our lunch and make sure that the bones left on our plates make their way to our favourite dog's mouth. That is why our dog does not bite us day in, day out, which could happen if there were no bones left on our dinner table or in our rubbish bins. Sometimes we forget our dog's voracious behaviour and absent-mindedly get rid of the bones in question, thanks to a number of rubbish bins decorating our kitchen and corridors. But then we hear our dog's reaction: a few barks that remind us of the bones we mercilessly dropped into one of our rubbish bins. So we head for the rubbish bin that contains our dog's breakfast or supper and dig out the bones on which our dog's wellbeing and bliss dramatically depend. The dog rushes towards our hands and we drop the bones into its mouth as if it were just another rubbish bin, another rubbish chute.

There are linguists whose judgement differs from the opinions we are bombarded with in our everyday existence. Crocodiles, foxes, leopards that change their spots. These talks do not deviate from the Hamlet-Polonius discussion we are acquainted with thanks to Shakespeare's genius. But our linguists affirm that every cloud is a word or the logos. Wreathed in ironic smiles, their opponents say with gusto, 'Why do you keep on talking about the logos? Don't you know the idiom "to sleep like a logos"? Today, the logos is asleep, our dear fellow creatures.' 'The logos is wide-awake,' retort the logoists. 'Anyway, every word is of a divine origin.' Of course it would be almost intolerable to regard every word as God the Almighty; and yet its connection with the logos is obvious, if not frankly tautological. Word *sive* God, in other words. Like a conscientious, meticulous writer you shake your head, after reading the word you have just written. You shake your head and say, 'Not that, not this word.' And you set about looking for another word, not necessarily a synonym of the one you have just discarded in pursuit of the *mot juste*. After checking the result of your renewed, almost desperate efforts, you shake your head once again. You can also shake some other member of your body – your leg, for instance. You shake your leg as you say and repeat, '*Pas le mot juste, pas le mot juste*.' Not the word 'just' in English.

But the logos rears its beautiful head again, even if we do our utmost to bury it somewhere, far away from our studies and everyday life. Of course we are reminded that the logos has many translations, meanings and after-effects, and so if you begin to talk about it, someone is likely to interrupt you in the middle of your discourse, if not at its very outset. 'Which logos are you talking about? Are you talking about the father or son, the king or his subjects?' And you recall a few dialogues and arguments that have been analysed exhaustively in the course of the centuries we can observe from where we are sitting or standing tonight. The logos is either written or uttered, and I, for one, do not think we should mistrust a written word for the sake of what is known as the logos-sound. When you open your mouth and a word or logos goes out into the open air, you assume the air of a father who guides his son and endows our lives with utmost, almost divine importance. The son should be taken care of, otherwise he may look helpless, muttering, 'What do I mean? Do I mean anything? What's the meaning of life, of death? Is death meaningful? And what about life? Is it just a series of words, of their combinations?' The father assumes the air of a patriarch – he *is* a patriarch, if not our Lord – and says, 'Life is the logos. And the logos can fend for himself and therefore needs neither a series of words, nor any other company.' And the logos, alias the king, says to his son that only his grandeur – he is often compared to the grandeur of Wagner's music – confers both dignity and unquestionable value on whatever the son writes in his leisure time: in his bed, in his bathroom.

So the logos is a human being or the Almighty painted by Michelangelo. It is not for nothing that in the Sistine Chapel, under the Flying God (for once we are not dealing with the Flying Dutchman) one can read the following caption: 'The Logos.' And yet one should not confuse fathers with sons, and even Turgenev put us on guard against this rather familiar confusion. We say about a teenager, 'This boy is the dead spit of his father.' Whenever we hear such a remark, we should reply, 'Perhaps, perhaps. But this boy is *not* his father, for the simple reason that he is not *his own* father. Anyway, he's too young for this role. Even in 20 years' time he won't be his own father, although he may become a father of somebody else, of a little boy or girl.' But whenever we talk about fathers, we remember not only Turgenev, but the murders committed by Freud and his characters, alias his sons who, for some obscure reason, remove their fathers from the surface of the Earth. We also recall the sun and its rays which may cause too much trouble, given our eyes' fragility and susceptibility. And once again we come across the notion to which we have grown accustomed in the course of my exposé: the logos, the logos, the logos. (Some scholars speak about the Holy Trinity of the logos.) According to some specialists, the logos has only *one* function or quality: it protects our eyes from blindness unavoidably caused by the brightness of God or the sun. Instead of clouds, we put our logos in between our Lord and our eyes, which does not prevent us from enjoying the sight of God *completely* – to the point of being born once again and probably forever. The logos is identical to God except that we do not grow blind as a result of our contemplation or meditation. On the contrary – we see the world or rather the entire cosmos for the first time as if we (and the cosmos) were born yesterday.

But let us return to our everyday world and forget for a while both monasteries and their cells where people often go blind, in spite of being protected by walls and roofs. At least that is what they convey to us in their diaries. 'I saw our Lord the other night and now I can't see anything with the exception of my Saviour. They bring me a cup of coffee, but I see neither the cup nor the coffee it contains and cherishes to some extent. I see only my salvation embodied by my Saviour Who will never bring me either coffee or tea. And I'll never ask Him to do anything of the kind – not for all the tea in China. I'll drink His blood. That is what I'm about to do, by the way. I see His blood, and this blood of His is as luminous as the sun. Much more, much more. I can look at the sun for five minutes without going blind. Whenever I glance at my Saviour, I go blind at once as if going blind were a natural process to which I willingly submit on account of my unshakeable faith. They shake me, shake me, shake me, those enemies of humankind. But my faith stays with me, for it is rooted to the spot. And the spot to which it happens to be rooted is myself, my soul of souls. Sometimes I say to myself that I am a spot on the sun; sometimes I come to the conclusion that I am the sun itself. Or the Son Himself. And then I'm reminded of my blindness and of the way I should behave in this world where there is the Father, where there is the Son. And I am neither of them. I am not even the logos, contrary to what I have said so many times in the course of my existence. Yes, I used to think I am the logos and consequently all my words are logoi, little flowers or logoi. I proudly thought, "Whatever I say is divine, almighty, ineffable." There's a poem I read in my youth, and in this poem we come across a king or rather his tomb on which there remain only these words, "I am the most powerful king in the universe. Look at my tomb and shake with fear and veneration." Instead of this king, all one could see was a grain of sand. Of course you could see a world in this grain of sand. Well and good – you can still see the world in this grain of sand. But try as you may, you'll never see this king, even if you manage to find a few coins with his profile. Or his profile with a few coins. Why? Because you'll say to yourself, "I don't care about this profile. I don't even want to look at it. I do care for the money, though."

Sometimes we say to others as we watch a documentary on our computer, ‘Look at this actress! Isn’t she a queen?’ And someone is likely to voice the following objection, ‘She is a goddess, not a queen.’

‘No, she is the logos itself, herself.’

‘No, she is just Tamara Makarova, a famous Soviet actress. She was married to a famous film director going by the name of Gerasimov.’

‘Was he a king, a god or just the logos?’

‘Or just a film director?’

‘Or just a Soviet citizen?’

‘Did he end his life in the Gulag?’

‘What about *her*? Did they often rape her in their concentration camps?’

When walking up or down a street, one can hear the following words, from time to time: ‘Here goes the logos.’ A famous Russian ballerina, Maya Plisetskaya, said in an interview, ‘I mistrust human beings.’ ‘Do you hate the human race?’ asked the journalist. ‘I wouldn’t go so far. But I’m displeased with their behaviour.’ ‘Are you still talking about humans?’ asked the journalist. ‘Yes, I am. I wish I could talk about dogs, all the time. Never mind, never mind.’ ‘Why?’ asked the journalist. ‘Why are you displeased with them?’ ‘Because they’re always green with envy. When I see such a man or such a woman, I never say to myself, “Here goes a green activist.” I see only envy, envy, envy.’ ‘Because your charisma is the envy of the world,’ said the journalist out of politeness.

We speak of the logos and we insist on the importance of this word, saying, ‘This is the word.’ And if someone says, ‘Do you mean to say this word is as significant and unique as the Book?’ you answer, ‘Yes, of course. It is the word, the book – it is everything and everybody.’ But after a while you realise you are way off the mark: the logos protects you only symbolically, metaphorically, metaphysically or spiritually. Of course you can say, ‘I put the logos in between my eyes and the sun which is on the point of depriving me of my sight and mind.’ But you should admit you are playing with words and notions: you simply cannot put the logos anywhere (you can put any *logo* anywhere), with the exception of a sheet of paper and your computer screen. You can carry this (or any other) sheet of paper above your head on a sunny day instead of buying a Chinese umbrella like the one you saw many times in the hands of your grandmother. But you are stubborn and your determination to prove your alliance with the logos is indomitable, and no amount of argumentation can talk you out of your determination. So you carry this sheet of paper above your head as you walk along your street, and many passers-by ask you the same question, ‘Are you sure it’s the right way to protect oneself from the murderous heat of the sun?’ and you answer, ‘Only the logos can protect one from the arrows of destiny and misery.’ And then you explain to all these pedestrians, all these cyclists and motorcyclists: ‘The logos is omnipotent on account of its omnipresence. The logos is everywhere and the sheet of paper, alias a particle of the logos I’m carrying, communicates its truth to the sun. Do you know that there’s a similar sheet of paper, alias the logos, on the surface of the sun? Do you know that the only way to clean the sun, to cleanse it of sin is to cover all its spots with the logos?’

And a middle-aged pedestrian asks you the following question, ‘Are you sure there are many logoi under the sun, a multitude of logoi?’

‘*Under* the sun and *on* the sun,’ you answer nonchalantly.

‘But I see the spots we’re talking about with the naked eye. In spite of everything. Without going blind, you know.’

‘I know, I know,’ you answer. ‘The operation called “Its spots and our logos” isn’t over yet. We should shift the logoi around for a while – until we reach their right positions. You see, some time ago we sent a number of logoi to the sun, and that constitutes a major blow to the Devil’s might and intentions. I hope you raise no doubts about the provenance of the above-mentioned spots. At some point, in days of yore, the Devil resolved to make his presence visible to almost everyone – with the exception of the blind, needless to say. Actually the blind went blind not only because they used to stare at the sun for hours and hours. At some point, not necessarily in days of yore, they realised that the Devil was in their midst. They were frightened to the point of losing their wits. Some of them did lose their wits. They’re still out of their wits, incidentally. All of them lost their sight.’

Suppose, however, you happen to meet what Plisetskaya calls ‘envy’, and I am not sure there is another name for it in spite of the proverbial richness of the English language. Well, even if your language is as rich as Putin you have only one word for the notion called ‘envy’ because envy as such, as an object of our discussion and study, is on the point of becoming Absolute Truth related to humankind and its behaviour. This human being (the one I am talking about) goes up your street or someone else’s avenue, carrying nothing whatsoever except his envy that devours everything and everybody and even every animal in its path. Well, how could you protect yourself from this creature whose fondness for peace and harmony continues to wane? Once again – and these onces and agains are over there, within our reach; a good supply – I see a sheet of paper on which the omnipotent word ‘logos’ is written, painted, sometimes in blood.

Let us take an example and illustrate what I am talking about, without getting too far – too far from the spot where a brick was about to fall on my head. I went along some street or other: the itinerary of my walk does not count on this occasion. Actually neither the walk nor its itinerary count unless you take into consideration the fact that the brick had been ready for its fall for some time, given the way it fell and acted under the circumstances. So why didn’t it fall on my head, pushing me to the ground and smashing to pieces whatever can be smashed to smithereens within my very substance? I like the word ‘smithereens’, and I am told some of our sorcerers use this word during their ceremonies so you hear, ‘Smithereens, smithereens, smithereens,’ before seeing a number of rolling heads (no stones, this time), before a magnificent display of blood-fountains.

Well, I continued to walk along the same street, although I do not really know whether I was walking up that street or down, and suddenly a gust of wind wrested the sheet of paper (the logos) from my grasp. I followed my logos’s itinerary – it was *my* logos and I had every right to take care of it – and I witnessed its encounter with the brick that covered it, having liberated itself from one of the walls, a local dictator. (Every object has a lot of dictators within its reach; their reach, rather.) So we should take into consideration a few forces that operated on that occasion within my field of vision, within the framework of my life.

Usually, when conjuring up such and such a situation, when chasing away bad omens, sorcerers turn this way and that, murmuring their injunctions to fields, forces, particles and waves. They say, for instance, ‘Can you hear me, Force A? You must deviate from your trajectory, otherwise I’ll destroy your existence in this cosmos of ours.’ Then he or she would turn towards another field and say, ‘I know your obscenities and perversities, Field R. Aren’t you overgrown with weeds? What kind of behaviour do you exhibit to the world and the Almighty?’

Do you know how your comrades behave and live? A multitude of cows stand in one of their corners, although there are no trains on the horizon. A number of labourers are at work in ordinary fields. In extraordinary fields, on the other hand, there are bricks, bombs and warriors. I enjoin you to get rid of the warriors and replace them with a number of farmers, labourers and peasants. I would invite Tolstoy's peasants, if I were you. They're not only much more skilful than other peasants: their wisdom knows no bounds on account of their past and present intimacy with the sage admired by Gandhi and other politicians.'

Then our shaman turns towards another danger lurking within the landscape on the edge of which he is standing and says calmly yet convincingly, 'You contain too many particles, in my opinion. You're duty-bound to get rid of three thousands particles – on the spot. They're warmongers, you know. And we shouldn't tolerate warmongers in our midst because, as everybody knows, a new war would be the last war in the history of humanity unless its survivors are inclined to fight another war with stones and fists. That's what Einstein said, if my memory serves me right. He said, "The Fourth World War will be fought with stones, with grains of sand." And Nils Bohr answered, "I like the idea. Let them fight the Third World War which is bound to solve the war-and-peace problem once and for all. They'll also fight with snowballs. Life will become a game, a dance, a ritornello." "Can't we skip the Third World War?" asked Einstein. "By means of a quantum leap," answered Nils Bohr. But Einstein could not bring himself to accept quantum mechanics and its consequences. So the Third World War took place and many people died, according to the newspapers and newsreels.

'What really happened to the brick? My logos must have carried out a ritual which saved my life without my participation in the operation. I looked at it from afar, from a distance that protected me from the harmful effects inflicted on pedestrians and even on motorcars by bricks and other heavy objects; let alone bicycles and other fragile contraptions. (Inflicted on them too, by the same bricks and boulders.) Listening to the logos's interior monologues is not my favourite pastime, but from time to time I do hear something along these lines, 'You might think you're in charge of your own existence. See the error of your judgement! Even this walk of yours is under my control. Sometimes you speak of me in the plural, which is a monumental error. My relationship with quantum mechanics enables me to fill the whole cosmos. I am everywhere. So my journeys from point A to point B, and from point B to point C are illusory, mythical, almost mystical. If you're everywhere, you don't need to travel. You just slide, glide through yourself, if you see what I mean. You must know this text by heart, "At the beginning was the word, and the word was here and there, and the word was everywhere, and the word was the logos, and the logos was the world."'

The logos was not only the word I am talking about for the sake of talking: you do so many things for the sake of talking. Sometimes you live your whole life for the sake of talking as if you were unable or unwilling to live for the sake of moving, to move for the sake of moving, to live for the sake of living. All right – you do your best for the sake of moving, living, lying and dying. And you know that the worst thing in the world, the worst danger you may encounter in the course of your wandering around the world boils down to bricks of all kinds; and most of these kinds hang from the roofs under which you walk rather carelessly and even nonchalantly. You walk under one such roof, without even saying to yourself (why should you talk to yourself all the time?), 'This roof looks dangerous, it seems to me. One of its bricks – and I know which brick I'm talking about – is about to fall on my pretty little head. And if it does fall on my pretty little head, this pretty little head of mine will become

this ugly little head of mine. I'm not even sure it'll remain the little head I'm used to boasting about, when talking to my cousins and sisters.'

Well and good, as usual: everything is well and everything is good, until further notice. And this notice will never come, considering it is too further, too further, when they are too lazy to say it is far away. But what about the bricks I encroached upon – the brick-subject – at the beginning of this paragraph or section where the dangers we are about to encounter everywhere do encounter us to the point of pushing us downward – as far as Hell, as the saying goes. The saying does go to the end of the word, as far as I understand these matters, but we go as far down as the Hell of Hells. We often speak of hearts and their hearts instead of speaking of Hell and their Hells – and nothing but Hells, as the saying goes.

You go – exactly as the saying goes – through the streets of your native city and say to yourself, now and then, 'This brick is sure to fall on my head and the rest of my substance.' You do not have to explain to yourself why you always speak of your substance as if you had any idea of what this word really means and signifies, and you notice a brick or a roof or both. Let me repeat this recondite idea: you walk through the city you know by heart because it is your native city (the one where you were born) and suddenly you notice a suspicious brick hanging from the roof of a building you know by heart: you know everything and everybody by heart, which means your heart is very big – bigger than any heart you can think of. Actually you do not think of hearts – of the hearts of others, so to speak. You think only in terms of your own heart; and these terms concern only your heart, nothing else.

You look around and see a lot of buildings, houses and their inhabitants. Some of them behave like bricks and often you see a body flying through the air. Through what material could it fly? For a while it resembles a bird whose flight you cannot always predict with exactitude. You do predict it, saying to yourself, 'This bird or body will fall on my head and kill me on the spot.' (Everything always happens on the spot.) And then you run for your life, stampede, make rush. You also make many other things, resolved to avoid the impact of death. A body, a fly (let alone bricks, bricks, bricks) – anything can kill you if you are not cautious enough to protect your body and soul from death or karma or whatever can come and say, 'I'm here. Please offer me a glass of cognac.'

You look at the air – not at a building, as might be supposed. You suppose so many things, and then you realise your supposition mocks you viciously and you walk towards it – your supposition, your doom, your mistake – and all of them fall on your head at once as if your head were designed for this purpose; for nothing else, mind you. At this point you no longer mind anything. You just say, 'I don't mind, I don't mind.' They hold a boulder above your head and utter these words, 'You don't mind, do you?' And you say, 'I don't, I don't, I don't, I don't.' And that is the end of something: story, matter, tether, mother. And then you say to yourself, 'No, no way. There's no end to my mother, whatever they do, think or write.' You mean, your mother is not prepared to throw herself from the roof of the house where she gave you the most precious possession you can think of – your life. At least she is not standing on the roof of this house you know by heart, otherwise you would not have been born in it, I suppose. Of course you *are* suspicious, considering the dangers you run everywhere, even if you do not venture beyond your bathroom. But you don't think your mother is about to fall on your head, either out of the blue or out of anything else. (You can fall out of anything down to nothing. Incidentally, falling out of nothing is far more dangerous than falling out of the blue or the dark. Or the night.)

You are born and you feel like walking around – just for the fun of it because it is fun walking around instead of being ensconced in your mother's womb. You walk around and say to yourself, 'There are only bricks

in the world into which I was born a few minutes ago. Let us wait and see what happens. Or rather – let us *walk* and see what happens. And if nothing happens we shan't see anything.' So we walk around and see boulders and bricks, comets, humans and a lot of flying saucers. And some of these saucers are humans, believe it or not. What does it matter? Whether you believe it or not? You believe that some of the flying saucers you see overhead are humans. So what? What you may decide on the spur of the moment – the number of these spurs is frightful – boils down to this (and this boiler is frightful too), 'I should eliminate all these saucers and cups – they might fall on top of my head. And if they do fall on me somewhere, not necessarily on top of my limbs, I'm sure to die on the spur of the moment, on the spot and on the pot. What is this pot related to? No idea. Some chamber or other perhaps. Or some palace or other. Or some heaven or other. A heaven pot – sounds nice, doesn't it?'

And sometimes, odd as it may seem, you just don't do anything: walking and talking are not your cups of tea. So you look around and meditate inwardly, 'All these cups I'm seeing in front of me and all around me are *not* my cups of tea, for the simple reason that they're not cups. Of course they're cups – there's no denying it. But the cups exposed within my field of vision aren't cups, in the first place. And in the second place, in the third place.' I see a lot of cups in front of me and say to myself, 'They're not cups, end of story or end of cups.' But then I say to everybody it is high time I thought about the contents of these cups. And then I realise these are not the cups of tea I was waiting for. Moreover, I'm not sure I was waiting for anything because I know that waiting is a waste: waiting-waste, so to speak. Or wasting-wait, if you wish. Well, I see a lot of cups and ask myself if these cups are filled with tea or anything else. What does this anything mean, signify and made of? This anything can be made of coffee, for all I know. I do not know 'all', but I do know the word and substance 'coffee' which corresponds to something they understand in the outside world. If, in the outside world, I pronounce the word, 'coffee,' they pour a certain liquid into whatever vessel stands in front of my eyes on some counter, table and whatever.

So you look at this particular cup of coffee and say, 'This is not my cup of tea.' And if the bartender says to you, 'This is a cup of tea, believe it or not,' you might reply, 'I do recognise the substance of this cup and its contents. But it's not *my* cup of tea, if you see what I mean.'

'None of these cups are yours?' asks the bartender.

'None whatsoever,' you answer.

'What about this cup?' the bartender says, pointing to a beautiful cup, its design and colours.

'Not even this cup of tea is my cup of tea,' you answer, brandishing one of your fists. And if you have no fists you brandish something else; a large mug of beer, for instance.

Of course there are dangers everywhere and every thought is dangerous to some extent, to every extent. If your train of thought is bound for the end of the cosmos and you say to yourself, 'There's no end, it's endless, and I am the other, I am not I,' you may die on the spot as if death were determined to prove to you once and for all (in spite of resurrections) that there *is* such a thing as the end. Yes, you know that 'I' is not completely 'I'. Your 'I' is not complete: there is 'No I' somewhere, perhaps in the room where you are sitting right now, this afternoon, this evening. And 'No I' is not completely 'No' because your 'I' or someone else's 'I' is not far away: it is in one of your corridors. Moreover, you know in which corridor your other 'I' is located at this particular moment.

Then your thoughts switch to another subject and you say to yourself that the moment you are crossing right now (it is your cross, every moment is a cross) has nothing exceptional: it is not a *particular* moment, contrary to the conclusion you arrived at a few moments ago. All this is utter nonsense, and you are likely to realise it at once if you take the trouble to *utter* it: your interior monologues are too indulgent, too patient, putting up with any nonsense, however nonsensical. But when you *hear* your idiotic thoughts, your way of thinking, your *train* of thinking, you decide to do your utmost to derail this train, your interminable inner talks.

BOUNDS

You are asked, ‘Do you know the bounds of eternity?’ and you answer that you know neither eternity nor the notion applied to bounds and to the bounds of these bounds. Bounds are bounded, aren’t they? So they have to be bounded on every side and in every mind; and if they are not they are no bounds at all and so you had better speak about something else. Yet it is useful and even essential to speak about bounds because you have to know how far you can go, assuming you do go somewhere and do not stay in your bed from morning to night and even beyond the night, however endless. Sometimes you just let yourself go and go, go, go until you feel exhausted and consequently have no wish to go any further. (One of my favourite expressions, borrowed from Shakespeare.) So you sit somewhere and say to yourself, after a while, ‘This is a bound to which I’ve already grown attached, if only for a minute or two.’ Then you rise and go as if you could really go somewhere, as if the world were suited for spiritual or even physical goings, in some way or other.

Where *are* the bounds you are thinking in terms of, you ask yourself? You look around and see an overturned motorcar which might have deviated from its trajectory a few days ago. For a few seconds you have a vision where you see the car in question and its trajectory, going from right to left, from left to right; and then you hear the screeching of its brakes. Is that what human life is about? What *is* human life about? You are a reckless driver and your brakes begin to screech and you scream louder and louder. And then you realise there is no limit to what may be defined as the volume of your voice, of your vocal cords. Are there limits to your umbilical cord? you may ask yourself if you love your mother more than anything or anybody in the world. Then you deviate from everything, including your life and find yourself in a ravine – from a Chekhov story – or in any other dunghill. Of course one might say you are always in a dunghill, even if drive your Mercedes up and down a motorway, heading for Venice or Venus or any other spot where one enjoys oneself to the utmost; and for once you do not have to know where the bounds of this utmost are situated. Is anything situated at all? you may ask yourself at some point if in the grips of quantum mechanics about which I speak rather often without knowing what it is all about. But what *is* it all about? You may ask this question, especially if you wish to get rid of all questions.

Where are the bounds of this moment? They are at the beginning and at the end of this moment, you answer rather readily, thinking you cannot be wrong for once; meaning, ‘For once I won’t be in the wrong.’ Well, you *are* in the wrong again: there are no bounds either before or after, either in the middle or anywhere, according to the latest version of quantum mechanics. But if you take into consideration Poincaré’s theories about which I know nothing – almost no one does – I may draw the following conclusion from my investigations, ‘There are no bounds, no lines, no figures, no structures – only vague, vague, vague, vague formulas.’ What does a vague formula amount to? One wonders whether it amounts or desceounds, as some of us say rather jokingly. Well, if it amounts, it resembles something like this succession of words, ‘I mount,

mount, mount,' and any book on mathematics can supply you with whatever is necessary for understanding this procedure. For instance, '1+1+1+1³+2+3+4+5+88888.' All right you mount, mount, ascend as if you were the Holy Virgin. But you suffer from nostalgia and so you simply begin your descent. Is that what human life amounts to?

You mount, descend, and one might ask you why you carry out these unnecessary rituals. And then you remember a few details of your childhood; a symphony. I, for one, always hear something somewhere, although this somewhere is bounded on every side by my memory, my love for music. For instance, for at least two hours I have been listening (unwillingly) to a Russian symphony. And what does this symphony boil down to? Where are its bounds? If I say, 'I have no idea where all this can stop,' it stops nowhere. This symphony resounds through the air and even elsewhere – through the Earth, among other things. What do we know about other things, their boundaries and textures? What do we know about the texture of the world?

Well, what counts is your protection, your survival, and you should find out at all costs whether your logos is reliable to the point of ensuring your safety not only in the streets embellished with bricks, not only during the rain of bricks, as they say, but also everywhere else, at every moment of your life. Suppose you buy a ticket and take a seat on a plane bound for a catastrophe – not for a sunny beach situated on the other side of the Earth. What could your logos do under the circumstances? A plane is not a brick and you cannot put your logos under the fuselage with a view to carrying it as far as your destination, as far as the end of the Earth. Your end can come much earlier – earlier than the end of anything else, including the Earth and the cosmos. (Let us forget, if only for a moment, the second law of thermodynamics.) Yesterday, I saw a documentary dedicated to the fragility of Soviet planes and flights. During their flights they often lost their wings, those planes; as if it had been carefully planned: events like these take months of careful planning, according to the specialists. They would lose their wings, and their pilots said to their phones, to a few holes through which many voices came and went, 'I can see my own wing fly towards the Earth. But there are no passengers on this wing so I can't figure out why it yearns to reach the Earth in no time. What's the use? Why? Why? Why?' Usually black boxes talk to you about angst or rather dread of death; of the Earth which, instead of feeding you, caressing your skin and thoughts, is about to hit you in the face, to smash your organs – brutally, unavoidably. And I wonder what my personal logos could have done under the circumstances.

Dostoevsky intended to write a book about the Blessed Virgin, about Christ, about himself in relation to the Blessed Virgin. His diary was full of extrapolations streaming and stemming from his own brain over which he had strict control, as testified by his notebooks where you can see a lot of ramifications and bifurcations of his mind, body and soul. And even his astral body can be seen in his notebooks – with the naked eye. Now you can follow the procedure adopted by scholars; they are determined to dissect Dostoevsky's intentions and aspirations. His or her eye is veiled at first as if we were dealing with a representative of Islam and its rituals, obligations and contestations. Well, what counts, as many pragmatic billionaires say, is the picture you find in Dostoevsky's archives; and this picture reminds you of something, everybody, of holiness, virgins and babies conceived and born at the right moment, at the right place and time. The picture I am talking about is partly borrowed from the Dresden State Art Collection where you come across the Blessed Virgin painted by Raffaello Sanzio. At some point Dostoevsky singled this gallery out from a number of galleries and pictures scattered all

over the Earth, and one is likely to find a few vestiges of this infatuation in his novels and even in his short stories, in his letters. This partly accounts for his involvement in the birth of Christ which was far more important for him than his death (than his own death, among other things). His last novel ends in C Major, in the future, so to speak, for the boys he talks about for quite a while go out and look at the horizon in such a way that their glances reach whatever is situated *beyond* the horizon and also beyond the *present* about which they do not really care. They are looking at their own second birth, at the umpteenth birth of Russia. And the Blessed Virgin whom Dostoevsky worshipped in his childhood, his youth and mature years, was not beyond the horizon, contrary to what one might suppose upon perusing the last pages of his ultimate masterpiece. Actually the Blessed Virgin was hanging not only in the Dresden Picture Gallery, but also on one of Dostoevsky's walls. In spite of the modest size of his walls and floors, Dostoevsky found enough room for the picture on which he had depicted the Blessed Virgin and her son to whom he was planning to devote and dedicate a mammoth masterpiece.

One may wonder why Dostoevsky vowed his undying love to Mary and not to an earthly woman with whom he might have availed himself of what is known as 'ordinary, blissful happiness'. Of course he loved his wife; to *some* extent, as one might say and think. And this extent had nothing in common with the heavens where his Prince Ivan (sic!) Myshkin lived and continuously paid homage to madness and epilepsy and turmoil; where he kept on breaking precious vases. His visitors (Dostoevsky's friends and foes) were not surprised upon seeing the picture of the Virgin hanging above the writer's bed. But they could not fail to recognise his features, the writer's features. On his writing desk there lay the writer's diary. The writer's features, on the other hand, the writer's face and body, were lying on the Virgin's hands and lap. The visitors felt like asking a lot of questions on the subject, addressing themselves to the writer and not to his wife who was always ready to answer any question related to her husband, to his genius. So she would say from time to time, 'You can question me, if you wish, but leave my husband alone. He is about to embark upon his new novel dedicated to Jesus Christ, our Saviour.' And then she would turn to her husband and ask him the following question, 'Can I talk to them about your grandmother?' 'You can,' Dostoevsky would answer without turning his head or a hair. 'All right.' And his wife (her name continues to slip my mind) would set about telling her fairy tale of which she was very fond – to the point of willing to immortalise it in her own writings.

At the beginning, at the outset of her story, Anna Feodorovna (no, I'm wrong) usually said that Dostoevsky had known his grandmother more than his father; and he loved her very much, almost as much as the Blessed Virgin. Actually it was his grandmother's idea. 'What?' asked the visitors. 'His grandmother thought the Blessed Virgin would protect the future writer more efficiently than Jesus Christ, let alone a guardian angel of sorts. So she would speak of her, whenever they headed for the nearest church where an icon reminded everybody of both Jesus Christ and his mother: it was a copy of Raffaello's famous picture. And my husband's grandmother always said upon casting her glance at this icon and the Blessed Virgin holding her son, "Look at her face, at her hands. These hands will always protect you from catastrophes. And even death bows to the Virgin's superiority so that her hands, the Virgin's hands, can easily ward off not only death, but also a lot of evil spirits. So you'll need no magic charms to ward off evil spirits, you know."' Let me remind you that, in this day and age, mothers and grandmothers usually say to their offspring, 'In the winter you should take vitamin C to ward off colds.' This unquestionable testimony allows us to see the difference between our respective centuries rather clearly.

Anna Grigoryevna could go on for hours, when asked a few questions about her husband's relationship with the Blessed Virgin. Apparently, Dostoevsky was unable to get rid of the adjective 'blessed', whenever he happened to find himself in the presence of a virgin, even if the virgin in question was as perverse as the most obnoxious prostitute. Dostoevsky agreed with today's scientists who declare that all babies, whatever their origins and potentialities, see angels and also some archangels on a regular basis – at the dinner table, for instance. That is why they often look 'somewhere else' instead of looking at their mothers and fathers and uncles, and their uncles' wives. They look somewhere else as if they had already been led astray by an evil human, by a paedophile or his counterpart. Today's mothers are afraid not only of bricks that continue to fall on our heads in spite of our guardian angels' hands, arrows and shields, but also (and mostly) of paedophiles. These catch up with their children, grapple with them for a while, and say or rather cry, 'What are you making your way for? The Blessed Virgin? Do you take yourself for Bernadette or for those Spanish girls and boys?'

'I saw an angel,' answers the little man.

'What kind of angel did you see?'

'I saw a *real* angel,' says the immature man.

'According to psychologists, all children see angels three times a day. Nothing to write home about.'

'I'm not writing home,' answers the boy.

Such dialogues can go on for ages – as if all my characters were influenced by Dostoevsky's wife – but there is no denying that the overwhelming presence of celestial go-betweens sustains us through our ordeals, agonies and a number of Angsts. In this context we should not omit the following reflection: it is better to have something within your reach or even in your hands than to look upwards in the hope of spotting a few wings of no significance. Indeed many grown-ups mistake both airplanes and their wings for archangels, which induces them to proclaim from the rooftops or from soap boxes in London's Hyde Park: 'God exists and angels are His errand boys.'

You should not be too fastidious in the domain of salvation, even if what you deal with concerns exclusively your rudimentary safety, your isolation from falling bricks and suchlike. (But you can put up with shooting stars.) In this case, you are probably more attracted to tangible objects and bodies, and your bodyguards could be more efficient than your guardian angel whose tendency to fall asleep at the wrong moment – such an angel is as perverse as a falling brick – is well-known in our milieu. So Dostoevsky whose awareness of Rogozhin's knife was beyond a shadow of a doubt – at some point Rogozhin was a shadow in Myshkin's eyes – needed something more tangible than a prayer to which he devoted many hours, starting on the day of his first visit to the nearest church, in his grandmother's company. She said as they headed for this church, their heads resounding with Russian bells, 'You know, my dear grandson, you should pray during the ceremony, otherwise you might remain empty – godless, so to speak. Only our active participation in the ritual ensures our immortality, our eternal stay in Paradise where only saints and the representatives of the angelic order will ever keep us company. Now you're walking towards our priest in your grandmother's company, but then, in heaven, in the domain entitled "Paradise" – there's a poem to this effect, you know – you'll always walk or rather dance surrounded by the Holy Trinity and a host of archangels, let alone a multitude of angels. In short, you'll never be alone. When I die (and this will inevitably happen some day although, I'm sure, you don't want me to forsake you) you may find yourself alone. Your parents aren't very keen on your development and future maturity. Well, in Paradise you'll never be alone because no one dies in Paradise. And everybody takes care of everybody.

That's why everybody is well-educated up there, beyond the clouds you can see this morning. And you'll certainly see them this afternoon, according to the weather forecast.'

Dostoevsky was an obedient child and so, upon leaving the church, the priest and the ritual during which he did his best to execute the prayer in accordance with the rules dictated by his grandmother and God, he looked at the sky and found the same clouds as if his prayer had been powerless to let him see the face of God, the aim of his prayer and thoughts. He asked God to show him everything, not only His face and other parts of His body, but also the mystery of the world that Dostoevsky began to feel at the time. But feelings are often blind: they need a revelation, an image coming out of the blue, from the sky unspoiled by rain and gloomy clouds. And the mystery he felt was centred upon light, another birth, boys, girls – the young who were to see the light of life in all its splendour. What I am driving at has nothing to do with revolutionaries who questioned light, revelations and whatever could be linked to divinities whose very existence they denied rather obstinately. They needed something they could put into their mouths and also on their bodies. 'We'd rather wrap our bodies in luxurious tissues,' they used to repeat, 'than go around half-naked.' A century later they proclaimed another truth, 'We'd like to go around half-naked because we're emancipated. So are our bodies and minds and also our libidos – let us not discard them (our libidos) out of laziness.' Dostoevsky saw all this in his prophetic dreams and that is why he wrote *The Possessed*: all those people were possessed, in accordance with Christian doctrines. He thought his people, the Russian people in the midst of whom he was born, should march or rather walk – marches reminded him of wars and the Soviet parades – towards the icon he saw and worshipped in his childhood; the icon introduced to him by his grandmother who directed his attention towards the Virgin.

Oddly enough, this image was associated in Dostoevsky's mind with the verb 'to touch'. After all, we are convinced that virgins, whatever their numbers and multiplicities, would disappear from the surface of the Earth if too many people touched them, if only from time to time. It is enough to touch a virgin once a week – or just *once*, as cynics testify – to deflower her poetically or deprive her of her purity (rather physically and brutally) so that the numbers we are speaking of should be reduced to the very minimum, to the minimal minimum. But, as I put it earlier, even one man or woman can deflower a flower in no time at all if no guardian angel interferes with the process. And this process, like many other processes, echoes Kafka's book to some extent: you are decapitated at the end of this process, whatever your feelings of guilt or innocence.

QUESTIONS AND CONFESSIONS

Do I feel anything in my heart? And in my heart of hearts? What kind of feeling do I harbour in them? Is my feeling somehow related to the Cross? Is my feeling in the shape of the Cross, of *that* Cross? Do I realise there is only one Cross in the history of humankind? Or do I think that Spartacus also died on a cross? Do I think that Judas was a traitor or a saviour? Was he ordered to betray Jesus Christ? Who gave the order? Jesus Christ himself? Or the heavenly Father? Or the heavenly Mother? Was heaven involved in the process? Are we in the presence of the Earth's sadistic doings? Am I ready? Have I drunk enough of red wine? Have I eaten enough of bread? I shouldn't have eaten sausages, I suppose. Anyway, I suffer from indigestion. I have an upset stomach and my bowels are loose. Bad signs.

CONFESSIONS (II)

In this context I always recall Ivan Karamazov and the ticket to Paradise he was determined to relinquish upon seeing one tear dropping from a human eye – especially if the eye in question adorned a childish face. A child is on the point of crying. Karamazov puts his hand in one of his pockets and pulls out a huge ticket on which one can decipher, ‘PARADISE’. Ivan Karamazov looks around, casts a glance at heaven, sees St Peter and says to him, ‘Here you are. Here’s your ticket. I don’t need it.’ A few hours ago I might have composed a dialogue between St Peter and Karamazov, but I no longer feel like it because I had better put a few finishing touches to the story I am about to devote to the idea of incarnating Judas – for the sake of one’s relationship with Jesus and salvation as such. Why am I always talking about my salvation, about divinities of all kinds? I am even in the habit of touching upon Aphrodite as if my salvation depended on *her*, on her unearthly, sea-born beauty. And yet I know that any touch connected to Aphrodite’s body is ominous and leads one astray even faster than any other touch, however sinful. Well, you picture to yourself the traitor known for his poisonous kiss – the one that resounded in Jerusalem, in its air on the day when a battalion of Roman soldiers left its barracks with a view to arresting Jesus. Historians are still asking themselves the question related to this battalion’s general or captain who, according to the reliable sources, stayed at home: he could rely upon his ears and did not really have to accompany his battalion to the spot where the tragedy was about to unfold, smearing our private and public lives. The wife of this military man was about to tell him yet another old wives’ tale, but the colonel stopped her and said, ‘I’m listening to the sound that will change the course of human history.’

‘A cannon?’ asked his wife.

‘No, a modest sound. But in spite of its modesty, discretion and intimacy, it will be heard in the 21st century.’

‘An arrow? An arrow of time?’

‘A kiss,’ the general rounded off.

Then he heard the kiss and this sound is the basis of what is known as the ‘resurrection ritual’. You have to picture to yourself the tree on which the traitor, alias Judas Iscariot, hung himself. Then you should make your way to this tree and remove his body from its branches and stem. Then you are to set this body into motion, otherwise it will never be able to walk towards you in the midst of Roman soldiers. Purists think that you should also visualise or even materialise these soldiers, but most of us limit their exertions to one picture only – that of the traitor himself, of Judas Iscariot, of Jesus Christ’s ignominious apostle. So this Judas of yours, your latest creation, heads for your face and kisses you on one of your cheeks. This kiss resounds either in your room or in your garden (all depends on the weather and your mood) whereupon you say to yourself, ‘This is my imitation of Jesus Christ, my own version. Hopefully my salvation is already under way, whatever they say, those purists, those perfectionists.’

HERE WE GO AGAIN: KARAMAZOV AND HIS TICKETS

He had a multitude of tickets in his pockets and, on his way to Paradise or some other hospital, he would show these tickets to all sorts of guardians whose fervour knew no bounds; nor did he, our Ivan Karamazov, know any bounds. And if, unexpectedly, he saw a bound in front of him, a few inches away from his feet, he would draw a ticket from his pocket and say to whoever was in charge, ‘Here’s my ticket. Please remove this bound from my sight and path.’

‘But you gave your ticket back. Don’t you remember?’

‘I remember nothing of the kind. It’s true I had no wish to settle for a Paradise inhabited by paedophiles and their likes. I love only paedophiles’ unlikes, if you must know.’

‘I mustn’t know anything – there are no musts in Paradise. Free country, isn’t it?’

‘Is it Paradise I can see from where I’m standing?’

‘That’s right.’

‘That patch over there?’

‘That’s right.’

‘Are you sure there are no paedophiles in the vicinity of the patch we’re talking about?’

‘Are you a child? How old are you?’

So it was a boundless journey. He (Karamazov and others) would go from one point to another point, A, B, C, D, and some guardians or inspectors followed him, punching holes in his tickets. After punching one of these holes, one of them could say to Karamazov and some of his others, ‘Can you squeeze through this hole? If you can’t, you won’t be admitted to Paradise, to its benches on which our saints are used to kissing each other throughout eternity.’ And Ivan Karamazov invariably answered:

‘I’ve told you many times I don’t wish to go to Paradise and settle down on one of its benches. Have you ever heard Richard Wagner’s *Tristan und Isolde*?’

‘No.’

‘So you don’t even sing the very beginning of it, every morning. That’s what *I* do.’

‘No. To tell the truth, I always sing out of tune. So I don’t sing at all so as not to get under my colleagues’ skins. I’m reluctant to sing out of Isolda’s tune.’

‘The beginning of the opera is called “the yearning leitmotif.” You yearn, yearn, yearn.’

‘You yawn, you yawn, you yawn.’

‘Don’t be so disrespectful. You yearn as long as you’re young. And then you grow older and older. And you set about singing “the olding leitmotif.”’

Nothing is tangible in the domain of leitmotifs unless you are allowed to touch the sentiment of love, of hate; unless you are allowed to touch a corpse which incarnates the leitmotif of murder and death without resurrection.

We are probably rooted to the spot, and we know, if only approximately, where this spot can be found: we might be saved if some mortal danger threatens us from above, from below, from every side, every mind. But, for some reason – and this reason can be found in our own reason or mind or brain – our reason pushes us to what we thoughtlessly call ‘beyond’, thinking that the beyond we evoke in the course of our meditation has nothing to do with the Great Beyond where someone, a number of angels, might be waiting for us in order to convey our souls and also our bodies – why not? why not? – to eternal bliss. (Whenever you utter the word ‘bliss’, someone is sure to shout, ‘Lying on a sunny beach is my idea of sheer bliss.’) So, romantically speaking and acting, we budge from where we are ensconced and begin to move in the direction of this imaginary bliss, saying to ourselves (in German, for some reason), ‘*Dahin, dahin*,’ which means ‘going beyond’, beyond the horizon – no point in going elsewhere, staying on *this* side of the horizon – and so you either go or stay where you are. But if you do move your legs and other members of your body and soul, you should convince yourself of the necessity

about which I am thinking right now. And this necessity involves both a lot of beyond and the horizon conceived and interpreted in a manifold manner. And this manifold manner is so intricate you cannot conceive and express it clearly because it is not clear: it is too intricate to display its qualities and disadvantages plainly, without offering your sight and mind a lot of obstacles, barriers and so on. After all, it is not an obstacle race, you say to yourself, although you might say to yourself (often in the same breath) that whatever you come across – your ideas, projects and future – is nothing but an obstacle race. In short, everything is not only an obstacle race, but also just nothing but, nothing but. Or just but, if you wish to put it mildly, tolerably; otherwise you are not likely to tolerate your own thoughts which lead to your self-annihilation, as every television viewer knows by heart. The same goes for computer viewers, by the way.

So here it is: *Dahin, dahin, dahin*. A taxi driver asks you the following question, ‘Where to?’ And you answer him self-assuredly, ‘*Dahin, dahin,*’ even if you happen to find yourself in London. Of course your opponents and downright foes might point out you are not able to find yourself anywhere – not even on the main street of Moscow. (Let us not forget that I was born in Moscow. But what can we forget? What? Not our sins and crimes.) Well, let us go elsewhere; let us reach this elsewhere in no time at all. And even if we need a lot of time, a huge quantity of this spiritual, psychic material, it is worth our while to spend some time in order to explore this medium and its components, its elements, particles, waves and hurricanes.

What is the great reset they are talking about at the Davos Forum and elsewhere? The chief Siberian shaman explains this notion thus, ‘Look at the sun, following its trajectory with the utmost concentration. Concentrate your thoughts, hopes and desires on the sun’s itinerary and sooner or later you’ll see its decline, its sliding and slithering towards the West, towards some point located in the West, our West Side story. This point can be found under the Earth, and we’ll look for this point one of these days if everything goes in accordance with our numbers, gestures and music. Yesterday I spent the whole day at home, and I can assure you that around 6 p.m. the setting sun cast long shadows across the lawn, whereupon I said to myself, “I should reset the sun, otherwise the world will go down the drain. The sun shouldn’t go down the drain, the sun shouldn’t go down.” And I reset the sun so that in the morning, 12 hours after the onslaught of my superman efforts, the sun went up, reset and rejuvenated. The sun you’re watching now is as fresh as a daisy.’

‘Will the sun ever go down after your ritual, after all your efforts?’ ask the citizens.

‘No, no way. From now on, the sun will always go up, crossing the stars and galaxies.’

‘Can the sun cross the borders of the cosmos? Aren’t they guarded by frontiersmen?’

‘They are. But the sun will destroy them by means of its rays and poisonous bullets. Don’t you know that the sun has its own cannons which are far superior to American atomic bombs?’

‘Yes. But we’ve always thought the sun’s weaponry is inferior to American anti-tank rockets.’

‘Do you believe that the sun’s tanks are less powerful than whatever they used in the course of the Second World War? By the way, why don’t you recall the battle of Waterloo, while you’re at it?’

‘At what?’

‘At cannonballs. Some of those balls killed a number of Tolstoy’s characters.’

‘You know, we can’t read *War and Peace*: it’s too gigantic. We’re used to clips. Our attention span is clip-like, if you must know.’

‘I know, I know. Today’s writers should take this phenomenon in consideration. It’s a must. An image, an idea, a thought – not a *train* of thought, mind you. Just a compartment, you see. There’s someone in this

compartment and this someone is eating a dish, drinking a bottle of wine. Well, you have no time to discern the label. Only a candle, one candle illuminates the scene so you can just discern a figure in the dark. And a few fingers which are probably holding a fork. The onus is on your imagination to ensure that the image is enticing to the point of making you acquire the book. Or making you read it to the very end if it's already lying on your writing desk. Or reading it throughout without yielding to the everlasting temptation that enjoins you to throw it in the nearest rubbish bin.'

But let us once again return to the American seer whose presence can be felt, whenever we feel inclined to talk about Russia – and Siberia, in particular. (I talked about him in a discarded draft.) He used to travel up and down Time Avenue. In his diary you come across a lot of run-of-the-mill pieces of information which are nothing but a smokescreen. Let us take and analyse the following sentence, 'I walked down a broad avenue lined with trees.' This means, 'During my walk I met Louis XIV in Versailles, in the parc of his chateau.' And the sentence you light upon a few minutes later, 'I walked *up* a broad avenue lined with trees,' means, 'I met a Russian cosmonaut on Mars.' Of course one does not fail to wonder if there are trees on Mars. We are quite used to the ordinary, commonplace question, 'Is there life on Mars?' and whenever we learn that, on this belligerent planet, there are no signs, no traces of humans or other fellow-creatures (Whose fellows? Whose creatures?) we lose interest halfway through the answer which may last for 10 or 15 minutes, human beings being rather talkative – on the talkative side, as they say at present. (Another proof of their addiction to talkativeness. Why not content yourself with the adjective 'talkative', without going any further?)

A Russian cosmonaut on Mars. How did he travel through time and its suburbs which are often more important and fruitful than time itself? You just pull in on the roadside, on the hard shoulder, and then you avail yourself of what Bergson called '*la durée*'. And we can also call it and even conjure it if we feel like it, if we feel like anything or anybody, if life still appeals to us in spite of all the deaths we learn about, whenever we switch on some contraption lying within our reach; or even out of reach, for bad news resounds everywhere, even if you do not switch on anything (or anybody). You just decide to get out of your room – for some reason that escapes you, being too obscure, incomprehensible and awful – and then you participate in a show where almost everyone gets killed and a lot of blood flows through the veins of the world. Whenever people get killed – one person, two persons, a crowd, an army – they say, 'This bloodshed is necessary – the veins of the world can't remain empty. Our blood should flow through all the channels it can use to run the world; otherwise, otherwise, otherwise.' Otherwise. You get stuck and then revert to your old scheme – to the blood running through the world either on battlefields or just in ordinary houses, on lawns, around parks, Versailles and Hyde, Hyde, Jekyll and Hyde.

I just listened to the Dalai Lama's remarks exclusively geared to the needs of those whose disabilities are beyond suspicion. Some of those people still hope that their disabilities can be dealt with successfully, triumphantly, thanks to silicon chips and transplants. Why not? All this amounts to the same thing called 'old age'; and even if you refrain from calling it names, this state of affairs is old, irremediably old, and you are on the point of dying very quickly, perhaps in the twinkling of an eye. For a while everything twinkles, for you are doing your best to figure out what kind of disease is likely to lead you to your grave about which you do not care for the moment. But you do know that this moment will last only a moment and so you will have to write your testament and express your last will in clear, unequivocal terms. You say, for instance, 'I bequeath my estate to old people whose wallets and portfolios are empty. They're just blank sheets of paper, and these people are

afraid of blank sheets of paper as if they had to write poems on these sheets, on these papers, on these materials they're facing as they sit at their writing desks or in their baths.'

The Dalai Lama says, 'Of course you grow old and nothing can prevent you from doing so, even if you have the best doctors, the best pills in the world where only desolation reigns to the exclusion of everything else. But if a few children come and pay you a visit, and if these children sing something in your presence you feel rejuvenated.'

'You're old, you're old,
We're young, we're young.
All this goes. There comes yang,
And yin, and yin. I'm cold,
Tom's cold, Tom's old.'

He (the Dalai Lama) also says, 'These old people should be tender because only tenderness is able to nurse us back to health, back to wealth, back to our childhood when everything was halcyon, healthy. These old tender people come and begin to caress both children and their nurses. And if accused of paedophilia, they say, "We caress not only children, but also their nurses, which means we're caressing humankind in its entirety." And they leave them alone: the authorities leave them alone. And they continue to caress both children and their nurses, and also their nurses' nurses, and also their nurses' children. That's how the world goes round because it should go somewhere, otherwise it might stall like an engine. Don't forget the following maxim, "A car may stall due to the driver braking too suddenly."'

Let us return (ritornello) to the American seer, to my latest idea – to anything that reminds us of the past which continues to go on (to grow) either somewhere or just where, where, where, where. I can also supply an answer to the last question, to the forsaken 'where' which seems to be expiring, due to the fatal lack of companion, of definition, of whereabouts. Usually, when in need of a monstrous topic, of a subject matter that is sure to elicit a spectacular reaction on the part of the audience, they begin to talk about Siberia – even Putin and Stalin are less spectacular, for all their teeth, their fangs, for all their affinities with Siberian wolves. Their opponents habitually say, 'Of course they're unparalleled scoundrels, not to say universal, cosmic criminals whose crimes against humanity abundantly fissured the vault of heaven. But Siberia itself is even more monstrous: you cannot *talk* to it. If you talk to Putin, he smiles and answers you as follows, "If you listened to me, you'd know the answer to your question already. But you don't listen – your ears aren't cocked. You look at our palace, at the pride of my native land where so many tsars and prime ministers made their discourses throughout many centuries, not to say a lot of millennia. They still resound within these walls, their memorable speeches, and so you might hear their thoughts if you listen carefully to their wisdom. Mine is attuned to theirs, you know. So all you have to do is listen, listen, listen, as professional musicians say to their disciples, to pianists, violinists and cellists.'"

Whatever you listen to under the circumstances, in the Kremlin palaces, churches and cathedrals, is however almost crystal clear (for all its hermetic tendencies) – in comparison with Siberia, with the symphonies executed on its organs. Their orgies, they call them. (The Siberians and foreigners alike.) You hear snowflakes,

snowstorms and a lot of footfalls – bodyfalls rather. The Decembrists whose deaths awaited them in Siberia, not in St Petersburg, used to recite a sort of poem – during their muffled falls. Their *bodies* recited it, to tell the truth. They called this poem *La Ballade des pendus*. They all knew François Villon and his ballad, needless to say. The tsarist acolytes would hang a multitude of criminals on trees – Siberia is still renowned for its generosity in this domain – and the corpses were falling very slowly from their branches as if anxious to recite this poem till the very end (in French, in French) despite the lack of time maliciously due to the force of gravity; and other terrestrial, official forces. Their bodies recited it along with their minds, souls and astral bodies. The air too seemed to give a helping hand or rather a helping voice to this recitation that was beyond a joke and beyond compare.

That is how Siberia speaks to you in the domain of literature, politics and falling aristocratic bodies: oddly enough, it recites François Villon's most famous masterpiece. But what about our eyes, visions, revelations and hallucinations? All this could be heard in past centuries which are accessible only through books, mystics, shamans and tables that turn almost endlessly, for we are immortal, as so many people declare almost feverishly and with enviable panache. Four or five decades ago a man followed a track made up of blood, if I may say so: it is such a pity our blood can make up tracks (or anything else) – *outside* our bodies, muscles, vital élans and aspirations. Of course there is only snow in Siberia; at least many foreigners think they would not find anything else in that faraway region if they took a few planes and parachutes to go there in earnest. I remember a story which makes me laugh in this morose century – even during American elections or European discussions; or rather universal bickering. A friend of mine asked me to accompany him to Norway where he intended to spend a few weeks – ‘following in Wittgenstein's footsteps’, as he put it. Upon landing, however, a wondrous sight/sound/thing occurred almost simultaneously. He looked around, saw a lot of snow – an impressive number of snowflakes, in his own words – and he finally exclaimed, ‘How wonderful, how wondrous, how magnificent, how excellent!’ and he asked me if Siberia looked like Norway, ever so slightly and negligently. I said, ‘No. To know what Siberia looks like you have *to go* to Siberia.’

‘But I've an important appointment,’ he said.

‘Is it more important than being Earnest?’ I said nonchalantly.

‘What am I to do?’ he asked pathetically. ‘What's the difference? The snow is all over the place, isn't it?’

‘What about bears?’ I asked him. ‘And what about wolves?’

‘Are there still wolves in Siberia?’ he asked me. ‘I thought they had been exterminated on the afternoon when *Doctor Zhivago* saw the light of day. Or in the wake of Pasternak's Nobel Prize at least.’

‘Not at all,’ I said. ‘One of my Russian friends saw at least four wolves in the taiga – last month.’

So he went to a shop and bought a bear and a wolf – two puppets you can put anywhere, even in your drawing room if your daughter finds them *divertissants*. Well, at least the snow he had been looking for was there and he just contented himself with walking around his wolf and bear, struggling with them, now and then, for he might have thought they were rather playful, being toys meant for *divertissement* and not for the real struggle for life we find everywhere, not only in Siberia.

So let us return to the man who follows *les pas sur la neige* or rather *le sang sur la neige*. They amount to the same thing, assuming they do amount to something: their owner is on the point of no return. He probably no longer knows where he has to return, and he hardly thinks in terms of God and his real *patria*. Let us not forget he was a communist in those days, living in a communist country full of anti-bourgeois prejudices. But, for some

reason (for some *bloody* reason, this time) he was *not* against purity, virginity and numerous expiations of sins. So the blood-track led the second man – a policeman of sorts – to a victim whose private parts had been removed; slowly but surely, if I am not mistaken. Or quickly and unsurely. Where could they be found, these private parts I am talking about at length? (The track is rather long.) Well, you go to Siberia and look for blood: you are bound to spot a lot of it on the snow; almost everywhere. You follow the drops that continue to drop in spite of your inborn empathy – don't drop, please don't drop, you keep on saying – and you follow them in their footsteps as if these drops had steps, feet and the rest of the substance I am alluding to. But at some point you begin to hope for the end of this adventure: you can have too much of a good thing. So you have too much of a good thing, but the good thing does not have too much of you, judging from the momentum it had gathered in the course of its journey. Eventually it stops (tracks and all) and you discover a body lying on the snow you fell in love with upon arrival in this mythical country.

In Siberia at least, you seldom walk on the snow without losing a lot of blood. Why? Because there are many sects in Siberia and even some remarkable shamans take part in the rituals that are not associated with their *métier* and glory. Well, the American seer who pursued the first man to his final destination – death, the utter loss of blood – naively thought he would discover another remedy against rottenness. And he did discover it, as a matter of fact. He came across the victim's private parts and realised that the ritual he had encountered was situated in the kingdom of purity, in spite of its bloody references and traces; in spite of its blood which is so hard to get rid of, once it begins to cover your hands. You rub shoulders with someone and then you notice a lot of blood on your hands – the Lady Macbeth syndrome, they say to you.

Well, to put the matter in a nutshell or rather in private parts – it is a private practice anyway – you stop in your tracks, bend over the corpse ('the unfinished corpse', as Schubertians put it) and begin to draw your conclusions. You draw one conclusion after another and one conclusion, the very first conclusion, talks to you at length about purity, for the private parts you are holding smell badly, to put it mildly. You say to yourself, 'This man ought to have taken a bath before joining his club for the sake of this ritual dedicated to purity and the utter lack of libido and Freud. (By the way, Freud is never invited to these Siberian orgies – not only because he is dead and lives very far away; at least for Russian citizens and their airlines.) You remove the private parts in question as if toying with the idea of depriving them of their privacy and put them in one of your pockets; or in two of your pockets. All this depends on the sizes you are dealing with because there are private parts you could put in the middle of your living room. Some other parts you happen to lay your hands on would not allow you to go on enjoying your domestic traditions, being too voluminous for any of them. How could you dance in your living room – alas, you have no ballrooms at your disposal – if the private parts you exhibit take more room than your body and those of your guests and nieces? Put together, if you please.

What is the meaning of the ceremony I am enlarging upon? Once again I raise him from the dead – or from the quick: I don't really know if he is dead or not – the American seer who admired Siberia and Russia in general; to the point of assigning to both a radiant future they might need if they do not mind any survival, any prosperity and future. Let us sum it up: there was an American whose sympathy for Russia and Siberia in particular were beyond any shadows, doubts and paradoxes. When asked about his attachment to the Russians, he would always answer, 'No paradoxes, no paradoxes. Great, great, great, great.' We can see him in a Siberian hut, drinking holy water, eating holy vegetables, fruit, berries and fish. In short, there is nothing unholy in his

life. And if someone knocks on his door and broaches the admission-subject, the seer says, ‘Are you holy or not?’ which means he has become wholly Russian.

‘I’m only partly holy,’ answers the visitor.

‘Why partly? Why in parts?’ asks the guru.

‘Because I still have my private parts.’

‘Don’t you worry – we’ll get rid of them tonight unless my assistant can’t be relied upon once again – he always forgets an additional pair of scissors.’

So first they dance *à la ronde, à la ronde*, chanting, ‘Ay, ho, ay, ho, ay, ho, ay ho.’ And then they begin to chant in squares and in triangles so their song sounds thus, ‘Square, trayer, square, trayer, go to hell.’ And then these participants begin to perform the dance during which you see them jump and disappear in the air; or hang in the air for an hour or two. And then they explain their infatuation with the air and its properties, ‘God stretched His baton and I just sat down on it. Do you mind?’ And if you say, ‘I do mind,’ they answer prolifically, ‘You’re not pure and if you deny this truth, you must undergo our test to which you’ll be submitted in a minute or two.’ Two minutes later you say to them, ‘What’s your test about?’ and they answer, ‘It’s about you of course, about your private and social parts.’ Then they grasp your private parts as if they were Donald Trump’s followers and say, ‘Along with the rest of your substances – your private parts aren’t hygienic. So you’ll be admitted to our hospital for observation.’

And then they ask you, ‘Are you a woman or a man?’

You answer, ‘I am a man.’

And then they ask you, ‘Don’t you have any vestiges of a woman on your body, on its premises?’

You answer, ‘Yes, I do have a few vestiges of a woman on my body.’

‘All right. So first we’ll remove your genitals or whatever you call them – your private, masculine parts. And then we’ll remove some other words and parts from your substance. As you can see, the word “substance” may come in handy, from time to time.’

You stand or lie in the middle of a circle that dances around you as if you were a victim or a god, a pagan god who cannot survive in our world without dances and profane, bloody rituals. They may even pour a quantity of blood over you, anxious to prepare your mind for the forthcoming revelation; unification, as they call it. With what? you may ask. With what or whom am I supposed to unite? Not with proletarians, I surmise. ‘No, no,’ they answer. And they speak of Jesus Christ, of the Blessed Virgin, and then you see a gigantic pair of scissors on which the word ‘PURITY’ is engraved in capital letters. This pair of scissors gets closer and closer to your private parts and at some point you realise your private parts are no longer private. Moreover, they are not even *your* parts, your little *substances*. What *are* they? you may ask yourself, and if you do, the answer sounds as follows, ‘These things are just parts – some spare parts, if you wish, if you can still wish something in this vale of tears, within this circle of blood. That’s all for today and also for tomorrow. No more questions, you scoundrel.’

Those participants and members sincerely believed that, by removing these parts or rather wholes, they could purify the human race whose only preoccupation was exclusively focused on rapes – on other bodies, to put it bluntly. ‘They are so blunt, those parts and individuals,’ the president of the group would affirm rather unexpectedly, ‘that they have to be sharpened at all costs. Let them become like a Christmas Tree – nothing but pricks and kicks. Pricks without kicks, so to speak.’ This kind of nonsense reigned in those circles for many

years, notwithstanding the fact that no sects of this kind – or any other kind – could be logically situated within the Soviet borders. It is true that you *were* supposed to become pure – differently, differently. You could keep your private parts to yourself, but your thoughts underwent the ritual traditionally called ‘brain-washing’. Unfortunately the members of the Virgin-Sect discarded the spiritual element altogether: even after the removal of intimate organs they insisted on materialistic bias. They would wash these numerous parts in what they called the ‘*douche* Charcot’.

And they continued to vociferate, ‘Purity, purity, chastity,’ which amounted to a sort of prayer or hymn or whatever or nothing at all. They explained to each other that the Blessed Virgin was pure not only on account of her mind’s unquestionable ignorance, but also because she had no private parts at all. Blasphemy seemed to flourish within their society and they were proud of those flourishes, saying, ‘We rewrite everything and our opposites coincide throughout our rituals and existences.’ There is no God without the Devil, they used to maintain. ‘The Blessed Virgin would be an orphan without the Unblessed Whore.’ There were many women in the caves where they celebrated their masses and liturgies, and those women were topless and privateless. In short, they had only their virginity and purity to boast about, which was rather logical: according to the hygienic president, a human being cannot boast about anything else.

Such was Siberia in those times, in those days – in the days when the American seer proclaimed the following truth, ‘The future belongs to Russia because the Russians can count on Siberian purity and riches. Hegel was wrong – in the United States of America they have a lot of riches, but they lack the purity required for future rituals and daily preoccupations.’ His fellow citizens said he was a communist because he spoke of Siberia and the superiority (siberiority) lying in store for the Russians who could not overtake the United States. They still cannot overtake anybody with the exception of underdeveloped countries that will always remain under, under, according to the latest statistics and reports. So he said something about Russia and Siberia, and they said, ‘You’re crazy because you’re a communist, and only crazy people are communists – Marxism is outdated, as outdated as some weapons, ideas and the dresses our wives and mistresses wore last summer.’ And they insisted on his wearing one of the dresses they were speaking about, and he did wear this dress to satisfy their demand. That is what all this comes down to in our society which does not tolerate serious discussions and demonstrations, even if they are centred upon old people. As the Dalai Lama put it, ‘We’re growing old and nothing in the world can prevent us from doing so. Not even I and my knowledge of the ways of the world and underworld and aboveworld can do it. What can do it? I don’t know, I don’t know.’

The American seer saw a lot of trees, a lot of air – at least in his mind where his Siberian panorama was unfolding its splendours to the detriment of the real world. Leibniz and Deleuze often spoke of folds, and for once let me overlook all those magnificent folds one admires in Botticelli’s and Utamaro’s paintings, engravings and drawings. Of course if you put on one of the dresses or kimonos you find by chance in those masterpieces, you are not necessarily incited to *unfold* them, eager to enjoy their beauties at length; in space, so to speak. Wouldn’t it be a gorgeous sight? Contemplating such a dress all over your dining room floor? You could make love to it without interrupting your dinner, not for a second. Another bout of love, as they say; another morsel of sturgeon, as you say. The American seer saw a leaf of grass or any other leaf, and he said to himself, ‘This particular leaf is everywhere, as far as this barbaric kingdom goes. You go left and right, and you find a leaf

about which neither Walt Whitman nor anyone else knew anything before my arrival in this country of hope. You don't really have to *keep* this herb or whatever it is in your pocket; or this mineral – there are plenty of them all over Siberia, according to public opinion polls. Only prisoners outnumber them. Of course you can't put a prisoner in your pocket – apart from everything else, that would be indecorous. Anyway, prisoners don't provide you with a sufficient number of the organic, fresh, untouched molecules we're always looking for, whether at home or during our travels. The molecules we're likely to find within those prisoners' bodies and souls have been touched many times, on a daily basis. Those molecules have been beaten, molested, raised from the dead for the only purpose of being restored to yet another series of beheadings or remembering or betendons or bemuscles. We don't need human chunks and bones because there are leaves around us, and we don't really have to carry them around because they *are* around – everywhere, everywhere. What else does our terrestrial world need? (Incidentally, I think the other world, I mean the universe itself, needs that too and rather badly.)

I am talking about purity, and it is not enough to put on a recording of Mozart's *Piano Concerti* to purify all and sundry because a grain of tobacco – in which you will never find the whole universe – can spoil everything, even if you do not identify it with flies in the ointment. (Which ointment? There are so many of them, as many as flies.) Is this purity obtainable at all? You pick up a leaf of grass and hold it in front of your nose, resolved to put it to advantage throughout your journey to the end of Siberia; assuming there is some end to it. You hold this leaf in front of your nose, and if you happen to let your interior monologue deviate from this leaf and its final, universal purpose, you feel so miserable you do your best not to find yourself again in such a predicament. So you train yourself (mentally at least) to be a pilot, a lawyer – you are supposed to fly with your precious possession and also to defend it from intruders – and then you just decide to concentrate on its overall context: the cosmos, the leaf you carry and hold in your hand, and the light that radiates from whatever you do, provided you are surrounded by those who keep saying, 'Light, light, light, light, light.'

Of course you are tempted to ask them, 'Which light are you speaking of?'

'There's only one light,' they say.

'What is that?' you ask them, although you are aware it is a dangerous question to ask. (You are supposed to *know* what all this is about.)

'The light radiating from Him and Her. And it opens every door, however shut.'

'Sorry, I'm not well. I can't –'

'We know you can.'

'What? What do you mean?'

'We can see through you, through your numerous skins and minds.'

'How many minds do I have, in your opinion?'

'Let us count.'

'Do you have a computer within your reach?'

He (the Dalai Lama) was giggling uncontrollably and had to leave the room to pull himself together. Did he pull himself together? A journalist saw him backstage and spotted a few gestures that corresponded to what we call, 'Pulling oneself together.' Well, *did* he pull himself together? I don't think so. As for the American seer, he saw something but did not giggle; on the contrary he sobbed for almost 20 minutes. And when he finished sobbing,

they said to him, ‘Do you know that Stalin purged another million of people?’ At first he did not understand what they were talking about, and when he did realise what was the matter and also the spirit of what was going on not only in the room where they were seated, but also in Siberia, he said, ‘It’s not true. Stalin is the greatest man in the history of humankind. He is the little father of our nation which is one of the many nations we can see on the surface of the Earth and also under its surface. Let us remember the dead, once and for all.’ They remembered the dead; so did we, at the same moment – within the same thought. And then we said to each other, ‘We’re growing old. What can we do with our wrinkles, with oldness, with our oddness?’ And once again we answered this question as follows, ‘We should care about others, otherwise our others will die as everybody did in all the centuries that preceded our century, our meeting and our decision to help our elders and betters.’ We help our elders and betters and worsers and they say to us, at some point, ‘We’re your *bettors* and so we know *better* what to do with our lives you tamper with for no reason at all. Please leave us to ourselves, to our wisdom, and go your way, assuming there’s a way in front of you and you have a pair of legs which could propel you to international stardom. And if you don’t belong to this international stardom, you don’t exist, end of story. End of glory. Bye-bye.’

The Dalai Lama pulls himself together, comes back and says, ‘I think we should organise a committee to call upon the sages of the world we inhabit and use to the utmost. We should call upon *them*, otherwise our children will never know what wisdom is about and if it is about, around or nowhere. And if they ask, “Where’s the wisdom you’re talking about so obstinately?” we shall show them our men and women and say, “The wisdom we have in mind when talking about it is right in front of you – these people are wise and they can tell you how to behave in the future and even at the present moment, right now. You should neither smoke nor drink, and you shouldn’t finger your nose or fiddle with it – in the wrong way. Do you know what the wrong way is and how to avoid its numerous paths?”’ And the Dalai Lama says, ‘These wise people should teach their pupils the right ways, otherwise everything will go wrong forever. Do you know what “going wrong” means? If you go wrong, you just step into a puddle, and if you step into a puddle you become soaked, soaked through. And then you die of pneumonia or another disease connected with puddles and water – with unholy water, my dear friends. If you step into *holy* water, you become holy *yourself*. But if you step into unholy water, it turns you into a plaything and you begin to play with your penis, among other private parts. And you know – even *you* know this – to what results such tinkering leads you inexorably.’

What else does the Dalai Lama say? What else did the American seer do? He saw Siberia in the middle of which they built a few skyscrapers where people decided to live reasonably, following the Dalai Lama’s precepts. He said (during his interview), ‘The reason is very important. If you see something in front of you, you’re likely to ask yourself, “What is it?” And only reason, your reason, can answer this question. It answers the question and you say to yourself, “All right. I can eat this thing because my reason says it’s harmless and so I can eat without fearing the outcome of my meal. I won’t die as a result of my consuming this thing in itself. So it will become a *thing in myself* and I’ll be able to hold out for another afternoon or so.” So the power of reason is more important than sensations because our sensations can lead us astray. They lead us astray and we eat this and that. And yet *this* is good for our health and *that* is likely to annihilate us. They (this and that) come and let their intention be known. They say to our housewife, “We wish to bury someone for whom you’ve worked for several years.” “I’m not the type of person to stay at home and be a housewife,” she answers. “Well and good,” they say, for they do not intend to search for a reasonable, convenient answer. “Yet we have to bury him so as

not to let his odour fill the space where we're standing right now.” On that particular occasion, the Dalai Lama's speech had a boringly predictable conclusion. ‘Where is he now, the corpse I'm speaking of? At the nearest cemetery. That is human life for you and everybody else.’

What else is human life? The Dalai Lama said to our scientists, ‘I hope you'll improve our inner instruments – our body. My health has improved dramatically since I started on this new diet.’

‘What diet?’ asked the scientists.

‘You know, I eat only garden peas – the peas that grow in my garden. Do you think I have a *petit-pois* in the head?’

‘What? What? What?’ asked the participants of the symposium.

‘So you don't know French? Do you?’

‘Do you? Do you?’ answered the participants.

‘Do *you*?’ answered the Dalai Lama.

What else did he answer? Does he ever answer? He thinks he is the Dalai Lama and so has no obligation to his friends or foes. He sees a foe and this foe goes, goes away without making a formal protest. So the Dalai – Dalanka, as one of my friends calls him – says, ‘The old should rely on the young. They, the old, I mean, can't come up with new ideas. They can come up only with old ideas, and logically enough the young say to them, “We're pragmatic, you know. We're English to the core. Do you want to see our core?” Of course I say to them, “No, no, no. I know your English core by heart. I can recite it, if you wish.”’ But his opponents don't wish anything of the kind. So they say, ‘What do you propose to do to alleviate their suffering?’ And the Dalai Lama answers, ‘Are you speaking of the old? Well, I'll say to them, and so will the young I'll send to hospitals and other organisations of this kind, “You should listen to the young because the young are never ill. And they don't view their lives in terms of successive suicides. Do they?” And everyone will shout, “No, no, no.” So I'll round off as follows, “Listen to the young and you'll be young in no time at all. And if you find that your time – the one you're facing – is unbearable, kill this time and enjoy, enjoy, whatever comes your way.”’

Naturally enough, the Dalai Lama also spoke (and also speaks) of compassion, saying, among other things, ‘The young and even the old know only passions. There are many soccer fans among them, and some of these fans are very old, very old indeed. So they cannot cross a few streets and pay a visit to a stadium where an important game is about to start. At least one can hear a whistle, and one assumes that the sound one is listening to comes from the stadium. But the old man stays at home, which doesn't prevent him indulging his patriotism. He indulges his patriotism, waving flags and singing songs. Then he shouts, “My dear wife! Don't we have another bag filled with flags of all kinds? To the brim?” And his wife assures him they have a dozen bags of this kind, and she picks up one of them at once, so as not to waste another minute. And she carries this bag to the television set in front of which her husband is waving two flags and singing two songs at once. “Our team has scored two goals,” he explains. “Please open two bottles of champagne. As you know, I love champagne but I don't often indulge myself. But these goals call for a celebration, don't they?”’

So what is the difference between the young and the old? In this domain, in the domain of sport? The young play soccer under our windows and sometimes we receive a football as if we were young and appropriately trained for the game unfolding under our windows and also in our rooms, whenever we take the

trouble to kick the football or pick it up. But suppose the young about whom I am writing today are ill – not dramatically, though. They are not paralysed and one might suppose they are healthy enough to go to the stadium where an important game is scheduled. Suppose this game has not been cancelled, not yet. Anyway, the illnesses I mentioned in passing (Covid, Aids) do not permit the young to go to the stadium and shout themselves hoarse. They stay at home, enabling us to compare their behaviour with that of their elders and betters, as I used to say out of respect for the generation to which I belong. (Elders and olders makes no sense.) Why are they better, those people, my colleagues, my counterparts? Because they drink champagne, whereas the members of the younger generation drink themselves stupid with cheap vodka. But the Dalai Lama did not think in terms of vodka when enlarging upon the importance of the younger generations and its members. (A sort of club, isn't it?) He thought that the young could write dissertations on philosophers, poets and mathematicians. The amount of energy stored in their bodies and psyches allows them to do so without missing goals and other details which television screens bombard them with for several hours, if not for several days. But the old seem to have lost this energy in the course of their long and fruitless lives. All human lives are fruitless unless we single out Leonardo da Vinci and say, pointing a walking stick at his portrait, 'His life wasn't fruitless. One of its fruit is *Joconda* or the *Mona Lisa*. Call it what you wish. You know what I'm talking about, don't you?'

One wonders why the young, while watching a match on TV, do not wave a flag or two; it's as if they were not patriots, feverish supporters of their national team. (Flags of all the participating countries are flying outside the stadium.) The point is they are really young and so read the latest books devoted to the economy and the structure of the world where we live, suffer, laugh and die. Klaus Schwab of Davos Forum fame wrote yet another book where he said, 'The world will be governed by corporations. States, patriots and armies will disappear because they are already a huge thing of the past.' So the young say to each other, 'Klaus Schwab is one of the key figures in this day and age. He's always right, which means he can't be wrong, even if his doctrine may seem fantastic, not to say absurd – to some earthlings with whom we have nothing in common. Of course we disagree with patriots who carry their flags and sing their songs where the word "land" ("*patria*", in Italian) sticks out and pierces the air. Sometimes you just hear one word sung either by a tenor or a baritone. *Patria, patria, mia, mia, mamma*, and so on. It is true that now and then we hear *three* words, but they're synonymous, meaning, "My, my, my, here, land, ancestors, forbearers." The young have no fondness for such stuff. They sing their own songs or just stamp their feet to stay warm and shout, "Plum, plum, plum!" That's why they're able to write a dissertation as they watch a game on TV or on a computer.'

Let us return to the American seer – before it is too late; before everyone forgets who this seer was and what he predicted for our future. The Americans were not happy with his prognosis and some of them said, shaking their heads and fists, 'Many Americans felt it was their patriotic duty to buy bonds to support the war effort. He wasn't of their number, this seer of yours. He spoke about Siberia instead, showing no patriotic fervour. Even Hegel said the future belonged to the United States of America. And he added, after much soul-searching, "Only the United States can provide the Earth with an enviable future. As for Germany, our native country will all but vanish into thin air on account of Hitler's crimes and voraciousness." And our American seer underlined the importance of our arch-enemy, of the Russians whose Satanism is well-known throughout the galaxy and creamy ways. Do you know why the Russians, all of them, carry sticks? Because they have to ward off a wolf pack as

they go up and down the Moscow streets. Besides, Stalin's and what-his-name's dictatorships have been responsible for countless barbarities.'

So they sent him (the seer) to Siberia and said, 'You'll wait for your version of communism and Marxism right here, in the middle of the Red Virus.' No wonder his life found its premature end in the Siberian snow which is thicker than other snows known to humanity. (It is also thicker than blood.) For instance, you cannot ski on that snow: you *sink* into it at once. No one has read a book on the seer's adventures in Siberia. A few essays scattered around Siberia and other Soviet territories – you can still find some of them in distant libraries – speak of the seer's struggle with the snow where he literally swam, after waiting for the result of his body's interaction with this white powder. In the long run, the powder would melt and the seer enjoyed his mastery of the crawl. Actually the Siberians are not sure he had really mastered this style, and whenever they struck up a conversation on the subject he would answer, 'A style of swimming in which you move your arms over your head and kick with straight legs.'

'OK,' they would answer. 'But show us how you manage to carry out this ritual. By the way, do you have straight legs? Aren't you bow-legged, by any chance?'

'No, I am not.'

'Please, proceed.'

'Do you have time on your hands?' he usually asked them, after drinking a cup of tea with milk.

'Of course.'

'So you're prepared to wait?'

'To wait for what? Do you have to train yourself, to learn this style before our very eyes? In the twinkling of our eyes?'

'No. The snow usually melts by mid-March – in other regions of Russia. Here, in Siberia, it melts by mid-June. We can't wait till June or July, can we? Don't we have other fish to fry?'

'This goes without saying.'

'I'm sorry I did say that. Never mind, never mind. My body will melt the snow.'

But the ritual turned out to be more complicated than everybody had presumed, for the seer had to warm his body first, otherwise the participants might have waited for the outcome of the operation till mid-August. First the seer began to stamp his feet and rub his hands. Usually humans rub their hands at the thought of winning, but at that point the seer did not seem to have won anything. And in everybody's opinion, he was about to *lose* his reputation and probably his right to stay within the bounds of the community to which he did not really belong. Everybody recalled the words he had uttered a few months before, 'After three years in Siberia, I finally feel as if I belong here.' But as one looked at his body, at his way of warming his hands and other members and organs of his body by the fire, one was likely to judge him differently: he did *not* belong to the Siberian tribes. Someone suggested he should put his whole body into an oven. His answer surprised his visitors, 'I remember Savonarola and the way he behaved in front of the fire which was to decide whether he belonged in the kingdom of God, whether he was one of God's dearest sons. He stepped back, you know. And I'm not as great as Savonarola. Anyway, the American way of life doesn't include such an ordeal. Let us go instead to our Turkish bath.'

One cannot avail oneself of the documents relating the rest of this story: we have no idea whether this initiation into the mysteries of the crawl was a success or a tremendous failure. Be that as it may, the seer died in

Siberia (at least I believe he did) and his funeral might have become a run-of-the-mill, unremarkable burial – in those days, Siberians were interred in unmarked graves or in snowdrifts – but oddly enough, even today everyone remembers not only the funeral itself, but the corpse whose freshness was astonishing, not to say illogical and miraculous. Three weeks after the burial they opened the coffin and found a fresh chunk of meat as if they really had to partake of the dead body; as if there were no sausages within the bounds of Siberia. They called a doctor or rather a charlatan who said, ‘His body is dead, but his mind continues to send signals to the external world from where we’re looking at him. Do you know we’re full of negative and positive signals, tendencies and *élans* which swarm in our minds non-stop? They stop only on the brink of death, for they say to each other, “We used to fight and quarrel all the time. Now it is high time we stopped because we’re on the threshold of death. Even if you can’t see this threshold, it is there, right under your feet. So let’s patch things up, even if the number of things we’d better patch up is extremely high. In the world inhabited by the wise, you’re supposed to put your train of thought into neutral, whenever you stop on the threshold of death. Let us imitate the members of the club we’re talking about.’

The seer died in Siberia, but he was also *born* in Siberia, for all his American data, passports and paraphernalia. In his testament he recounts the story of his *naissance*, his journey through the entrails of Mother Earth where he was really born as if he had no mother, no sister. ‘My mother recognised me, once I was within her reach, and I have no idea how I had reached the space, the spot where she was standing rather majestically, like a monument dedicated to the Mother of the Universe. She promptly put me into her womb – for a short period of time – to let me get accustomed to human warmth, tissues and tenderness. Yes, for a while, for many years perhaps, I was swimming through the ocean of the Earth situated near her centre, core and soul. I was swimming towards the exit, whatever it is or was in those times. What is the exit anyway? How many exits can we avail ourselves of? How many exits, loopholes? After my death, please put me on the surface of the Earth, of the Siberian snow so I could sink into it, getting sucked into it and into the Earth until I reach her centre, the place of my birth and being.’

Those who are on the threshold of death – and everybody is always on this particular threshold: there are no other thresholds or entries in our world – habitually think about their health, about the life which is about to leave them in the lurch; or in the ditch. Apparently, in Switzerland people don’t like dying in hospitals. Of course one might say no one likes dying, wherever this sorrowful event may unfold (or just fold) rather mercilessly. But in Switzerland (of all countries) patients say to their doctors as they watch the latter’s bodies bend towards their own bodies, ‘Doctor, I’ve come to your hospital with a view to giving you an opportunity to cure me once and for all. But, as far as I can judge, you’re hand in glove with death, with my forthcoming agony. This hand is your glove, and this glove is death’s glove. And your hand is in death’s glove. How come? How come? Swiss hospitals aren’t cemeteries in disguise, are they? Of course you don’t even take the trouble to disguise your intentions and actions. You’re gravediggers, bugaboos, hobgoblins.’ The doctor shakes his head, switches his computer on and presses a few buttons. ‘Fever accompanied by delirium,’ appears on the screen that patients scrutinise to find out what is in store for them. ‘Are we in the same boat, in the same bed?’ they ask the doctor as the latter switches his computer off. ‘Life is a huge boat and bed,’ answers the doctor. ‘And so is death. According to some of my colleagues, deathboats are even larger than lifeboats. And I think they’re right.’

Why do we remain fresh after death, after a long-lasting agony accompanied by sweat and abundant vomiting? Of course it is not done automatically: we have to practise for hours and hours – before our death, before the first symptoms of our timeless disappearance spring into existence rather nonchalantly, defiantly and hatefully. We have to strip to the skin and run into a series of snowdrifts, crossing them in the manner of Dante who crossed a lot of planets in the course of his odyssey in space and time. Our morning bath should be as cold as the water of Lake Baikal. You are very fond of ice-cream, and if someone reminds you that sugar is not good for your health because it leads you and your body and your life to diabetes, you say, ‘My immortality is far more important than my life. I’m prepared to suffer in my lifetime for the sake of my eternity, of the Hereafter where I’ll have enough time to read Plato, Aristotle and even Tolstoy.’ Those people – the ones whose only aspiration is related to eternal life situated in the kingdom of death – are also very fond of Rimsky Korsakov’s opera *The Snow Maiden*. They even sing her arias, although their voices do not always allow them to sing them correctly instead of getting on their neighbours’ nerves. By the way, their neighbours often complain about their skins under which something lives, moves and prevents them from sleeping soundly, from enjoying a lot of sweet dreams. If they dream at all, their dreams are sweet-and-sour, which proves that the thing in itself they harbour under their skins is powerful enough to penetrate their brains and destroy them, if only partly. But this thing in ourselves may prove to be so powerful that we rush out, leave our gardens as well and run up and down a number of streets, shouting, ‘Get under my skin! Get under my skin!’

‘What for?’ ask a few pedestrians.

‘To push this bloody thing in itself out. Let it become a thing in the world.’

‘Do you already have something under your skin?’

‘What?’

‘According to your confession, you do have something under your skin. Do you want us to get under your skin as well? Do you have enough skin for all of us?’

‘No, no, no. You’ve got me wrong. I just need your finger. Are your nails long enough for the job?’

‘We could use a pair of tweezers.’

‘Do use them, as quickly as possible.’

Such is the pernicious influence of human voices singing Rimsky Korsakov out of tune; and yet his tunes are rudimentary – nothing to do with Stravinsky’s tunes. Some potential singers say to themselves, ‘I don’t really like Rimsky’s music. But Stravinsky was his pupil, and he’s regarded as one of the greatest composers of the 20th century. Let me try and sing one of *his* tunes.’ The woman in question bursts into a song, whereupon a lot of shouts, screams and other manifestations of anger begin to resound in the atmosphere and even beyond the atmosphere. The same number of people rush out. ‘Why the traffic has grown so irregular – in the space of five minutes?’ says one passer-by to another. ‘New measures have been introduced to try and ease traffic congestion in the city,’ says the second passer-by to the first representative of this category of citizens. ‘And yet five people were injured in a traffic accident this morning.’ These passers-by have no idea why the chaos they (our scientists) speak about in their learned books grow visible, audible and destructive in their native city. And yet a long time ago they got rid of butterflies whose interference is firmly linked to tempests, hurricanes, Katrinas, Irinas, and so on.

But music might help you in the process of getting rid of pernicious elements because you pluck a chord, producing a harmony on the piano, and everything becomes harmonious – not at once, not at once. You play this

chord once again and you move your ear closer to it, to the piano on which you perform it willy-nilly and, to be honest, imperfectly. Some notes go this way and that, and you rush towards them, hoping to catch up with them, creating perfect harmony where human health would prosper – phosphorescent, you add all of a sudden. You go on touching the piano and the world continues to grow under your very fingers; but then you realise you are disappointed with this world as well.

THREE-STAR NECROPHILIA

Let us return to the same seer whose body is still lying on the same deathbed as if, unlike all other beds, deathbeds were indestructible. His body has not been put into a fridge, contrary to what might be expected. The members of the club or just neutral observers – they are hungry, all of them – seem to have relinquished the idea of partaking of the fresh-as-a-daisy, amazing corpse. Many people are tempted by necrophilia, by corpses and their gastronomic delights, but they are often put off by odours, putrefaction and other unpleasant details embedded in the very notion of death. However, whenever these virtual necrophiliacs light upon juiciness associated in their minds with markets (with Versailles market, for instance) their mouths water profusely. When meeting each other in their clubs, they often talk about the pressure to which they are submitted by their fellow-creatures who enjoy the gaily striped awnings of the little shops and market stalls (an attractive scene) instead of exploring crematoriums and other charnel houses.

It is true that, being cut off from earthly delights and suffering, our brain concentrates on what is habitually called ‘nirvana’ or ‘absolute neutrality’ – a sort of zero to which you are rather reluctant to add anything. (I could add another neutrality to their neutrality – for the sake of completeness.) Anyway, this zero is so insensitive that even millions and billions would not elicit any visible or audible reaction on its part. You can also put on a beautiful piece of music, but even if this piece alludes, if only elaborately, to the very fact of saying farewell to life – Mahler is a good choice under the circumstances – the brain would not budge from its newfangled neutrality. (Usually the brain does not budge. And if it does, it says, ‘I usually do not budge.’) As if it were saying, ‘Leave me alone. I’m neutral now and nothing in the world can affect my indifference to worldly games and values. You like jewels, don’t you? Well, you can wrap me up in your diamond rivières. I wouldn’t budge from where I am, from the very core of neutrality. Nor am I sensitive to caviar.’

Some believe that nirvana is tantamount to immortality, eternity – to the absence of time and its intransigence. But not all of us are prepared to undergo the ritual associated with death, freshness and coffins; and even deathbeds are out of favour with our moods, however funereal. The first condition in this domain – the domain of immortality; there are no other domains, to tell the truth, as Socrates used to point out – is a sort of immobility that promises us a real independence from time and withering (wuthering lows, as pessimists call them). We all know a few people who spend many years caring for their senile mothers. And some of those people care far more about their mothers’ spiritual wellbeing, than for their wellbeing as such: their legs, hearts, lungs and breasts. Such people say to their mothers, ‘Mother, do you feel like looking at yourself in a mirror?’

‘No,’ answers the mother.

‘If I were you, I would accept my own advice.’

‘But my daimonion advises me against this experience,’ says the mother.

‘I don’t suggest you should examine your back, your shoulder blades, your buttocks,’ says the child.

‘What *should* I examine, in your opinion?’ asks the mother.

‘Your eyes.’

‘*Warum?*’ asks the mother. (She has not yet forgotten her mother tongue.)

‘Because your eyes have never grown older. Not a day older are they in comparison with your childhood.’

‘Did you see my childish eyes?’ asks the mother.

‘I saw photographs of them,’ answers the son or daughter.

‘Photographs always lie,’ says the mother.

Actually the theory under scrutiny is not as nonsensical as might appear at first glance on condition that we glance at the eyes which do not grow old in spite of the speed of time, of decadence. You look at your mother’s eyes if you have no other eyes within your field of vision; within your own eyes, as it were. You look at your dying mother’s eyes and you know that your eyes are yielding to your mother’s charm and beauty and also to the sinister beauty of death. And yet you say to yourself – oh, these talks we tolerate within our brain – that your mother is not growing old: she is not tottering on the threshold of death as many of us do, without knowing it, as if walking up and down the main street of our native city were a proof of our imperviousness to death’s tricks and sticks and stings. Death stings you continuously because it has a sting in its tail; and it also has a sting in its arms, legs and tongue, and gums, and nose. At some point you realise there are only stings in front of you and you do your best to avoid them by jumping up and down, by flying to the moon and back. You retrace your steps, your wings, your thoughts and instincts as soon as you realise that on the moon you come across the same number of stings. You wish you could swap these stings for swings on which you would enjoy yourself till doomsday and even after this crucial event. You think this kind of exchange is as easy as pie and you have a lot of pies on your dinner table. Moreover, you remember one of your favourite remarks – the one you resorted to in the presence of a few young ladies or boys you were in love with. In days of yore you would say, ‘I’ll swap you my chocolate bar for your peanuts.’ And the verb (or the word) ‘swap’ kept you company for many years, although you failed consistently, when trying to swap anything for anything. Weary of your failures, you ended up swapping your Ferraris for a bar of chocolate, odd as it may appear. Well, your memory, your senses kept two elements within your substance: swapping and a bar of chocolate. So, whenever you were in a position to swap anything for anything – you met a man and a woman, their arms outstretched – you would offer them an exchange that might deprive you of everything, including your life, wife, children and a custard pie, a cottage pie, a banoffee pie. Yet you were happy: what you really needed was an exchange, not a Ferrari. So you would walk along some streets or others for miles and miles, hours and hours, eating your pie and smiling to yourself. Such is life, as they say. Such is death too. And what about pies? Such are pies? At least such is a banoffee pie, I suppose, unless my supposition is wrong and I had better not air it. Anyway, I had better air grievances – for hours on end, for hours on no end.

You look at an old woman’s eyes, even if she does not happen to be your mother: it is not forbidden to scrutinise some woman’s eyes, be she your mother, aunt or an utter stranger. You look at her eyes rather closely, provided she lets you bend over her body or rather over her eyes. And if she asks you the following question, ‘Are you bending over my eyes? What for?’ you can answer, ‘I bent down and picked up the coins lying on the road.’ Of course you have to tell her a fairy tale featuring a road in the woods or any other road on which one can find a million dollars left behind by a careless billionaire or rather a simpleton – his half-wit nephew. Well, what

do you see in her eyes? Eternal youth, according to some philosophers. Yet other philosophers contradict their colleagues, for their doctrines teach them another approach to the same problem featuring age, eyes, immortality and a dying individual who cannot see anything, let alone a mirror where his or her eyes are reflected for some obscure reason. Suppose, however, that some of them *can* see their eyes; their undying eyes, so to speak. You can speak to them until dawn, which does not mean they will understand anything apart from their own death, their departure from this structure, to put it mildly and mercifully. At this crucial moment you say to them, 'You're as young as Helen of Troy or Adonis.' You may say to them whatever you wish: anyway, they no longer understand anything apart from death. And everybody understands both death and its final consequence – even born or genetically modified idiots.

You remember some eyes, even if they cannot compare with Elizabeth Taylor's eyes about which one of my acquaintances said in a fit of ecstasy, 'O her eyes, her eyes. Never seen anything more beautiful, not even when staring at Madonna's eyes.'

'Have you *wirklich* seen the Holy Virgin's eyes?' I asked.

'Several times. But I can assure you they weren't as beautiful as Elizabeth Taylor's blue, blue, blue, big blues, as some French film-director said to journalists –'

TWO VERSIONS OF THE SAME MILK

You encounter a lot of meteors which you track in the hope they will whisk you off to some exotic location – to another planet, another galaxy, another milk, another way. You drink a glass of milk and say to your friends, 'This is *another* milk I'm drinking. At least I don't recognise the milk I availed myself of in my babyhood as I sucked my mother's breasts. And the way is different too, you know.'

But the eyes, our ordinary eyes – they are not Martian spectacles, are they? – see our eternity as if it were as real as any way, any milk. You drink the milk of your eternity and say to your mother, 'I recognise your milk. Does your generosity still feed me, your son?' And your mother replies, 'It's my milk. But my milk is identical to many milks flowing through galaxies, ways and days and eternities. I'm their mother as well – all these galaxies were born in the same maternal hospital, *ne vous en deplaise*.'

The eyes, the eyes. Do they change? Never mind galaxies and their avatars. Your eyes, Mother. Have they ever changed? Have they changed since the moment of my birth? Did my birth alter their expression, their inborn bliss? Do you still look at your baby, your newborn babe? Am I not new? Am I already old? And what about my own eyes? Do they look as they used to when I was as young as the baby I have just depicted in my diary for the sake of my memory that does not recall anything with the exception of its own gaps, lacunas? Is my memory a manuscript? Aren't they, our eyes, as motionless as immortality? Immob, immor, immob, tali. My eyes are supposed to be a mirror of my soul. But doesn't my soul grow old like the rest? Like the rest of my body, of the world, of communism, of capitalism, of whatever comes and goes and howls, howls, howls, howls, howls in pain, howls in laughter? Doesn't my soul howl, laugh, wriggle, writhe, squirm? Isn't it a worm?

If one could really follow the soul's progress by watching a pair of eyes – as one watches a soap opera – one would certainly notice the approach of nirvana, of ultimate indifference. In this case, under these circumstances, the eye becomes as empty as an empty bottle of wine. You cannot drink wisdom from such a pair

of eyes; unless you regard nirvana and its void as the ultimate wisdom accessible only to those who renounced everything and everybody: their mothers, fathers, brothers, aunts and also their heritage – as Wittgenstein did. But an evangelist is likely to ask you the following question, ‘*Quo vadis?* Why not join Jesus Christ’s army instead of sitting in an empty hall, a pair of empty eyes on display? The same goes for the empty brain. You forsook your family and money, and you’re entitled to follow Jesus Christ to the end of the world. Isn’t that far more advantageous than sitting in an empty room, in front of an empty table, an empty bed, an empty chest of drawers?’

But I wonder if this discussion is relevant, considering that I am preoccupied with the fate of the American who espoused, if only for the space of one year, the fate of Siberia and its inhabitants, known for their resistance to low temperatures. Our thermometers show us the degrees we know nothing about because we live elsewhere in relation to Siberia and its geographical coordinates. One even allows oneself to wonder whether such a place has any coordinates, any longitudes and latitudes and lassitudes and so on, whatever the names of these so ons are: this place is so outlandish, in a manner of speaking. But if we continue to speak we realise we should return to the American unjustly forgotten in some hut or other where he is lying dead and fresh, according to the latest reports. True enough, his body or rather his corpse is still fresh, for all the efforts performed by putrefaction which is reminded of its duty, whenever someone dies or *passes away*, as they say nowadays. (The phrasal verb has been in use since the 1400s.) And I am almost sure they will use the same expression in the future, even in the distant future, for political and sociological correctness is not likely to die very soon, let alone in the twinkling of an eye.

First of all, we should look at the eyes of the American citizen and seer to find out if they are shut or not. And it does not really matter whether they are wide shut or narrow shut or medium shut or just, just, just, just shut. If they *are* shut, if they *happen* to be shut instead of being wide open, we should open them at all costs, no matter what. If we do not manage to open them, there will be no matter – that’s for sure. There might be some spirituality somewhere, but under the circumstances, in this case, in the case of our failure, our chances, future and immortality will be jeopardised forever; that’s for sure. So we begin by talking to the corpse whose understanding was greatly impaired by death, by the very fact of being separated from life, from its umbilical cord. Yes, the Devil in person was standing by your deathbed with his scissors, and at some point – at the point of no return that disregards both Christ and the Resurrection – the scissors cut the cord. And if you really wish to know what cord is meant in this context, you can christen it, giving it any name you wish; even the name of Earnest. Why not? Everything is possible in the free country where we live, prosper and die in Siberia, of all places.

We are in the presence of a corpse, in his company. His eyes are closed and even if we open them completely, ultimately, even if we glue the eyelids to the eyebrows so as to prevent the eyes resuming their dead-and-buried position, we are unlikely to tempt the corpse, to induce him to feel both greediness and war-like sentiments. At least that is what we think and conclude. His eyes are not greedy, not domineering: they cannot grasp anything and put it in their chest of drawers. They are neutral, so to speak, even if they might look libidinous in someone’s (a young man’s, young woman’s, child’s) presence. Yes, we look at a corpse and notice an interest, a glimmer of hope – something sexual or just erotic; in spite of death’s neutrality and fundamental indifference. And we wonder what kind of object or subject can give rise to such a colour, to the colour which spreads over the eyes we keep under our control. What does *that* mean? It means that if we notice a dangerous

nuance in the eyes under scrutiny, we are duty-bound to close them again, so as not to compromise our safety, the safety of the world to which we were sent some time ago and where we enjoy ourselves so fully, so freely.

Suppose these eyes see the world thanks to the windows we have forgotten to cover with curtains or just a dozen pieces of furniture. The point is the corpse we are manipulating has not yet said to itself, 'It's time these old scores were forgotten.' This corpse and its brain bear a grudge against the world where we live and prosper rather shamelessly, considering the number of poor people we come across every minute, not to say every second – in the streets and elsewhere. Even in museums, strange as it may appear. Is it really strange, this tendency we are trying to analyse, which might help us understand human nature even more profoundly? The poor have nothing to lose and they are always on the brink of tears. Some guru or other says to them, 'Why don't you go to a museum instead of crying on this bench, on this patch of grass? Do you know that the ongoing war has already diverted attention away from the country's economic problems? I don't suggest you fight for our country. Of course this occupation might divert your attention from your worries, from the starvation problem you're facing day and night. But this solution would be too brutal, in my opinion. So, instead of going to a battlefield, go to a museum and indulge in what is conventionally and conveniently called "the contemplation of beauty". And you'll forget your starvation and the clothes you're wearing; or rather what remains of them.'

Well, we cannot say to the corpse, 'Go to the nearest museum.' Nor can you say to it, 'The good thing about running is that it takes your mind off any problems you've got.' On no account should you forget that a corpse cannot run. But we are duty-bound to take our corpse's eyes from the misery of the world which, in his (the corpse's) opinion should be destroyed at all costs. (Let us not forget the grudge it bears against the world. A corpse can be both a sex maniac and a destroyer – which amounts to the same thing.) That is why these eyes are looking for someone in charge of an atom bomb: an engineer, a charwoman who dusts this bomb every morning, at dawn. Let us, however, concentrate on immortality and whatever can be beneficial to one's wellbeing, even if this wellbeing is situated well beyond our ordinary lives related to fridges, hamburgers and many other trivialities without which our human life seems to have no meaning. And yet there are Madonnas painted by Italian and Flemish painters, let alone the women we encounter in modern paintings, that try to teach us something about purity, chastity and conceptions; about immaculate conceptions, among other conceptions and purities and chastities.

What counts is life and its boundless quality which ought to be attained through the sort of immobility you can see in the eyes of a corpse, provided you do not even try to close his or her eyes. For some reason, it is mostly *his* eyes we try to close as if women were weary of life and shut their eyes well before the advent of their deaths, well before their lives' departures. Your life departs and you hear, 'If you don't want to miss your train and remain on the platform for ages, not to say for the whole of eternity, you have to reach your compartment in no time at all.' Your life departs, and so do you. And then you begin to assess the long-term consequences of what you have done, and you say to yourself, 'As soon as I was on board, I began to have second thoughts about leaving.' Leaving what? This miserable life? This miserable Earth where only one or two Niagara Falls can be regarded as the sight you have to pay a visit to before dying forever? You do visit these falls, mountains and museums and then say bye-bye to all those sights and minds that talk, meditate and come up with new solutions to old problems. They can also come up with old problems to new solutions. Solutions and problems succeed

each other and you say to yourself (your dialogues grow gruesome and tiresome), ‘I wish I had no problems whatsoever. And yet I have nothing against life – to the point of wishing to live forever.’ And your thoughts end up switching to the American corpse lying in the middle of a Siberian hut where only a few onlookers know how to deal with eyes, souls and duration.

The corpse seems to stare open-eyed at all the food you put in front of him, thinking it might wish to nourish its (his) life that dwindles or disappears, to tell the truth – instead of going on lying about eternity, immortality and Eastern sages who live without dying as if death were not on the world’s widespread agenda; as if it had not been inscribed in our genes. (He carved his name on a tree. She carved her death on a tree – that is what it comes down to.) Well, I think I have already said a few words about our glances’ neutralities, indifferences and untouchabilities. Indeed our glances cannot touch (let alone grasp) anything, which means they are neither grubby nor greedy. They might be greedy, to be perfectly frank with you, but they cannot get anything, apart from a few images. The images we are alluding to enable them to stay within the bounds of life. And these bounds, however narrow, miserable and ridiculous, are better than death which is so narrow you cannot *live* within its bounds. And what about your soul whose pilgrim’s progress you can follow through your eyes’ agency and colours, nuances, movements? Your eyes dart their glances at this, that and a few human beings, whereupon you arrive at the following conclusion, ‘The soul of the person I contemplate at will is alive.’ If you are still interested in whoever lives and kicks, you are alive: the only sign of death is indifference. You can open as many eyes as you wish – I am talking about the dead, to the dead – but if these eyes are indifferent you will not achieve anything except just another version of death. But if you open a pair of eyes that belong to a corpse lying either in a charnel house or in its (not his, not her) tomb; and if, after a while, you realise that these eyes dart an angry look at your own face, you may safely reach the following conclusion: both the corpse and the eyes are alive and kicking and flicking and picking up either a piece of fruit or any other object. Anyway, they are alive and that is what counts in the final analysis which is never really final: after one final analysis you reach another final analysis, and so on. That is the only way to become immortal; in the final analysis.

Well, let us not forget ourselves, which might be dangerous unless you constantly recall St Francis – you recall him more often in this day and age, thanks to the pope – who advised his followers against life and its quirks. ‘Never model your behaviour upon the quick,’ he would point out in pontifical tones. ‘Only corpses deserve our entire attention, our congratulations. We should congratulate the dead round the clock, otherwise they might think they’re inferior to the quick, which is not true, to say the least.’

‘Should we open the eyes of corpses?’ asked a disciple.

‘*Warum?*’ Few people are aware of St Francis’s acquaintance with the language of Goethe.

‘What for? Is that what you mean, your Holiness?’

‘That’s right. You’re right, for once.’

‘To make him participate in our rites which are geared towards the needs of people with disabilities.’

‘Do you mean to say he’d like to see our empathy, our longing to help him, to extricate him from the clutches of death, to transfer him again to the kingdom of mirth?’

‘Yes, yes, yes.’

‘I hoped you might be right, for twice. I hoped that, for once, you might be right for twice. How silly of me. Don’t you realise to what extent you’re ludicrous and condemnable? Not *commendable*, mind you – condemnable!’

‘*Warum?*’

‘At least you don’t mind learning the German language, it seems to me and probably to somebody else. Well, well, well. Didn’t I reveal to you the difference between the dead and the quick? A few minutes ago?’

‘You did.’

‘Aren’t the dead far superior to the quick?’

‘Of course they are.’

‘Why on earth are you bent on opening their eyes, my disciple, partisan and follower?’

‘No harm done.’

‘How do you mean?’

‘Dead eyes hurt nobody.’

What St Francis really meant becomes transparent – to use the Russian word ‘*glasnost*’ – if we dissect the expression ‘yes-man’: it is enough to grasp the head of the corpse of your choice and push it down, down, down, making it nod in agreement as long as necessary to satisfy your ambitions and self-esteem. It is also rather easy to convert a ‘yes-man’ into a ‘no-woman’ by substituting a female corpse for the male one, which can be done rather easily, especially if you are fed up with the corpse of a man you have fiddled with for more than a month. A ‘no-woman’ remains utterly faithful to you, for her reaction is both predictable and obtainable – in the presence of a handsome young man. You invite this man to your house and say to him, ‘Do your best to seduce my corpse.’ This man does his utmost to do his best by stripping naked in front of the woman, by flexing his feet and huge muscles. But the woman whose head you grasp rather firmly continues to say, ‘*Niet, niet, niet,*’ for her head’s signs and meanings prevent the young man attacking her, harassing her and satisfying his libido then and there, on the spot – in a crematorium, for instance.

That is what St Francis apparently meant, although he did not think in terms of sexual relationships: he did not belong to a Tantric club that advocates our sensual or rather sexual approach to the god-man-woman problem. Yes, in this case you say ‘yes’ to a god who pays you a visit and he or she invades your body – literally, liberally. But, according to his biographers (St Bonaventure, among other saints) St Francis did not belong to this club or any other club of this kind. He used to say rather plainly, though not in plain English, ‘You should say “yes” to God, whatever happens and however difficult it may appear at first glance. And if you can’t say it you should nod enthusiastically. You should spend your time in the land of nod.’ St Francis also emphasised the utter indifference displayed by any corpse in front of which you can put whatever you wish: jewels, caviar and other dainty dishes. You can even put a crown on its knees, a Russian or English crown, but the corpse will not react either tomorrow or the day after; as if it could not ascertain the value of this crown. As if he mistook it for a chamber pot. But why would you put a chamber pot on someone’s lap?

St Francis was not the only person in human history whose death-tendency seemed to offer a panacea in a world where everybody grabs whatever is within their reach. Eyes do not grab anything, for the simple reason that they have no hands, no claws, no paws. Moreover, they cannot leave their sockets without damaging their worldwide relationship. What may surprise a lot of people concerns Georg Wilhelm Friedrich’s attitude towards St Francis and his sun – the hymn he wrote during one of his ecstasies. He wrote a poem where he called the sun: ‘My brother.’ I wonder why he did not add ‘my sister’, for the sun is certainly far more androgynous than any

representative of the world where we live; until further notice. He effusively praised the sun's ability to shine and even project its rays or beams: 'Ninety percent of the projected missiles will hit their target,' he said about the sun's warmth and spiritual support. But Hegel's thought was more absolute, more unconditional: it encompassed everything, everybody and their respective, yet harmonious histories. He said, 'We should pay homage to light which is not greedy, contrary to what some of us might think. It is true that light usurps a lot of domains where shadows and dark intentions reign – in the manner known through Mozart's masterpiece entitled *Die Zauberflöte* where we encounter a queen whose chief (aggressive, anti) occupation is focused upon light, might and wisdom; a positive might, a positive wisdom. (She is far from stupid, this queen of ours.) Upon their antithesis, I mean.'

Hegel wrote, among other things, 'Light is far more Christian than many Christians I'm acquainted with. My light, the one I'm talking about – actually, there is only one light, that of wisdom, harmony and happiness – does not require anything, not even a piece of bread upon which so many human beings inconsolably count. It shines, come rain or shine. What could you say about the sun sung by St Francis? A ray of sunshine shone through a gap in the clouds. As for my *personal* light which belongs to the whole of humanity, it shines all the time, even at night, because there are no clouds (either material or spiritual) in the space where it reigns like a king of light, of day and of absolute happiness of humanity advocated by Marx, Lenin and Engels – my disciples and faithful followers. My light does not take anything; it *gives everything* with the exception of evil which I'll always reject and discard. It is neutral, my light: it votes neither for communists nor for capitalists, liberalists and national fronts. Or fronds, or affronts. It is just there; like everything else. Let us acknowledge its presence.'

Hegel also wrote about the body which pervades the whole of our substance or whatever we hold and possess, at least to some degree – *our* body. The heart is our body's centrepiece unless we do not deny the existence and immortality of the soul. The heart is the sun of the body, according to Hegel and Hegelians. Sometimes they say, 'The whole body was pulsating with music.' Why does the whole body pulsate with music, on this particular occasion? Because the heart goes on beating, whatever happens; unless we die on the spot. 'The heart was pumping out music with a heavy beat,' we confide to our notes. Here are a few entries from our personal, almost secret diary, 'The heart was pumping out music with a heavy beat. The body was pumping out music with a heavy heart. Pumping, pumping, pumping, pumping. Vibrating, vibrating.' To cut the long pumping short, the body grows so vibrant you cannot possibly stop it – even if you die. The body becomes a string or rather yet another string theory. You might say it performs a Beethoven symphony; if you are fond of Beethoven's music. Someone's body, the American seer's body, vibrates under your very nose or eyes, and suddenly you see everything – literally everything and everybody – in this American's eyes which you opened at some point, eager to resurrect him on your own, without Jesus Christ's assistance.

Let us speak for a while about Jesus Christ's presence in our lives; even in the lives of those who think he never set his foot on the surface of the Earth or the Moon. Often they discuss this problem, saying to each other, 'Christ wrote a few words on the sand lying under his feet, and specialists eventually found these words, their traces, although they don't know for sure what he really meant and how to decipher these historic words. Some say he spoke of his resurrection. He also spoke of *our* resurrection – in the same breath, on the same sand. They say, "We can distinguish the difference between secular words and spiritual words rather easily. And we're convinced his words are spiritual, mystical, and consequently they have nothing to do with our daily routine, with shopping, banks, safes and other futile preoccupations. Some of our specialists are colour-blind and

therefore can't distinguish between red and green so easily as normal, ordinary people. But that doesn't really matter, considering that Jesus' text appears to us in black and white.'" And then some specialists say in a hoarse, rasping voice, 'I sometimes have difficulty distinguishing Spanish from Portuguese. Jesus' words had been written in Aramaic and I understood their meaning on the spot. He did his utmost to convey to us the importance of his presence not only in our hour of need, but at every moment we cross in the course of our lives. In the *cross* of our lives. So we shouldn't say, "Don't fail me in my hour of need." We should say instead, "Don't fail me at all, even if I think that everything goes smoothly.'" Sure enough, we mustn't let our moods and instincts blind us to the situations we get involved in. These situations can be fatal, mortal, and only Jesus' presence can save us under the circumstances. For instance, with the hand he can put on one of our shoulders.'

Such nonchalance makes me furious: these people enlarge on the sacred, on the sacredest aspect of our lives rather frivolously and disgustingly. Recently, during a television programme an atheist said to a priest, 'Where was God during the Holocaust? *Where* was He? Where *was* He? Where was *He*? How could He allow them to drag their innocent victims into gas chambers?' And the priest answered, 'Jesus was standing beside every victim during this ordeal.'

'Standing?' asked the atheist.

'Yes.'

'And what about his hand? Did his hand press down empathically and warmly on the victim's shoulder?'

'I suppose so.'

'Why didn't he *save* the victim instead of *pressing* his shoulder? Why did he limit his interference to this compassionate yet sterile gesture? Or did he just *fold* his arms?'

Sometimes we say to each other, 'It's certainly better to lie *under* the crust of the Earth.' But if someone takes us up on this consideration, on this untimely reflection, saying, 'Well and good. I promise I'll dig a comfortable, tailor-made grave for your body. Would you agree to spend a few nights, a few weeks in this comfortable grave?' It goes without saying that you will start waving your hands, by way of an answer: you will seem unable to utter any word, however short and insignificant. And if someone puts a handkerchief in one of your hands, you will look like a citizen bidding someone farewell. Are you bidding farewell to yourself? It is a difficult question. In a way, we always bid ourselves farewell – not only on the eve of a dangerous, quasi-fatal journey. It is better therefore not to hold any handkerchief when you unconsciously decide to wave your hands: signs *are* dangerous, as Ferdinand de Saussure put it.

Let us make it clear: our main problem concerns our death and consequently we should take care of it, as far as we are allowed to do so without undergoing a severe punishment. According to Plato, we shall have to remove our clothes before introducing ourselves to three supreme judges who cannot judge anything or anybody unless this (our) being in himself or herself shows his or her soul – stark naked. The judge – there are three of them, but they carry out different rituals – looks at the soul deprived of its usual ornaments and garments and says, 'What is it, pray?'

'You mean, this scar?'

'Yes, this scar, this very scar.'

'It's the wound I received at Waterloo.'

'It's your body which got this wound, if I'm not mistaken.'

'You're never mistaken, Your Holiness.'

‘Your Honour.’

‘Yes, Your Honour.’

‘Let us return to your scar. Didn’t you harass a woman in your lifetime?’

‘No. Anyway, she became my wife.’

‘What about your servant? The last one?’

‘You mean, the one before last?’

And so on. These interrogations go on for centuries: time does not exist in the Hereafter. At least it is suspended – the belief in time – during these trials and tribulations and last judgments which are often defined as ‘the one before last’. But if you happen to be the American seer I am writing about, you can say (or impart) to your judges and great inquisitors the following truth, ‘My soul can be seen and scrutinised with the help of my eyes. They’re very helpful.’ Indeed, they are quite visible unless you choose to shut your eyes forever. Fortunately, you do not opt for this solution and so your eyes continue to stare into space where your great inquisitors judge your behaviour – as displayed during your lifetime: your deathtime depends upon this judgement, be it false or fair and square. (A triangular judgement was banished from this court a long time ago.) They study your eyes and say to each other, ‘I can’t see any scars in these eyes of his and so he can live in Paradise for the rest of his eternal existence. So can she, if the person happens to be a female representative of the human species.’ (Many plant and animal species are found only in the rainforests. But the human species are everywhere, as well we know.)

These torturers go so far as to inflict a massive injury on the eyes in question (questioned, scrutinised). They take a razor and apply its blade to the above-mentioned eyes – with a view to creating the scar they seem to have seen in the soul of the person under scrutiny; the person undergoing the last judgement; or the one-before-last judgement; or the two-before-last judgement. And then they say to the audience, the public or the crowd gathered in front of Buckingham Palace, ‘We found a scar in the eyes of the deceased. And this scar speaks volumes about the crimes he committed in his lifetime – beyond a shadow of a doubt. Incidentally, we didn’t find such a shadow within the eyes of the aforesaid deceased, be he a man or a woman. Or be it a man or a woman, if you prefer. It doesn’t really matter *what* you prefer under the circumstances. You might prefer to consume a number of dainty dishes in your spouse’s company instead of standing in front of our Palace and listening to our rigmarole. From *your* point of view. But your point of view doesn’t count at all. So bye-bye, bye-bye, bye-bye, dear fellow-citizens, dear fellow-countrymen and women, dear fellows and maidens and mermaids.’

You can see as many shadows as you like, even if you are not a supreme judge standing on the threshold of the Hereafter or the utter annihilation. You say to yourself, ‘It is a shadow theatre, not a sinner.’ And you might be right; yet it is a sinner you contemplate as you walk around Creation in search of some occupation, preoccupation or hobby. But you might conclude – upon contemplating this piece of Creation or the Creator Himself – that the world is such and consequently such is the world. ‘And I can’t do anything about it. I can’t judge it because I’m a Spinozist, not just a supreme judge. I don’t judge, I don’t do anything about anything. I just walk around or lie about as the American seer did at the end of his life.’ They studied his soul by means of the overtures offered by his eyes and they found a lot of shadows inside it. They also found a lot of snow, a lot of snowdrifts. And those snowdrifts were so white they decided he was innocent and pure. (And they found a lot of blood on them, in them.) So they left his corpse in peace.

Your body, be it alive or dead, vibrates for some reason. If you are a man – and you *are* a man, under the circumstances – you vibrate because you see a woman in front of you, of your powerful body. And even if the woman in question is *behind* you, your powerful body feels her and you begin to behave crazily or offhandedly – but not *offbodily*, mind you. The vibrations you have already become subject to invade your body to the point of reaching your eyes where they are reflected so unmistakably that the supreme judges say in unison, ‘He’s guilty, this scoundrel.’ And yet the whole of life with all its nuances, colours and fibres is concentrated in your eyes. You don’t really have to rise from the dead: your eyes are alive, your body is alive, let alone your soul which is never alone.

But you can do it the other way round – if you feel like it, in spite of everything. (Of every *what*, may I ask?) You can rise from your body, even if it is not dead: your eyes can resurrect you in the twinkling of an eye. Your eyes store up, accumulate the life energy you heard so many times about in your youth, when working on your immortality. In your eyes you can see not only your soul, but also your whole life, your afterlife, your before, after and middle, and you say to yourself it is enough for your happiness and the mood that corresponds to this happiness, wellbeing and what not. And if this what does not tie in with your highest aspiration you add ‘not’ to it, otherwise everything will be spoilt, probably forever. Your energy is there – right in the middle of your eyes; and you ask yourself if God takes part in the procedure. How? How? How? Actually we need only two verses or lines or minds to complete the whole procedure – once and for all, believe it or not. You believe it and the junction takes place under your very eyes. What kind of junction, you may ask? You join life to death, more or less. And ‘more’ sounds much more than ‘less’ at this junction, if it is a junction at all. Sometimes you take your death or corpse and do your best to join it to life, but the screw is inadequate – it does not realise the importance of the event – and you miss the boat or your chance. The boat is already far away. As for your chance, it is still in front of you, but you have no idea what this chance is about and so you miss it inevitably, fatally, miserably. You should go back to life – on all fours, if necessary. Your eyes keep the energy you need for your personal resurrection and so they (your eyes and also your nerves) set the wheels in motion and operate a metamorphosis described in anthologies and anthropologies as pure, secular resurrection. You rely only on your eyes, on their will-to-live – not on Jesus Christ and his spirituality, vital force and tombs or graves.

On what or whom could we rely at such moments? Hegel rises from the dead and says that the dialectical process enables you to die and live at the same time; because life and death are interchangeable by virtue of what, of what, of what. Of what, I wonder? Well and good – the vital force is gathered and feathered in your eyes which radiate whatever can be radiated and thus obtain admission to the kingdom of EVERYTHING. In this kingdom you are not only happy, as might be presumed without much effort and calculation: you are also *alive* – you are back to barracks; to life, so to speak. And all this started in the hut where the American seer was lying rather peacefully – dead to all outward appearances; alive to all inward appearances. So what are we supposed to do with all these living corpses? Or living bodies? Shall we add them to our disastrous demographic worries? We say to each other, ‘The problem is solved. There are 14343434343 new inhabitants on the Earth. We have to put up with them in the future and even in the present. We’ll do our duty – we swear, we promise.’

But the dead body you bend over, anxious to find out what his or her anxieties are, answers you, ‘I’m better in this world, for the simple reason that I don’t have to strut around. That’s all. Death is better than life.’

You have no idea what metamorphosis you are about to operate. Well, there are people who refuse all operations, whatever these operations are centred upon. So you say to them, 'It's not really the centre of your being we're going to treat with the aid of our instruments. Just a few ramifications of your tree of life, a few twigs, you know. We can safely sacrifice them for your overall wellbeing, for your immortality which we talked about yesterday, when drinking your excellent, unparalleled tea.'

Anyway your lasers and pills are sure to help your patients instead of destroying their tissues once and for all. You stare at the victim, at the American seer, and his eyes begin to move in accordance with the Broyler movement I heard about in my youth. (Brower, Brewer; Brauer.) You have the feeling you are part of life, of the cosmos because your eyes radiate enough energy – according to Hegel – to inaugurate a few revolutions; or coups d'états at least. As your eyes look at the sky and the Earth, they begin to construct a Vita Nuova, and you realise you are a living creature. Is it better to be alive, to shake someone's hand, while uttering these awe-inspiring words, 'I'm a human being too'? Alas, you continue to think about the beauty of the cosmos because nothing seems to make sense beside or outside this beauty. At least you should take it into consideration, whenever you think in terms of suicide. You accept these terms, thinking they are rather advantageous, given the overall collapse of your life, of its numerous aspects. And then you meet someone, not necessarily the most beautiful woman in the world. And this woman utters the following words, 'When do you envisage finishing the project?'

'What project are you talking about?'

'You know what I'm talking about.'

'You mean my forthcoming suicide? I don't know, I don't know. Not the foggiest, you know.'

'It's hard to envisage how it might happen. Don't you think so?'

'I think so, I don't think so. What does it matter?'

And then you talk to this woman about the cosmos, its limits – if any, if any, you repeat several times. What do you know about the cosmos, apart from our unquenchable desire to kill ourselves? What do we know about ourselves apart from this fastidious, fatal desire? We never think in terms of the cosmos because it does not care about us, or so it seems to us and to all our friends, our fellow creatures. And if the cosmos does give a thought or a damn to or about our existence, they say almost in unison, 'It has just sent a meteor that will partly destroy our planet and its inhabitants.' At least it seems to have utterly destroyed not only the dinosaurs, but also the troglodytes and all sorts of so ons. But they forget one dimension, one notion linked directly, instantaneously, to light, to its modification and loyal, constant stream. What do we know about the cosmos? asks a laywoman or just an ordinary citizen. 'We know what our machines can capture and decipher,' says the person to whom we put this question. 'But what *can* they capture?' you ask this person.

'It depends on the space they have to conquer,' answers this person.

'I beg to differ,' you say. And you say that immediately so no one can say you did it after much-soul searching.

'Why do you beg to differ?' asks this person.

'Because in these matters, in this domain, time counts much more than space.'

'Does it?'

'It does. What's more, light counts much more than dark matter.'

'The dark matter is everywhere,' answers this person. 'We're talking to each other, aren't we?'

‘We are.’ You cannot deny the fact. Actually any fact can be denied either easily or laboriously, but this fact *can’t* be denied – there is no denying it.

‘In between our bodies there are particles of the dark matter. Do you want me to count them for the benefit of your skull?’

‘No, thank you very much.’

‘What were you on the point of confiding to my brain? Don’t you find it remarkable that we can say, “It looks like rain”? And yet we never say, “It looks like brain.” *N’est-ce pas remarquable?*’

Our ghosts (the ones we see during our midsummer’s dreams) say that light can come from some divinity or other, and so it is more prudent to withdraw, leaving the battlefield to positive influences (as they say). Let us leave these positions, these positive and negative influences and affects aside, otherwise we shall never hit the mark, whatever it is. From time to time, we do hit something, and we wonder if it is the mark or not: hitting anti-marks is pointless, as we all know. But this time I am resolved to hit not only the mark but light itself and whatever it transports from one galaxy to another; otherwise there is no point in doing anything, apart from turning in once and for all. And you should never turn *out* – it goes without saying.

What is light? They always ask this question which can espouse various figures of speech such as, ‘What is time?’ or ‘What is space?’ or ‘What is marriage?’ or ‘What is divorce?’ What *is* divorce? Never mind, never mind. Well, there is such a thing as a marriage of heaven and hell. But you can also get married to the cosmos, to the part of the cosmos we are acquainted with, thanks to our machines, apparatuses and whatever. And ever, ever, ever, ever and what. This part comes to us through one of these contraptions, and we capture whatever we can capture – and whatever, whatever, whatever, whatever – so that we have at *our disposal* (as our extramundane friends point out) a molecule of what is going on in the broad or Great Cosmos. But why can’t we accede to the *whole lot*, so to speak? ‘Lot number 134 is a fine old walnut bureau,’ as they say. Why not the following piece of news? ‘Lot number 135 is a fine old part of the cosmos you cannot see through your telescopes’?

The point is light travels too slowly, contrary to what Einstein thought and communicated to the world at large. We all say to each other, and also to our wives, husbands and children, ‘Light travels too fast. We can’t really take advantage of it unless we go to California, to one of its beaches.’ Anyway, we say *anything* to keep our hand in. In what sense? Where? To keep our hand in life. Well, light travels rather slowly, according to astronomers who would like to know more about the rest of the cosmos, about whatever lies *outside* the cosmos. We know almost everything about the cosmos, owing to the growth and progress of our technology, science and also to the growth of our brains, although (apparently) our brains grow smaller and smaller, according to some statistics. The point is light’s slowness or laziness does not allow us to learn the truth, the whole truth about what lies beyond what we can see through our telescopes or with the help of our short-sighted eyes. We should not measure the cosmos by means of space, as we used to do for centuries, if not for millennia. (Starting with Thales of Miletus.) We might say to each other, ‘What a pity we don’t know *everything* about the cosmos where we live, die, prosper and return to life, rising from the dead. Sometimes we also rise from the quick, and we call this rise “the second birth”.’ Our machines can detect everything down to our suicidal urges, and any signal we receive (or might receive) from outer space is grabbed – grab her by the pussy, as Donald Trump put it – by our

contraptions. But there are signals we do not grab either by the pussy or otherwise because light is too slow and so does not convey to us the vibrations sent by outer, outer, outer spaces, galaxies, souls and hearts. We know only 240 billion light-years, which means that 11111111111 billion light-years, dark-years, ordinary years lie outside the scope of our this, that and life in general.

What it comes down to is rather clear, crystal clear because light is the messenger, the go-between which surpasses literary heroes and their errands, letters, words. No lovers, no letters – this is far more important because the cosmos is our house, home, kitchen and parlour – our Edwardian parlour where we enjoy ourselves; to the utmost, as usual. It is noteworthy that our habits and rituals play the leading part in our play entitled *Our Everyday Life*. And the parlour I am talking about is fundamentally linked to the French verb '*parler*' from which you can derive all sorts of words and entertainments. For instance, you say to your companion in fortune, 'Let us indulge in a series of *parlotes*.'

'How do you mean?' she says, although she does not mean anything; nor does she wish to know anything of your meanings and intentions. She knows she wishes to go to the nearest bed – with you, of all representatives of the human species, as I always say, when talking about these representatives and species. So what? So what? You just answer her question, without wasting too much time on meditations, reflections and other clichés we are acquainted with, thanks to our history and gurus.

'I suggest we withdraw into the room I can see in front of my eyes. In this room we'll be alone, on our own.'

'Do you wish to harass me sexually, physically and abominably?' she asks.

'Not at all. Just a short *séance* of *parlote*, you know.'

'What is *parlote*?'

'"Par" is a part and "lot" is the word you're acquainted with because your parents spoke of it when you were an adorable five-year-old girl. Lot and his family. And if someone asks you, "Do you think you're happy with your lot?" What would you answer?'

'I'm not happy with my lot.'

'Do you think they should do something to improve the lot of the lowest-paid workers?'

'No. I have my *soucis*, as the French put it.'

There are entities of light, although we cannot say we know *all* of them by heart or otherwise; by skin, for instance. Space does not count: we could receive a multitude of signs from everywhere if light were not on the slow side. But whatever we do receive as we face both the cosmos and its stars is conveyed to our consciousness and unconscious by light, by its speed, slowness and magnanimity. We see a ray and say to ourselves, 'My God! Another piece of information that comes from the outside, from all the beyonds we can picture to ourselves in our visions, nightmares.' Even dark matter is sent to us by means of light, by its hands. We often say to our children whose mirth makes us forget our worries, 'Light wrapped the present and tied it with ribbon.' And then we hand to them (to our children) either a bar of chocolate or a doll, and our children sing a hymn to light, for they cannot do otherwise. That is what they call 'attraction of religion' or 'attraction of spirituality' or 'attraction of the pope' or 'attraction of the pop'. 'Pop' is a Russian priest, but whenever you say 'pop' in a Western society, they turn their heads towards you and utter the following sentence, 'She's the most exciting British singer to emerge on the pop scene for a decade.' They can also inform you that, 'The song reached No. 32 in the pop charts. She wants to be a pop singer/star like Madonna', whereas you cling to *your* Madonna, to the

reproductions of Italian paintings you came to know when your mother finally allowed you to quit her breasts and study the books assembled in your family library by your father.

There are characters who cannot find their author, and we often see them on various stages accompanied by those who direct their movements and also their mouths: their mouths open at the right moment and say the right words as if thinking only in terms of Flaubert's categories and doctrines. You think in his terms and utter a series of right words, hoping they will create either a masterpiece or a perfect world where no wars will ever explode like a bomb or something else. Socrates devoted a lot of time to the deconstruction of eloquence, but no one asked the most vital question we are confronted with throughout our lives, 'Can words uttered by a human being raise another human being from the latter's tomb?' You see a tomb and you say to your colleagues or idle onlookers, 'Of course I can raise this person from the dead, but I wish you could open this tomb, this coffin, otherwise my task would be too arduous. And I need a lot of energy for this game of cops and robbers, for this death-or-life battle.' So they (some of them) open the grave by digging a few holes in it. Then they settle down in these holes – not forever, not forever. There are gurus whose allergy to tombs is well-known: they even advise us against visiting our late relatives, mistresses and husbands. They say, 'Death is contagious. So are corpses. There's a poison on corpses, on their skins and bones, and this poison can affect our vital, essential functions by penetrating our tissues. Our tissues begin to look and smell like this poison. And you decline, and you continue to decline for some time before installing yourself in your grave.'

Well, you temporarily install yourself in one of the holes you dug in the Earth in expectation of a miracle. What does this miracle consist of? You wish to resurrect your dearest friend or your charming mistress without whom you can neither live nor pass away. And you rely exclusively on your eloquence, on your volubility – on your sales talk, so to speak. What do you sell, one may ask? You sell your words, your gift connected with supernatural forces. Only mantras can raise us from the dead and so your ignorance of Sanskrit or any other language magnificently focused on life and the ultimate triumph over death may damage, nullify your efforts focused on the resurrection of the dead – for the ultimate glory of God, as some talkers say and even sing as they bend over corpses and tombs. Alas, your mantras will never work properly: they will work only *partly*, resurrecting an arm or a finger. But what can your favourite corpse do with this finger? He can point this accusatory finger at you, at your sterile, ridiculous mouth that utters something to no avail. So you cannot – if you are a corpse – avail yourself of this gibberish, even if it is rooted in the most efficient mantra known to humanity, laymen and laywomen included.

Some of these charlatans (these fake, obnoxious gurus) go so far as to ask the corpse they are confronted with to repeat the following mantra, 'I'm all fingers and thumbs today. I'm all fingers and thumbs today.' Of course the corpse in question cannot ask them, 'What for?' This corpse – and this goes for most corpses – can say neither 'yes' nor 'no', let alone enlarge upon thumbs, fingers, toes. But if it *could* put this question to its torturer, the latter would answer, 'That's the only way to resurrect your other thumbs and fingers. But we shouldn't limit our intervention, our interference in individual lives and in the structure of death to this particular mantra. We should go further – as far as we're allowed to go by the Almighty, you know. So you should keep going without losing an inch of your momentum. You gain a powerful, mighty momentum by addressing your speech to your fingers and thumbs. But then you turn – mentally, mentally – towards other members and tissues

of your body and say to them (inwardly, inwardly), ‘I’m all lungs and legs this morning. I’m all stomach and shoulder blades this afternoon. I’m all molecules and atoms this evening. What a beautiful sunset! I feel like writing a poem about it, about this sunset and the feeling of love I experience inside my brain and breast as I look at it admiringly.’

Our toys are designed to withstand the rough treatment of the average five-year-old. If compared with the treatment we are submitted to by death, our children are angels; they are angels anyway, as everybody knows and maintains. And what about our homemade mantras, all these fingers, stomachs and tendons? What about all these notions and objects that we teach to the corpse in the hope of turning it into a living creature? I am not sure that every corpse is patient enough to go through our mantras and reach their final destination unscathed. Unfortunately the whole process is likely to fail if the corpse grows weary and says to herself and her own bones, ‘I’m fed up with it. I’m fed up with you, my dear bones. I’m fed up with everything, everybody, every star.’ Many people travel through the tunnel at the end of which they see some supernatural light and even a couple of angels, a husband and a wife. (Angels are *not* androgynous. And they are not very fond of Plato’s myths.) You are a doctor and you are supposed to treat a patient whose clinical death is beyond a shadow of a doubt. You do your best to get this patient off the hook – sometimes literally, if you please. Once your duty is accomplished, the patient opens his or her (or its, or its: spiritually it *is* a corpse) eyes and says to you in reproachful tones, ‘Don’t you regret your deed? Yes, I saw the two angels, the pair my colleagues speak of upon coming back, upon returning to life and prosperity – as they think, as they think – and these angels told me the following truth, “Don’t you worry – you’re going to live. What’s more, you’ll die at the ripe old age of 99.” “No, no, no!” I screamed. “I’m loath to go back to *that* world, whatever it is. I know it’s brimful with suffering, and I wish to abolish it, the suffering I’m complaining about. In my lifetime I tried everything: mantras, pills, wine, cognac and even vodka. What a poison, my God! But for nothing in the world – I’m still talking about that world over there – will I resurrect and resume my duties, my rounds of suffering. Let me come with you. Even if your final destination is hell, I’ll come with you, come hell or high water.’

On the other hand, your guru can make things easier for you by reducing your efforts considerably, by saying the following words, ‘Forget about your stomach, intestines and nerves – your heart remembers everything much better than your half-dead body. I beg your pardon – your *dead* body, my dear corpse. So your mantra (call it what you wish) should limit its wanderings to your heart, to its resurrection and future, eternal life.’ Sure enough, our heart contains the information – the whole of it, the overall information – we need for our future lives, for several future lives. And if you ask a specialist, ‘How many lives can your affirmation guarantee under oath?’ the specialist is likely to acknowledge his own ignorance. ‘I don’t know exactly how many lives you can count on, if you deign to rely on your heart’s memories, without inquiring too much about their viability and liability. But one thing is certain – your heart has enough memories to offer you at least one supplementary life at the end of which you’ll be able to remove your karma from the path of your lives. And then you’ll be free forever.’ Of course most patients say they are reluctant to become free under the circumstances; and these circumstances are called ‘death’. But death does not pay much attention to their wishes and aversions: it has its duty to accomplish and whenever you question death on the subject (there is only one subject in this kind of discussion and dissolution) it or he answers, ‘In the line of duty.’ The upshot of the discussions is that there will be no redundancies.

Anyway, there are corpses whose refusal to return to life and its inconsistencies is categorical, not to say absolute. And some relatives are adamant to the point of willing to raise their fathers, mothers and uncles from the dead at all cost and often to the detriment of the latter's (late uncles and aunts) tacit disagreement. The corpses subjected to this procedure cannot vociferate their nos, for all their willingness to do so to the best of their abilities (alas, they have no abilities of any sort. Not even some abilities of sorts). So their relatives visit their tombs (their late relatives' tombs) in some women's company. These women are pregnant and our part-time resurrectors – *ressusciteuses*, in French – trust their future offspring to the extent of using their life-force in the course of experiments related to their dear absentees. But neither these resurrectors nor their numerous admirers should forget that this last variety of raising-from-the-dead comes up against insurmountable difficulties, to put it mildly. What kind of difficulties, you may ask? The point is a lot depends on what the woman in question bears in her substance, nourishes in her substance and counts upon for her future maternal delights. Let us recall *Rosemary's Baby* by Polanski and some other people involved in the project. Suppose the woman in question is about to give birth to the Devil's offspring. But let us not jump the gun: first we should make sure the process itself can work in this deadly context invariably linked to the so-called 'point of no return'; unless you are a Christian devotee or a Buddhist who sleeps in his tomb with a view to awakening in two hundred years and teach yet another lesson to whoever can salute him in that distant future. Well, apparently our embryos are influenced by whatever they hear within our wombs: words, music, tsunamis et cetera. An embryo hears a Schubert sonata and develops an inordinate liking for pianos and pianists. So whenever asked the ritual question, 'Who do you like more – your father or your mother?' the four-year-old child answers, 'I worship my mother because she plays Beethoven's *La Pathétique*.'

But does this method or ritual work the other way? Will a corpse be affected by an embryo's presence in the vicinity of its tomb and coffin? Schubert and Beethoven and Brahms are powerful enough to affect not only embryos, but also the unborn – those who will never be born, for all our efforts and libidos. An embryo – especially a second-rate embryo – is deprived of vibes and waves; and even if it does have some at its disposal, they are so feeble, weak and wretched that leaving the womb (this particular obstacle) seems to erect a number of insuperable difficulties on the embryo's path. Even if its mother's skin is admirably thin, being highly aristocratic and refined, it is likely to bang its head against a brick wall for hours and hours without getting anywhere; without getting outdoors, to be exact. Do we call this particular 'outdoors' 'an open-air market' or 'a breath of fresh air'?

Be that as it may, the embryo we are studying with utmost scrupulousness does not really have to get out: it is enough to send your waves elsewhere instead of keeping them inside the womb in which you are firmly ensconced. Alas, sometimes it is easier to walk out or fly away, for waves are fragile, capricious, and you are not allowed to hold them in your hands, carrying them elsewhere, as I put it elsewhere. Suppose you *can* pick them up and set off down the road on your new bike. You think it is easier to reach your destination on a bike: *walking* down the road is all the more dangerous since many roads are covered with stones, roots and even banana skins. So you grasp the handlebars – one hand is skilful enough for such manoeuvres – and proceed on your journey, the waves in question taking it easy in the palm of your other hand. What about the wind and its gusts? A sudden gust of wind can blow an umbrella inside out. And an umbrella is much more solid than a childish wave, a group of childish, immature vibes. Even a butterfly is steadier than a mass of vibes, for you can immobilise it forever by pressing down on its body and wings; ever so slightly. All this does not really matter as long as we resurrect

somebody else, not *ourselves*. Indeed it is preferable not to resurrect oneself, not to be forced to do so: no point in taking it (them) to extremes (life, diseases and other components of human existence). Just follow the middle way.

We can try and raise from the dead not only others; our mothers, among other human beings. We can also raise from our grave our own bodies and even souls, according to the latest documents devoted to this vital, death-permeated quandary. And our procedure or rather the method to which we wholeheartedly resort (showing signs of distress) under the circumstances is akin to self-persuasion about which Jane Austen spoke so brilliantly in one of her novels or tales. Call it what you wish if you still wish something at this stage of your life. There is no denying that we encounter a stage where nothing awaits us; and we are quite aware of the fact. So we do not request anything, for no one will graciously accede to any request of ours; not even to an outstretched arm, to an open palm of the hand.

Does our soul depart from our body upon our death which is also a departure – of sorts, if we believe Socrates and a number of sacred books? So what do we have to worry about? The existence of the soul is proved by the fact that you lose 21grams at the moment when your death comes into its (his) own and strikes a fatal blow either with an axe or otherwise. Apparently the body exhales the soul – through the mouth and the nose; and this procedure takes place at the very moment of death. Usually, the last attempt to verify the presence of vital forces inside a substance or organism features a mirror you hold over the mouth of someone who is about to die; and this someone might have died already, according to your sensations and probably hopes. (Human nature is vicious, isn't it?) I used to get a lot of condensation on the walls in the winter – during my Russian life. That is what it mostly looks like, this test designed to detect the last vestiges of life in the will-be corpse. (No more will-to-live.) If you detect no signs of anything as you study the surface of the mirror you use for the experiment, the person under discussion is irremediably dead. But sometimes – this does happen in spite of death's unquestionable omnipresence and omnipotence – you see something that reminds you of your walls and also of the Russian winter; as far as I am concerned. Incidentally, I recalled the Russian winter two days ago, when I saw a lot of snow in my garden – in Belgium, of all places. At the beginning of April, if you please.

Well, if you are reminded of Russian walls and winters, the person lying in close proximity to your mind and body is alive. However, what you see may just amount to the last exhalation, to the soul's departure from the body. Russian scientists affirm that this departure weighs 21 grams. Actually some of these scientists began to believe in God, after studying the above condensation closely. They said to each other, 'My God, my God! So the soul exists, whatever our materialists and atheists can say on the subject. And the soul's weight corresponds to what we find with our instruments, on their screens – 21 grams.' Of course, some of these scientists look disappointed: the soul is said to encompass not only the cosmos, but also the whole of the Hereafter. If all this rigmarole does not exceed 21 grams there is nothing to write home about. Other scientists, however, insist on the importance of these grams, saying that the soul does not need to look like a sumo wrestler. 'This discussion has raised many important issues,' said one of the scientists to his wife.

'What discussion?'

'Our soul-centred discussion.'

'What did you say about the soul?' asked the wife.

'Do you think our soul resembles a sumo wrestler?'

‘No. It looks like a Russian ballerina taking part in a performance of *The Sleeping Beauty* – at the Bolshoi Theatre.’

‘Do you mean to say our soul is asleep? Most of the time? It’s always awake, my dear wife and companion. Even when *you* are asleep, your soul is awake. It travels extensively throughout the cosmos and its suburbs. And it is certainly not asleep during its departure from the body. Well, I do think the soul should have a lot in common with sumo wrestlers.’

‘Why? I’ve never really admired them,’ said the wife.

‘Because it is believed to wrestle with wrathful deities. Do you remember the Tibetan book entirely devoted to death and our agonies?’

‘And our hopes?’ asked the wife.

The scientist revealed to his colleagues the content of this lively exchange of ideas, and his wife’s remarks on the soul-question led to a heated discussion. First of all, as everybody knows, the soul is much more refined than the body which does not care about spirits and spiritual revelations. These are solely reserved for the soul and its consumption. Philosophers do their best to push the body away – as far as possible from the soul, leaving only a sort of umbilical cord without which the soul may starve to death, being dependent on terrestrial nourishment – as long as it lives near the surface of the Earth and not in heaven where it often travels at night. On their deathbeds philosophers smile and laugh as they think about future delights – the Hereafter is the most delightful region of human evolution – but they are worried about their soul’s departure (or their souls’ departures). That is why some of them keep a watchful eye on the vapour issuing from the mouth at some point – at the point of no return, to put it bluntly. These 21 grams are very important for eternal life and philosophers do their best not to miss this point, this moment – the point of the soul’s departure which may become a point of no return if the mouth does not inhale this smoke, as smokers often do, bent as they are on enjoying their ritual as long as possible. They keep on exhaling and inhaling the same portion of smoke until nothing remains of it – nothing except a portion of the air, of superfluous transparency.

Anyway, a true philosopher opens his mouth and inhales his soul which does its utmost to escape from his body. Frankly speaking, the body is tantamount to a quantity of smoke – or to a gigantic smoke screen you cannot get rid of unless you die on the spot or somewhere else. The chief thing is to die, removing the body from the screen of life, as it were. You watch the film of life, but the body hides the greater part of the screen on account of its mass, weight and tissues; even its bones get in the way. Putting a bone on the screen, as the saying goes. You yearn for a spiritual revelation and trip over a bone that reminds you of death, of its omnipresence and rottenness. It also reminds you of society, of human beings who have little or nothing in common with spirituality, for they do not care about their souls. They eat, drink, think only in terms of pleasures, and pleasures are nothing but bones which can satisfy only dogs. And these dogs eat only dogs and bones.

There are a lot of books about the human soul, and in these books they often speak about bones, skins, saying, ‘The soul has nothing to do with these elements, with this dirt, rot and dung. The soul is pure. Yet Socrates said it should sojourn in Hades because purity can only be born from its opposite – from impurity.’ Let us return to the dying person who endeavours to retain the soul within his or her body, within his or her entrails, within his or her pineal glands. This person’s mouth continues to inhale the smoke, alias the soul which is still on its way to the Hereafter; and obediently the soul retraces its steps and re-enters the body as if determined to stay in it forever. Far from it: at the earliest opportunity it leaves it again and the ritual repeats itself ad nauseam. If a

living person does something of the kind we say reproachfully and despondently, ‘His speech was dreadful – he just kept repeating himself.’ As for the soul, it grows thinner and thinner in the process. As it happens, it eventually says to the body, ‘I’m about to vanish into thin air. To tell the truth, at this very moment I’m almost as thin as thin air. And I’m bound to grow even thinner if you don’t let me go.’

But let us not discard the soul’s affinities with sumo wrestlers, although it is not really necessary to return to this resemblance or similarity. In this connection I spoke of the Tibetan book where a few wrathful deities devour your soul, without devouring it. As usual you cross the border between life and death. (How many times have you done that in the course of your existence? No light at the end of the tunnel, mind you. Just the tunnel.) Suddenly you see a woman or rather a deity. Actually you see a tooth, one tooth, but its appearance tells you it belongs to a wrathful deity: benevolent deities have no teeth, only gums. And the tooth you see and fear closes in on you as if willing to teach you the mysteries of the Cosmos, *Sein* and God. You learn a few mysteries related to God the Almighty. It is not very difficult: anyway, it does not exceed your capacities which are confined to the world we are living in. But in this world there is a hand that denotes anger and retribution, and they call it ‘The Hand of God’.

You surmount your family crisis, your business crisis, and you continue to live in spite of obstacles that manifest themselves by putting something in your wheels. You do not know *exactly* what they put in your wheels; nor do you really know whether the wheels we always talk about are affected, mechanically and spiritually speaking. Nevertheless something goes wrong and this something is bigger than the other something – the one that does *not* go wrong.

Well, do you remember the mouth whose teeth are on the point of grasping the soul? This soul is about to quit the body it belongs to – *corps* and *âme* – forever. Suddenly the body proves it has enough energy to make the soul change its mind and heart. So it swallows its own soul and digests it to its heart’s content. What do you experience when digesting your own soul? And what if you have an upset stomach? You are upset, that’s all. And what about the sumo wrestler who seems to back you up (judging from the size of his back and from his ups)? The mouth, the mouth. The body is looking for its own soul which incidentally belongs to the body – in the same breath, in the same wish, in the same ritual. This wrestler continues to struggle with the deities determined to destroy his future eternal happiness as they talk to him thus, ‘What are you doing here, sumo wrestler? Do you remember your crimes and sins?’ And the wrestler answers, ‘I do remember all of them.’

‘All right, all right,’ say the deities. ‘What was your first sin?’

‘I broke the neck of my rival.’

‘All right, all right. As long as you confess your sins, you’re free, you know.’

‘What kind of freedom could I enjoy, your Majesties?’

“Our freedom.”

The tooth I am fearing more than anything else (of course two teeth are even more horrendous) gets closer and closer to the sinner’s body and bites his mind as if punishing it for a number of wrong and pernicious conclusions. Oddly enough, the tooth leaves in peace the wrestler’s arms and shoulders which are far more harmful than his brain, mind and psyche: their cheerful disposition is beyond reasonable doubt. Unfortunately the wrestler’s mental capacities are so badly damaged – not by his adversaries, mind you – that he cannot

complain about the tooth's obvious injustice. Of course he says, 'M, M, M, M,' but the tooth does not understand him, understandably enough. So it asks the wrestler, 'What did you say? What did you say?' and the wrestler continues to produce the same sound, by way of an answer. 'Do you think your answer corresponds to what we're expected to do, in accordance with the code of politeness, with social codes of all kinds?' The wrestler continues to produce the same sound, whereupon the tooth bites the wrestler's mouth through which the sound comes (but not goes).

If we see two teeth in front of us as we walk along the path of immortality (or mortality) we can expect massive destruction of our psyche and bodily organs, members and nerves. Our sumo wrestler is restored to his original shape and substance: the deity wishes to hear his grievances which he is sure to air thanks to his tongue, mouth and lungs. The teeth devour his legs and he says to the teeth, to their mind and understanding, 'You're right – my legs did a lot of harm to my adversaries. So I'm happy to be punished for my real sins, not for their imaginary counterparts linked to my verbal aptitudes which are non-existent, to tell the truth.' Upon hearing this confession, the deity loosens her grip, wipes her mouth with a real handkerchief and says, 'All right, you seem to have deserved a visit from our *benevolent* deities. They'll caress you with their gums, if you don't mind, our dear virtuous man.' 'Would they be so kind as to massage my shoulders?' asks the wrestler. 'My own personal trainer always did that in my lifetime. And in his lifetime as well.'

What is the soul? You look at it from afar or from the armchair where you are ensconced (the soul is standing by the window) and say to yourself, 'If I don't behave, this soul of mine may disappear forever. It might also disintegrate into lots of small souls or bodies. And what would I do with this smallness? What could one do with smallness? Only greatness suits human beings whose origin can be traced to God, if I'm not mistaken. When you say, "I'm not mistaken", you affirm your faith, your belief in the Supreme Being.'

You can lose your soul not only on the threshold of death, but because of some obnoxious, unbearable interference due to the invasion of some virus or other. Let us take the coronavirus that dislocates your body, if I may express my feelings in this manner. You can say, 'She dislocated her knee falling down some steps,' but I wonder if you can say something along the lines of, 'She dislocated her *body* falling down some steps.' The point is she did *not* fall down some steps or other; neither did *he*. What we are talking about concerns the inadequate presence of the soul which is supposed to stay within your body, come hell or high water. Both come – this goes without saying – but your soul remains within your tissues, as I usually say, when referring to the body, to the material aspect of our self.

So your soul keeps you company under any circumstances unless it feels otherwise. Of course you can talk to your soul, and W. B. Yeats wrote a poem where you talk to your soul through an intermediary, alias your body. (What else do you have within your reach? A bottle of wine?) But the coronavirus may dislodge your soul from your body, for it has enough energy within its limbs (sic!) to do so rather efficiently and successfully. Yes, some of us visualise the coronavirus in the shape of a human being – as if it were the Almighty, our God to whom we address our prayers; not only in our hour of need. So one wonders what one can do under the circumstances. One looks around and sees one's soul *beside* one's body as if one's soul did not belong to one's body, which amounts to nothing: utter nonsense, as they say now and then. What can you do with this independent, rebellious soul? Of course you can talk to it – free country, isn't it? So you do talk to it, but one

continues to wonder what result can be achieved in this way, through this kind of behaviour, through these tactics which would be useless if you were playing chess with a world champion; or with a *Grossmeister*.

The coronavirus comes and says to the soul, 'Let us disintegrate this body, you and I. Instead of helping it struggle for life, you could give me a hand in the domain defined as annihilation. Don't you define this domain in the same fashion?' And the soul replies, 'Yes, I define this domain in the same fashion, considering that I'm really weary of this body which puts spokes, spokes, spokes, in my wheels, wheels, wheels.'

'What kind of meals are you speaking about?'

'Spiritual meals, if you see what I mean. Are you able to touch the meaning of my words?'

'Of course. I touch everything, every organ, every tendon. I'm used to touching, to destroying.'

'But you shouldn't destroy me, me, me, myself, your partner. Should you? I'll just emigrate from Europe to America, as they usually say nowadays. I'll emigrate from one body to another.'

According to other sources, however, the coronavirus helps its victims recover their purity by removing huge chunks from the body, which enables the soul to spread its influence over the whole substance, for want of a better word. Actually it is dangerous to question our terminology because both linguistics and destiny punish all those who are bent on destroying the balance, either ecological or otherwise. If you relinquish the use of the notion 'substance' you expose this notion to exterior influences which say to each other, 'Did you hear his words? He said that "substance" is an old-fashioned, medieval word that perturbs the purity and actuality of our reflections and decisions. Let us annihilate his substance along with his ego and shadow. Let us see what happens after our intervention, our purges.'

When you look at the victims of the coronavirus, you say to yourself continuously, as if afraid of forgetting this conclusion, 'They have no substance. Is that what they call purity?' Yes, there are philosophers who teach us this doctrine, and they call it 'panacea' because it is based on Plato's writings. And Plato is renowned for the scope of his research in the domain of ideas. His ideas are cosmic and not local, contrary to what our empiric philosophers come up with in the course of their wanderings. They walk around, see a sumo wrestler or a flower and say to metaphysicians, 'Here's true philosophy, you know. You touch this wrestler, inhale this flower's aroma. And the conclusion you draw from your experience is loquacious enough to reveal the highest mysteries of the universe.' The metaphysicians answer, 'Of course it would be better to get rid of the body altogether, but it is difficult, difficult, difficult – even the soul needs the body's intestines and their food; otherwise it might die before leaving the body forever.'

When confronted with this situation, with the soul hanging beside the body to which it belongs – hanging by a thread, into the bargain – a professional doctor cannot fail to ask himself the following question, 'What should I do? The soul has been removed from the body's tyranny either by God or by Covid, which doesn't amount to the same thing, whatever this figure of speech may suggest. Perhaps it's not the right time for this kind of linguistic adventure – engaging in wordplays and semiotics. After all, the life of a human being is at stake. When bogged down in words and notions we often forget about humans who continue to suffer, for all our memory lapses. I wonder why we can't forget death and suffering, even if we suffer from Alzheimer's. So what shall I do? The body and the mind that keep on living inside the body need food which can be supplied by the soul – for all its intangibility it's quite nutritious and we would be blamed for not using it as a dainty dish, for want of anything better. On the other hand, nothing can be better than the soul that knows much more about ambrosia than any body, any stomach or kidney. Kidneys know a lot about steak and kidney pies, but these pies

can't hold a candle to ambrosia. So what shall I do? Shall I leave the soul alone, which would enable it to bathe in the universal knowledge for quite a long time – until its next incarnation, to be exact? But the mind is sure to be fading away – rather quickly, I suppose, due to the lack of food. Incidentally, the soul is also stuffed with *spiritual* food that the mind needs rather badly, judging from what many humans' opinions, tastes, judgements and perversions come down to. The soul hanging in front of my eyes is part of the question of life and death I'm called upon to answer as quickly as possible, if I'm still loyal to Hippocrates and his legacy.'

A number of vaccines are supposed to provide us with antibodies which are sure to protect us from Covid forever: even in the Hereafter you may be exposed to this fatal disease unless you ask them to bury you in a desert. And you had better set your heart upon a huge, gigantic desert, for humans multiply ferociously and consequently they are likely to settle everywhere, in the near future; even on the moon, of all places. On the dark side of the moon, according to experts. Or in the midst of dark matter. But only the darkest matter could shield us from viruses and nervous breakdowns. They would see neither our nerves nor our tendons in the midst of this dark-lady-like substance.

Isn't our soul everywhere, even on the steps leading to our bedroom? Even on our blanket, even inside it? Let us analyse a few sentences that lead nowhere, 'She shivered, and gathered the blanket around her.' Did they speak of her soul? Is that what they had in mind, all those writers, journalists and mystics?

The soul is everywhere, otherwise it would not know everything, including the unknowable, known only to the gods, according to our legends. What is the unknowable? It is a soul you do not manage to capture, although it is hanging beside some corpse or other; beside some body or other. You might think the body you are looking at is still alive and so you speak to this body, in expectation of an answer. For instance, you ask this body the following question, 'How are you, my dear body?' And the body does not answer, which may surprise you: everybody is bound to answer questions in our society, in our polite society, following the rules of what is called 'political and social correctness'. All right, you follow this rule and then you are asked a question which does not seem to elicit a positive response on your part, on the part of your mind, consciousness and spiritual apparatus. So you say, 'I don't know.' And you may add, 'Leave me alone,' if you are not afraid of being massacred by your fellow creatures. Is that the right word? Massacred? You can say, 'England was massacred 5-0 by France in the semi-final.' What do you mean? as they always say, when facing you somewhere. Why France? Why England?

We all witness the marriage of convenience called 'Heaven and Earth'. It is true that, thanks to Blake, both Heaven and Earth were joined in marriage; and in matrimony, if you please. Why do we say 'both' so often? Often we say 'both' even if our thought encompasses many things; and universes, as the case may be. We say, 'Such is the case,' but the case we are alluding to continues to grow and so, sooner or later, we have another case on our hands, on our shoulder blades – a much bigger case. The pity of it, Iago, the pity of it, Iago, as Othello puts it. 'The pity of it' denotes unawareness of what happens to us all the time; this morning, for instance. And these instances are everywhere, come to think of it. What a pity I do not come to think of it all the time as if my thinking were impaired. My thinking was created with a view to making me understand what I am supposed to do on the Earth – the purpose of my birth, so to speak. We speak, speak, speak, but the purpose of it escapes us, the purpose of our speaking, talking and moping. Sometimes we just consult our dictionaries,

determined to find another determination, another purpose, another life. And we find something along the lines of, 'There's no point in sitting at home and moping – get out there and find yourself another job!'

How could I find another job? What for? Not to kill myself, here and there and everywhere? What's all this about, as they say, whenever they happen to find themselves in a meditative mood? When one sees another or the other, the one begins to manifest one's displeasure by hitting the other, by burning the other. One always carries a box of matches in one's trousers, and whenever one sees the other I am talking about, just for the sake of talking, the one (I am talking about *this one*, as you might have noticed) draws out this box of matches, produces a match and strikes the match and all others who happen to be within one's reach and even out of it. The match is struck; so are everything and everybody. And then the world conflagration gets under way. And the way we are talking about – are we really talking about it? – is very long. The conflagration burns this house, that house, this genius, that ordinary citizen or pedestrian.

What about *my* soul? Was it burnt in the course of this expedition? What expedition? What did you expect, expel? You are in search of a soul and you say to yourself, 'I'll never stop before laying my hands on a soul worthy to represent my being and other ingredients of my substance.' And then I think about electrons or other elementary particles. But instead of seeing a kind of beehive, I contemplate just one particle running around the universe, flying up and down, into the past, into the future, into the present. And I say to myself, 'This is my soul or the universal soul or God or the Absolute.' I salute this particle for the simple reason that all my neighbours are my friends. They become my friends and relatives, whenever I say to myself, 'They're my neighbours. Yes, the people I see in my house or elsewhere are my friends, my beloved fellow creatures about whom I know nothing. Well, I know *everything* about them. What about them? What about you? What about, what about, what about? They're the same particle, as it were.'

This kind of question or this unkind question is always in front of your eyes and mind. And there are also unkind answers – everywhere, even if you do not realise this state of affairs, this state of mind and also these affairs, those minds. Well, I see a sort of cloud under my nose and try to avail myself of this cloud, thinking it is another soul, yet another soul to whom I should open my arms. You see so many clouds above you, your substances and the nonsense you cannot refrain from uttering because it is on the move; always, always. But even this ball of nonsense you see can be resorted to to create a beauty no one has ever dreamt about. You take this beauty into your mouth, you warm it and it becomes your soul. And even if you have another soul, which might happen, given your attachment to life, light and spirituality as such, you can add this new soul to the old one. What does it look like, your connection of souls?

SOUL

NEW SOUL

SOUL

NEW SOUL

SOUL

OLD SOUL

BABUSHKA SOUL

ONE ELECTRON

Do you know what *babushka* means? *Babushka* is an old lady who might impress a young boy striving after wisdom and harmony that can only be found in old ladies whose close ties with old imperial regimes are in no doubt. You see this *babushka*'s breath leaving her mouth. What do you do? Do you try to catch this smoke, air, soul and essence? Death is the only answer to any question; and answer. The point is – and one wonders how to destroy this point once and forever, especially forever, if you ask my opinion – death is right here. And Death requires a ritual I do not approve of.

DOCTORS

DEATH

WRATHFUL DEITIES

YOU'RE NOTHING.

LET MET TAKE YOUR LEGS OFF.

LET ME TAKE YOUR PANCREAS OUT.

How do you live in the Hereafter, assuming you do live there at all? Sometimes you ask yourself if what you are left with does not amount to merely this half-expression, half-figure of speech of which you willy-nilly avail yourself: 'at all'. What is it? What does it pertain to? To *all*? Or to *not* which is somewhere, nearby, on the ground, so near you can kick it and even score a goal, in the last minute of the match. Some say it is always the last minute of the match. What match? What minute? Never mind. You have to score, otherwise you might die without being buried with honours; in this case, only one honour is enough. So if they say, 'He was buried with only one honour,' they seem to respect you, whatever your life-and-death story. And if they say, 'He was buried with honour,' omitting both only and one, you are honoured beyond measure. They put the measure on the square where you are put to death or rather to immortality, to eternity, and then they do their utmost to put your corpse beyond this measure. What else could one say on the subject?

At some point I uttered the following truth, 'What you should really care about is your sustenance.' And if someone reminds me of birds abundantly fed and clad by the Almighty, I answer, 'During this freezing weather, the food put out by householders is the only form of sustenance that the birds have, if you must know. The Almighty seems to have forgotten them.' So, whenever you hear a question directed towards your intestines and other food-centred organs, you should say immediately, 'I'm hungry, hungry, hungry. Can't you see I'm hungry?' And others, those philosophical others made up of one Other, answer, 'We can't see you're hungry.'

'Why can't you see I'm hungry?' you ask.

'You should open your mouth. Otherwise we won't know for sure you're hungry.'

'All right, I'll open my mouth. Is that enough for you?'

'Is *what* enough for us?'

'The overture, the opening, the volume.'

'To tell the truth, we know you're hungry, judging from the hole we see at the bottom of your face. But could you tell us, please, *how* hungry you are? Do you need one hamburger or two hamburgers?'

'We need no harmburgers. Can you verify the spelling of this word I've just pronounced? Harmburgers, harmburgers, harmburgers. You're so slow-witted I have to repeat the same word twice, thrice, frice, and so on.'

I think I was talking about the soul – either yesterday or the day before; or even tomorrow: we often talk about the mixture of times and we remember not only what Plato said about our remembrance of things past, but also about the future which is not far from the past. Actually they are superposed and so, once in a while, you

wonder if the image you see belongs to the past or to the future. For some reason you decide – on the spur of the moment, as usual – that this image does not belong to the present. That would be too easy and consequently unworthy of your intellect and latent genius: you are not recognised, acknowledged and admired; not yet. That is what happens before your very eyes, in front of your consciousness which walks hand in hand with your unconscious and belongs to another day and age; or just to another day, even if you generously admit that the age is the same. In other words, you live in the age about which you talk during your lectures and intimate discussions with your friends and numerous wives or rather concubines. To tell the truth, even you, you yourself, do not know whether they are concubines, wives, mistresses or some other women you met a few hours ago; for the first time, to tell the same unvarnished truth. You are so used to telling this unvarnished truth that sometimes you grow weary of this (un)varnish and decide – on the spur of the same moment – to tell what may be defined as ‘varnished truth’. You just pick up a morsel of truth – a chunk of truth, if you wish – and begin to varnish it, varnish it, varnish it until it becomes an insolent lie.

A PRO FORMA DECLARATION OF LOYALTY

I’m telling the truth and nothing else, for the simple reason that I know nothing else – I know only the truth. But I varnish it and that’s what I always do, whatever the circumstances, ages and days. I can’t do otherwise, you know. My sense of beauty – I think Santayana wrote a book on the subject – doesn’t allow me to act otherwise. Otherwise I might become a quivering wreck. For the sake of society – after all, I’m a social animal or man – I can pretend I’m a wreck. My fellow creatures like being in company with Hugo’s *misérables* who are the perfect foil for their own capacities and wealth. Magnanimously I offer them an opportunity to feel superior to my poor ego, and this feeling is sure to make them happy – for a few days, if not for a month.

Yes, I do maintain that my varnished truth is gorgeous, not to say brilliant and sumptuous – by virtue of the varnish I use in the process. What kind of process do I use? At the beginning of *The Mahabharata* a boy asks a sage what kind of tale the latter is about to tell him. And the sage answers, ‘This is an endless tale. You shouldn’t confuse it with a film they shot at the end of the 20th century. I think this movie bore the name it didn’t deserve to bear (actually, it didn’t deserve to bear any name whatsoever): *The Neverending Story*. In the first place, the story ended rather abruptly and ludicrously. In the second place, I’m not really sure there was a second place in that story. I think it didn’t deserve the second place – any place whatsoever. Anyway, the story I’m about to tell you *is* endless, believe it or not. If they ask you, “Do you believe in God?” you can answer, “I believe in an endless story.” I hope you’ll believe in my story as well because it is *your* story. And if you don’t believe in your own story, you don’t exist.’ Of course the boy does not ask his guru the obvious question, the one I am prepared to put to anyone whose eagerness to talk to me just for the fun of it is beyond a shadow of a doubt, ‘Is it better to exist, my dear guru?’ It is not all fun and games being a human being.

I seem to have forgotten the soul, which might mean it has forgotten me too; for good or for bad. I wonder what would happen if my soul *really* forgot me, if only for an hour or two. Being soulless, what does that look or sound like? What do you actually feel, if deprived of your soul? Of course you continue to feel *something* – *a lot*, to tell the truth, for it is the body we rely upon in the domain of sensations. We open our eyes and resolve to enjoy life to the utmost, and so we say to our body, ‘Now you should open all your cells to allow

me to receive all the pleasures I'm entitled to.' Upon hearing such a request, the soul might answer, 'You're *not* entitled to any delight, considering the way you behaved both yesterday and last month.' But the body is not in charge of morals, as far as I know and feel, so that you just plunge headlong into the sea of delights and ecstasies, not giving a tinker's cuss about your merits and demerits. You killed a pheasant three days ago and today you drink and eat whatever you feel like drinking and eating. And you feel a lot, a lot, a lot, and you like what you feel, the result of your feelings.

But then you ask yourself if the body acts on its own, and the answer comes at once, for it is the easiest question one can ask oneself or somebody else. You know that the body is a collections of tissues, of muscles, and they are unable to move, let alone dance like a swan or a demon on their own. So you come back to the brain or mind that you have not forgotten, assuming you do not suffer from Alzheimer's; not yet. You recall an unpleasant episode during which you talked to your uncle whose struggle with Alzheimer's came to nothing – to such an extent that you appended to this struggle the epithet 'sterile'. Of course you had no intention of revealing this secret of yours to the sufferer, even if you were quite aware of his inability to understand either the word Alzheimer's or the notions 'brain, mind, memory, consciousness'. And yet you did talk to your uncle about his knowledge of the brain, about his awareness of his own mind. When was it? At that stage he was still in a position to answer *some* of your questions. For instance, driven by your innate altruism, you asked him, 'Dear uncle, would you care for a sandwich or a cup of coffee?' At that stage – one of the early stages of the disease – your uncle was capable of answering you, 'I want both.' You could not help rejoicing at this answer for two reasons: *primo*, your uncle had not lost his appetite, not completely; *secundo*, he had not forgotten three words. Three words, only three words. You were drawn to this conclusion in the five minutes that followed your generous, humane, empathetic offer. You ought to have stopped in your tracks after receiving your uncle's satisfactory reply, but driven by your innate sadism, your perverse, obnoxious inclinations, you continued to question him on the subject. 'What exactly do you mean by "both", dear uncle? What victuals did you have in mind?' The answer you got this time was identical to the first answer, which ought to have put a stop to your inquisitive *élan*. Yet you went on and on and on, getting the same answer to the same question. Incidentally, your uncle's last word – the one he uttered on his makeshift deathbed was, 'Both.' What, however, gladdened his relatives' hearts was the fact that he repeated this short word thrice. 'He's worshipping the Holy Trinity,' said your nephew.

Let us return to the brain or the mind: as long as you remember some words either in English or in French, you are not in peril. Actually I have not left the brain (and the mind) alone for many years, not trusting my heart to the point of saying to myself, 'I should be in love with everything and everybody, and I'd better not think too much about evil, traitors and morons.' Well, last night I saw a Russian documentary on the brain in which a scientist expatiated upon the mind for two hours at least. He said that in the United States as well as in Europe, human beings had fallen prey to egalitarian fervour, as a result of which the brains we come across in those countries look alike, more or less alike. If you say rather self-confidently, 'Your brains, dear citizens of the European Union, look alike,' someone is sure to contradict you, 'You're evil, you must come from an evil empire. Are you forgetting your manners? Do you suffer from Alzheimer's?' And then you add 'more or less', and everybody nods in agreement. 'More or less alike, more or less alike. We're unique, you know, all of us without exception.' And then habitually, in full accordance with a venerable tradition, they sing the Final Movement of Beethoven's *Ninth*. (One of my favourite ritornellos.) A flash mob, nothing more; nobody more.

We are aware of the importance rightly attributed to space, and that is why, in our modern, contemporary world, we do not use motorcars all the time – for many reasons. In the first place, it is not advisable to pollute our precious atmosphere about which a famous actress speaks in an old French film, saying and repeating, ‘*Atmosphère, atmosphère, atmosphère.*’ In the second place – or *secundo*, if you prefer – you have to walk a certain number of miles (every day, mind you) to keep your body in good repair. Usually, whenever you use cars and other contraptions like the underground railway or buses, you keep yourself in *bad* repair because your muscles do not work, relying heavily on the aforementioned contraptions and manipulations directed against the omnipotence of space. But if you can buy your bread, butter and bottles without resorting to these contraptions, you conserve your energy, strength and good humour, your good mood and all other goodnesses accessible to human beings. In my native land you have to walk a lot (many miles to go) before meeting another man or woman. In Europe you are squashed like sardines – not only in rush-hour trains. You are a sardine and your neighbour, a man or a woman standing by your side (and by your mind, to all intents and purposes) is just another sardine, whatever God and His angels might say on the subject. They might think you are a human being created in *His* image. Anyway, you are *not* created in the image of a sardine otherwise you would not have been created, in my opinion: God would *not* have taken the trouble to create a series of creatures in the image publicised and advocated by sardines. On the other hand, sardines are not mighty enough to create anybody, with the exception of themselves – of the creatures made up of the same flesh and blood. They are unable to create human beings, even if we judge these beings and humans rather severely, declaring they are bloody fools and nothing else. They are nobodies, nobodies, nobodies; nobodies and nothing else. Not even sardines.

As usual it is hard to imagine, visualise and hear what happens *after anything*, even if this anything is really nothing, nothing else. Nor can you hear anything in your mother’s womb, contrary to what old wives tell you everywhere. ‘This baby or rather embryo listened to his mother’s piano-playing and also attended recitals at Carnegie Hall.’ Wasn’t he or she deaf momentarily, in those times? Or deadened by his mother’s skin-thickness? Apparently we don’t hear much in our mothers’ womb, and only vibrations traverse our embryo, especially when our mother’s husband slaps her face and makes love to her so brutally she falls off beds, divans and sofas every night. So if you play *forte* most of the time, they say, pointing to such and such a chord, ‘Here his father slapped his mother’s left cheek. Here his father slapped his mother’s right thigh.’ Feminist clubs have united in protest against this one-sided approach, now and then intercalating their own comments, ‘Here his mother threw a punch at the attacker.’ ‘Here the boorish bloke was felled by a punch to the head.’ And sometimes they transfer their emotions to a composer himself, saying, ‘Here Beethoven punched Gertrude on the nose. Didn’t you take note of his cruelty?’ Sometimes they just say, ‘Follow this pianist’s left hand. This is Beethoven’s brutality for you. Pianists should play this piece for the police, you know.’ From time to time, misogynists (and some music-lovers) counter as follows, ‘We disagree with you completely. Gertrude literally invades his left hand. Don’t forget that she was left-handed. And Beethoven was *right*-handed. Right?’ Apparently Beethoven beat his charwoman to death.

Chinese sages affirm that their ancestors could put a lot of broken legs, brains and mere bones together because their elders and betters knew a miraculous cure or glue that could connect any tissues in no time. And if time happened to run out, they would say, ‘This was no time at all and so we’d better do it within another patch

of time – far more propitious for our undertaking.’ If we translate their talks into our terms, partly coined by Covid, we should of course take numerous vaccines into consideration, saying, ‘This vaccine doesn’t take into consideration the English version of Covid.’

‘But this version is tantamount to the Irish version. It’s identical to it, word for word.’

‘Are you accusing someone of plagiarism?’

‘Not at all, not at all. The matter stands differently. They’ve copied the basic design from the Japanese, Russian, American and German models and added a few of their own refinements.’

‘What do these refinements amount to?’

‘To a few allergies, pimples, sleepless nights. A pimply face, you know. A pimply sleepy face.’

Your neurons start to wither (for no known reason) in your mother’s womb. Nothing else happens in there, for the simple reason that you neither hear nor see anything. And the vibrations you feel through your body do not amount to much – only to fists and other instruments of our common terror, horror and retribution. Probably all this comes to you when you encounter either Hitler or Lenin – for the first time. And then you are struck by their determination to destroy the human race. Why? Why? We are said to be protected by our saviours, by little messiahs of all kinds coming from distant nebulae and moons. They come, look around and say, ‘It’s natural to feel helpless against such abuse. The worst part of it is being helpless to change anything.’ But they are kind, gentle, amiable and willing to help, these extraterrestrials.

Well, you begin to wonder how Hitler’s body and soul, if any, survived in his mother’s womb. He must have received a number of tremendous, inspiring blows. He received one blow and instead of wincing, as they usually do, he said, ‘This is Stalingrad.’ Another blow. ‘This is Leningrad. Moscow, whatever. Go on, go on.’ You go on and demolish something and someone, and you say to both, ‘I’m not destroying you *personally*. I’m just destroying the *world* that I’m not on the same wavelength with. All these worlds come and go. Sometimes they don’t even come. And sometimes they go. And what do they do, our extra-terrestrials? If they lived in our midst they could help us, save us by saying, “You should come to our planet which is greener because we have no cats who eat, devour grass. Nothing can stop them from eating grass except the annihilation of the grass.”’ And so once again you are enticed into discussing the question that pertains to death and life, to life and death. Incidentally, there are people who think that, by putting the word ‘death’ *before* the word ‘life’ they ensure their own safety or rather immortality: you are not safe, not entirely, if you are mortal.

And sometimes – actually this happens rather often, not to say always – they (the same they, the same them) also find a few vestiges of your heels, of your footsteps, your falls, for you always collapse on your way out of your mortal agony. Yes, you do your best to escape from death as if bent on following Plato’s description of such escapes and remedies. You see a piece of evil in front of you and you say to yourself, ‘I am the opposite of evil because I am good, from head to foot.’ And so, so as not to grow evil (you really *grow* evil: you do not become this kind of thing *overnight* unless the Devil takes care of your soul) you show a clean pair of heels. And if they say to you afterwards, after a few incarnations you traverse in the course of your journey through lives, spaces and mazes, ‘Here are the vestiges of *your* heels that I found on the sand the other day – I recognise them, you know,’ you can answer, ‘My pair of heels were clean, were they not? As if I had spring-cleaned them before leaving this world or rather its threshold. And let me tell you that my soul and conscience are as clean as my pair of heels. Let us talk about something else, I beg of you.’

Either you flee from your death – the verb ‘to flee’ is closely associated with death, needless to say and write – or you stay where you are. You might think it is not proper; it is downright impolite and crazy to flee from the person or substance that pays you a visit. This person or substance or something in itself, in himself, in others, crosses your threshold and you say to this (let us leave it at that), ‘I’m sorry but I’ve an irresistible urge to flee. It’s not necessarily you I’m about to flee. To tell the truth, I am a flea. So I have to hop from one body to another, from one jacket or shirt to another. Do you recall Charlie Chaplin’s movie? Sorry, I have to leave you and disappear in the twinkling of an eye.’ You are cold and you flee from heat so as not to grow warm, let alone hot, hot, hot, hot, as hot as a dog. By the way, I saw on television two famous chefs whose art is celebrated not only by the Michelin guide, but also by many fine gourmets all over the world. And now the whole world comes to the lorries they hire in the hope of selling their hot dogs. ‘That’s the only way to keep our hand in,’ they say to journalists and television crews. ‘Covid robbed us of our welfare, but not of our art – our hot dogs are *juicy*.’ It is widely acknowledged that the welfare system is under-resourced: hot dogs are less expensive than foie gras, oysters and salmon. But *hot* dogs are more expensive than *cold* dogs, Siberian dogs.

Can you turn into a hot dog, occasionally, even if you are to remain human to the end of your life? Or to the end of some tether or other? One of my friends is always about to turn into a dog as if his karma were somehow linked to that of dogs, barks, pursuits and hares. All of a sudden he begins to bark and I even spot a drop of saliva on his chin. I am quite aware that he is pursuing something or someone, otherwise he would not gasp and run to several doors at once, simultaneously. Last night he pursued a few bottles of whisky he eventually found in the house of his sponsor – a rather beautiful lady in her forties or fifties. In her *forte*, I am tempted to say if I take the trouble to recall her house, furniture and the area where she lives, dreams and welcomes a lot of celebrities and other geniuses. I take this trouble and as I do so I recall many other troubles linked to that day, evening and night which are not yet far away, although I begin to distance myself from all those bottles, dogs, hot dogs, hot whiskies without sodas. My colleague drank and drank, and I had no idea when he was going to stop this ritual. ‘In my life there are only rituals,’ he told me once. He might have told me this and that once in a while or all the time; except that I do not hear his voice right now. Not now, not now, anyway.

But that night I heard a voice, although not constantly. One is tempted to say, ‘Our life is an uninterrupted series of “although”,’ but the same one might point out that any series can be interrupted unless it is connected to mathematics. Unfortunately we mostly live outside mathematics, I’m sorry to say. Within the domain of mathematics you can say, ‘One, two, three, four,’ and you will be right, even if you do not say ‘five’ or ‘six’ or ‘seven’. Someone else is bound to say, ‘Eight, nine, ten,’ – it goes without saying; even if, in the domain of real life, sometimes, it does not go at all. You say to yourself and others, ‘Nine,’ and it is not nine, whatever you can say to anybody, any soul. Well, I *am* walking away from death as if resolved to be alive all my life, all my other lives – forever, *in other words*, as they always say when they have no words within their reach.

What *do* you have within your reach? I spoke of my friend and colleague, the other day, the other moment. I spoke of him nine minutes ago. What did *he* have within his reach? At some point or other? The point was situated within the house where we attended a sort of show, listening to Greek poets in translation. Those poets told us that Agamemnon had been killed by his wife. ‘And blood, and blood, and blood that streamed downward, upward, reaching for heaven, the gods, so that Zeus said at some point, “I don’t like this blood. It is unhealthy, unwholesome.”’ After a while I realised my friend was not listening to this rubbish, but I continued to listen to whatever they or he or what was saying about Clytemnestra, Achilles and his heel. I am not sure the

poet said at some point, ‘Achilles took to his heels and so you can find their traces almost everywhere because death is everywhere, being present (not absent) throughout the cosmos.’ At least I know – and I am sure I have this piece of knowledge within my reach – that I can find Achilles’ heels, their vestiges, almost everywhere; with the exception of the spots where I find only my shoulder blades or some blades (a sword with a steel blade, a packet of razor blades). Am I supposed to say ‘with the exception of’? Everything is included in whatever happens, as somebody said and probably did. That person lay down and said, ‘I’m done for.’ And he *was* done for, I’m sorry to say.

My friend was drinking and what counted in all those matters was his being, his *Sein* and probably his *Zeit*: he was to last for *some* time, if only for a few minutes. He did last for a few minutes and so we got out of that hospitable house simultaneously. Actually I would not have been able to get out of this house or any house – with the exception of the house where staircases are not conspicuous for their absence or absences – if he had not provided me with one of his helping hands. I hope I am allowed to say something about myself at this particular stage, point and moment. ‘I’m not capable of walking everywhere without a support, be it a column, a person or a rail.’ Hold onto the rail so that you don’t fall, as they say. I do hold onto rails as long as there are rails somewhere, in the realms around which I walk for some reason. (Is time a sort of rail?) After a while, the reason I am talking about grows clear and I stop walking because the reason I see in front of me is obnoxious, disgusting. And it is better to live without reason, for living with an obnoxious reason is even more disgusting than living without it.

At this point – and this point is just part of what Miro called ‘constellations’ – I would like to enlarge upon human beings and the species to which they belong. Are we really kind? Are we kind in any way? Are we unreally or anyhow kind? That night, the night I am talking about – there are no other nights on the horizon and even beyond it – my friend was drunk, and I might say he was drunk beyond any limits except that I know what limits Russian drunkenness can reach, when left alone, on its own. My friend and I were invited somewhere; and we spent some time in this (or other) somewhere, listening to talks and ‘mocks’, as I usually say because you are mocked all the time; at least if you stick to human society and its members. I wonder whether you can stick to human society without sticking to its members, which might be done in another dimension; although I cannot help wondering if there are other dimensions in our life. Aren’t we stuck in the mud? And when they say, ‘Stir the sauce so that it doesn’t stick to the pan?’ What do they mean? Suppose we are the sauce they are talking about at length, even though they might realise we have no time for anything, down to sauces and our human condition. So we can believe – and this belief is unshakable – that we are not *always* the sauce they are talking about. What *are* we? one might ask. And one asks this question over and over again. What *are* you? Who are *you*? Are you the sauce or the pan they are talking about? Who are *they*? Who *are* they under the circumstances? They are your biographers, the men in whose minds both the Mahabharata and the Bible originated.

So you answer (thus or not thus), ‘I am the pan, Pan, Pun, but I’m not the sauce you mention in your writings. Not at all.’

And someone says, ‘You’re a *sort* of sauce. And if you dare deny your existence you’re not even the sauce I’m talking about. You’re nothing, nothing, nothing.’

‘But I am *something*,’ you reply. ‘And if I’m not something, at least I am *some*.’

‘You’re so, you know. So and so and so and so.’

‘O, o,’ you say. What else could you say or do?

Suppose you *are* a sauce, in spite of whatever they can say about your being, saying, ‘You’re nothing, moron.’ Of course you can retort, ‘None of your business.’ You can also retort in other fashions, saying for instance, ‘All right, I accept your definitions and conclusions. I *am* a sauce and so I cover whatever I see, feel and fear – our Creation and forthcoming Destruction, among other things and beings and non-beings. I am a sauce and I am to die. Considering my futile and fragile being (*étant donnés, étant données*) my death is imminent. But I don’t fear death because his coming is natural, organic and messianic – if we resist both death and his invasion we demonstrate our disbelief in our own resurrection.’ Actually, we are weary, all of us, and even the Earth voices her or his or its complaints which can be put in a nutshell. And I would put it (everything) in a nutshell without the slightest hesitation if I had this shell and nut within my reach; on my dinner table, for instance. For once, I would not eat what can be found on my dinner table; I would not eat it, I would not drink it. I would pick the shell up and put a nut in it, the nut lying on my dinner table. And the mystery of the world and its creation would be solved – probably once and for all. And if you succeed in unravelling these enigmas, you will know what lies in store for you, for your body, soul and psyche. Well, you know everything because you are aware of your own lassitude. There are races that belong to our human race, and yet they say to their companions in misfortune, ‘We’re tired, tired, tired. So are the Earth and the other planets of the solar system. So we’ll do our best to disappear without leaving any trace on the surface of the Earth.’ And my friend about whom I spoke at some length, some time ago, did not say anything of the kind, I’m sorry to say. Occasionally he would collapse or fall without giving a thought to Adam and his transgressions. His face was covered with blood; or soaked with blood, if you wish. At that particular point his face was a cloth, a tissue, and this tissue or cloth was soaked with blood, so to speak; or so *not* to speak. It is better not to speak about it at all. But I am sitting in front of my computer, and I am not tired, not yet; not completely, as a matter of fact. And there is a lot of matter in this fact, I am proud to declare.

Did I say anything about the woman who had sponged his face and even his neck and naked arms? Most food stains will come off if you sponge the material with a little detergent. That is what they say about stains and the ritual designed to remove them. But what about blood and human beings? Are we materials, nothing else? And what about our soul? How could you sponge the soul embedded in human beings? The soul I am talking about lies on a bed within your innermost being, and one might surmise it is asleep; unless it meditates upon our destiny and suffering. My buddy’s body had nothing to do with the soul; and I am sorry to have succumbed to the temptation known as a ‘wordgame’ because I never use the word ‘buddy’; under no circumstances do I use it. The problem is my friend was lying on the grass and I was reluctant to think about Whitman under those particular circumstances. He was just lying on the grass, and the grass I am talking about was more on the mud side, so to speak; and my friend was in no position to speak, to utter a few distinct words. Why do I resort to the word ‘distinct’ under the circumstances? Let us analyse the following sentence (it is not a death sentence, until further notice, until further circumstances): ‘There is a distinct smell of cigarettes in here.’ My friend used to smoke 30 cigarettes per day. In this day and age (today) he does not smoke at all. But he utters many words and most of them are quite distinct so you can say with assurance, ‘There is a distinct smell of words in here.’ And then you begin to ask yourself all sorts of questions, and one of these questions sounds thus, ‘Do words smell?’ Of course you can answer this question rather quickly, saying, ‘Question the renowned French and universal

author Marcel Proust on the subject. He's sure to tell you everything about words, their smells, colours, tints and hints.'

My friend was lying in the mud, and I did my utmost to raise his body from the dead; or from the mud, to be more or less exact. To be more or less the mud I am talking about. I do not remember what I said about our journey to what was supposed to be the whereabouts of his flat. Why should I describe my exercise, my contortions, his contortions and what not? His what nots, my knots? My notes? What notes did I hear that night? All this took place three days ago, but I have the feeling it was, it was not, it was, it took place an hour 60 years ago. At the time, in those days, I met my friend for the first time. And that time, three days ago, I might have met him for the last time, considering the number of times we said 'thank you' to each other on the following day. (This day came into existence thanks to the taxi driver's strength and high-mindedness.) That is what time is about: the following day, the mud in which you spend a night or two; or the whole life. Sure enough, I thanked him many times in the course of our dinner which took place on the following night, on the following day – in relation to the mud I go on speaking about, for I'm not done yet with the mud and with my friend's body lying in that mud. So he was lying in the mud and probably I did my best to extricate his body from this dire plight or whatever words you can attribute to this state of affairs. At that time I did not think in terms of the universe because, frankly speaking, I had a few other fish to fry; and one of these fish was my own body. The point is my body is not always under my control – under my mind's control (under my mud's control). Actually it is easy to speak about it, saying for instance, 'I control my body. If I wish to go left, my body goes left. If I wish to fly –' and so on.

There are pigeonholes and lines. You walk along a line and you wonder if this line is really your line or someone else's. For a while you wonder who could possibly explore this line of yours because you sincerely believe it belongs only to you as if you had paid for, as if you had a document certifying this line's connection with your belongings that you can put in a suitcase, eager to convey them to the other end of the world. There are lines, structures, squares and you are supposed to jump from one square to another, bent on reaching your destination about which you know nothing, as usual. Apparently the word you should take into consideration in the course of your wanderings is 'spirituality', otherwise there is no point in your going anywhere. There is a point in which you are ensconced and that is quite enough for your happiness, according to many Digests where you find your gurus, your salvation and even resurrection; if only partial, God forbid.

They used to draw these lines everywhere, eager to protect themselves from devils and other creatures of the same unkindest kind of all. You walk towards the line, relying on your personal angels who keep repeating, 'Line, line, line, watch out!' You are looking down and so you do not see any threat; and you continue to walk as if nothing could ever happen, not even in the Other World. 'What's the other world?' you ask your mother. And she answers in the Reader's Digest manner: 'Take this piece of chalk and draw a line somewhere. No matter where.' You get down on your knees and draw a line somewhere, you don't know where, to tell the truth, and your mother says, 'Well done! Now imagine that beyond this line there's only spirituality – nothing corporeal, you know. Nothing physical, nothing vulgar.'

You draw a line, retrace your steps to where you began to take care of this line and walk towards it on your own; at least that is what you believe at that particular moment. You walk towards it, reach it, stop and begin to explore its space with your fingers, with both your hands. There is a voice as usual, and that voice says that the space you are exploring so studiously is impalpable so you cannot really explore, let alone conquer, it.

So you do not conquer it, but you get down on your knees and begin to pray, and the prayer says to you, 'I know, I know, you know me by heart. That's not enough. You should teach me to the soul.'

'How could I teach you to my soul? I don't see my soul's ears.'

'You shouldn't rely too much on your soul's ears and memory. Just talk to your soul's soul.'

'How many souls does my soul have?' you ask.

'As many as you wish or rather as many as you can afford to have within your reach, at your disposal.'

So your prayer comes down to the following poem:

'My dear souls! Can you see this splendid array of food on the table? Please reproduce this picture to make me happy forever; at least for this afternoon. I'll eat you one by one so as not to mix you in my stomach, which might provoke what they call "indigestion" and they'll be very upset, all of them. My stomach, among other things.'

As they say, spirituality never stops: it penetrates you insidiously – or sometimes sidiously, as some ecclesiastics say – and sometime you cannot help shivering when you feel the impact of spirituality in your body and soul. Your soul asks your body, 'Did you feel spirituality, its wave, its onslaught, its wave and vibe?' And you answer, 'I think there's a bit of slap and tickle going on in the back of that car over there.' And you spoil everything.

Once upon a time my friend declared, 'The world was spiritual during the pre-perspective period of our history – of our paintings, among other things. It was anonymous as well. Only rarely do you learn the names of painters whose patience and skill endowed our churches with angels, Holy Virgins and curly-haired babies. Their beauty and presence are unsurpassable because they're neither in time nor in space. But then Giotto made his appearance, and his appearance coincided with the birth of perspective and individual visions, with names and other pieces of rubbish. And the world of appearances gave rise to capitalism, commercialism – to goods, to put it bluntly.'

'You associate the phenomenon of perspective with goods and baddies, do you?' I asked. 'And what about Warhol? No perspective, a lot of canned chicken noodle soup.'

I reminded him of this dialogue on the day when he found himself in no-man's land, his face touching the Earth almost tenderly. He seemed to have obliterated all perspectives; once and for all. Perhaps for the sake of icons, of flat, immediate spirituality; for the sake of immediacy, so to speak. I am not sure he heard my monologue which did its best to convince him that God could be found elsewhere, even in space and time; or everywhere. 'There's no such thing as no-God's land.' It was pointless, however, to quote Spinoza, even in Russian.

So my friend was lying in the mud, and today, this morning, I am thinking about the Earth and her weariness. My friend was weary; so was the Earth – *my* Earth, to be sincere. My friend made a confession as he continued to lie in the mud, on our Mother Earth. He said, 'I'm not well, you know. If you could raise me from the position in which I found myself a few minutes ago I'd be very grateful to you and your offspring.'

'I wish I could raise your body and the rest of your substance from any state described in human books. These books or rather this humanism is dolefully attached to our human condition of which I've never approved.'

‘Neither have I,’ he said. ‘But the condition in which I found myself two or three hours ago doesn’t suit me at all. I’m prepared to fight for my life under any condition, on condition that the condition I’m talking about is more or less suitable, bearable.’

‘Don’t you think your present condition is bearable? After all, the Earth is bearing your body, carrying it through the cosmos and the universe, through the stars. Don’t you enjoy your present condition?’

‘I do not,’ he answered.

‘Don’t you know that the Earth is weary of our bodies? The Earth is likewise weary of our thoughts and deeds, of our gestures, intentions and hopes. The Earth is weary, weary, weary, you know.’

‘I don’t know anything,’ he said.

‘The Earth is crying at this very moment,’ I said. ‘That’s why you’re lying in the mud – because of the Earth’s tears which she can’t withhold, for all her efforts. Traditionally the Earth is dry, but when her weariness reaches the highest point, the point of no return, she grows soft, soft, soft. That’s how the mud you’re lying in comes into existence.’

‘I know nothing,’ he said.

‘Do you know that you know nothing?’ I asked.

‘No,’ he said.

I retraced my steps because the Earth had returned to her former condition so that I could walk on her surface without fearing either death or a series of falls. I was walking on a pavement and my feet did not plunge (feetlong) into one of the Hades universally known and appreciated, thanks to literature, to the Greek and Tibetan and Egyptian searchers for truth. They searched for truth and said, ‘There are several abodes to which you direct your steps. One of these abodes is located under the Earth – under her surface, to be precise. In this abode you spend your time in the mud. What’s more, you *eat* the mud, whenever you spend your time in this abode. And sometimes you spend the whole of eternity in this abode of mine.’

Whereupon you voice the following question, ‘Are you God?’

‘I am Not,’ he or she answers.

‘Aren’t you one of the wrathful deities they speak about in the Book devoted to the dead and their deeds?’

‘I am Not,’ they answer.

My friend or colleague is still on the ground and nothing seems to influence or affect his posture as if he were really (and not metaphysically) rooted to the spot. I have not got down on all fours. It would have been a useless undertaking: my friend is lying face down and arms stretched out – in obedience or worship. What kind of obedience am I watching at this hour of the day and night? My friend believes in God as firmly as a woman, a distinguished woman, believes in jewels and other luxuries such as three-star restaurants. Of course we might recall another type of women, and this type believes in children and in the way they can be reared and put on the right track. Anyway, my friend is a load and the Earth is duty-bound to carry this load with her as she floats or flies along her trajectory – around the sun and other galaxies. When you study this trajectory (as Kepler and others did) you may recall the following phrase, ‘Things have come full circle now that long skirts are back in fashion.’ Or you don’t remember anything because you suffer from Alzheimer’s and Alzheimer’s suffers from

you, from your presence: it has to deal with too many bodies, nerves, tendons and so forth. Alzheimer's is also weary so one may ask the following question, 'Who or what is not weary in this universe of ours?'

So the Earth continues to bear with my friend who does not succeed in getting his bearings. It takes a while to get your bearings when you collapse as a result of a sort of intoxication – in a courtyard of which you know next to nothing. For a while you ask yourself whether you are next or nothing, and you might come to the conclusion you are nothing. In this case you may remain where you are: nothing is nowhere and nowhere is nothing; they are interchangeable. Why does the Earth suffer, one may ask and answer in the same breath? What is the answer, may I ask? Because we walk on her, run on her, use our bicycles and other means of transport. Do you really believe that our buses and trams do not disfigure our Earth? And what about our intoxication, its results and consequences? Do you think our Earth is infatuated with whatever can come out of our mouths and intestines? On the other hand, the Earth might be fond of our bodies that now and then lie on her almost naked as if to declare the following truth, 'I am your son or daughter. Please take me into your body so I could lie forever in your womb. Please don't confuse this desire of mine with tombs and cemeteries, my dear mother and sister.'

I went back to the car, to the taxi that had conveyed my body to the mud-mood-mind where my friend seemed to meditate upon his own unconsciousness. Did I say anything about this motorcar and its driver? Did I say anything about the woman whose kindness had allowed my friend to survive and see tomorrow instead of sinking into Hades? One might suppose someone said to her, at some point, 'There's blood on the face over there – could you get a cloth and mop it up?' Actually I went to a chemist's and bought whatever was needed for this ritual (call it what you wish). When I got back I saw a woman taking care of my friend and his blood, his face and other ingredients of the incident. Moping, moping, moping, as Shakespeare might have put it. And of course she talked to him, to her patient as she continued to mop his face; moping and talking, as it were. Actually the same situation can be admired in *Macbeth* where the guardian talks to himself as he listens to the knocking produced either by fists and swords or even by suits of armour: let us not forget that this noise originated in the group of soldiers or courtiers whose interference led to the disclosure of the assassination, to the discovery of Duncan's corpse. As my involuntary memory depicted that murder, Macbeth's and his lady's misdeed, I thought about my friend and his body which might have been half-dead, for all I knew; but I could not touch his wrist and check his pulse, for the simple reason that I cannot bend down without exposing my spine to one of the gravest dangers. Breaking and entering, I call it: the danger enters and the vertebral column breaks.

I wrote a lot about so-called beings of light (or light beings, dark beings, heavy beings) and whenever my thoughts return to them and their phosphorescence (to their fluorescence?) I visualise their eyes; and their souls, needless to say. Yesterday I thought about them once again, and I said to myself that robots would illuminate our sins and pains with torches. For some obscure reason, I also thought about matches, and these thoughts might have stemmed from the film I watched a long time ago – in Paris, of all places. In this English film one could see (and probably admire) two cucumbers sticking out of two nostrils. Yes, at some point the hero stuffed these cucumbers into his nose, but I have no recollection of the goal he pursued through this action. Perhaps he wished to offer these cucumbers to his girlfriend or boyfriend; perhaps he was resolved to humiliate one of his foes. Actually I do not remember whether he said to this foe of his, 'Enjoy these cucumbers. By the way, you could add one or two tomatoes to your salad.' My friend no longer carries either cigarettes or boxes of matches in his pockets; and even his lighter survives only in a drawer, in a dusty, musty drawer. What could I do with this lighter, I asked myself? I could light my eyes instead of stuffing a few matches into them. If you dare to carry

out this operation – I am alluding to matches, not to the lighter – you will have to cope with the problem indissolubly linked to matches of all kinds: at the end of the rite (just another rite of spring) you will have to throw them away and insert another pair of matches into your beautiful eyes. But at the end of a dozen rituals of this kind your eyes are bound to lose their beauty. Moreover, you will have to watch the blood they are sure to produce as a result of your experience. You will have to watch this blood's trajectory, itinerary, otherwise your clothes might be discoloured; or coloured, as the case may be. You are probably acquainted with this problem thanks to your nose which often makes you lose a certain quantity of blood. When you realise that your nose is not as reliable as it was only a few seconds ago, you conduct a thorough search of your pockets and even through the premises. Meanwhile the blood goes on literally flowing through your nose and also through the air. And some portions of this air are closely connected with your trousers, jacket and shoes.

When dealing with corpses or half-dead people you run the risk of hurting not only your feelings, but also your body and whatever happens to wrap it up. (Your gift-wrapped body.) Apparently every corpse contains a certain quantity of poison known as the 'corpse poison' in Russia, among other countries and civilisations. Whether the quantity in question is huge or not, you handle these substances at your own risk. A half-dead man can grasp you by the throat – Rasputin did it several times, according to his assassin's memoirs – and his agony multiplies his forces to such an extent that only a similar agony can save you from death, disgrace and ordinary horror. He knows he needs all his forces to triumph over evil – the aforementioned murderer – and he mobilises all of them as he mutters under his breath, 'Prince Yusupov is the last person I'd expect to assassinate his sponsor.' Sponsor? The dying often talk rubbish and we have to put up with it – for the sake of our mental equilibrium. Rasputin was a peasant whose influence in the space (pre)occupied by the Russian court was incredible, not to say unbelievable. There were people who could not, would not believe that his words meant more to the tsar and the tsarina than ministers and their declarations. So he might have used a 'prestigious' word to show he was on an equal footing with the Russian aristocracy, ministers and scientists, let alone composers and painters.

Anyway, it is hard to deal with corpses or with the dying, as I pointed out earlier – for the simple reason that you never know exactly what they can do or ask for. During the Second World War, a Russian priest was captured by the enemy. He was known for his aversion to lies, hypocrisy and other phenomena of the same kind, and he said, when asked about his age, 'I am 39,' which was true – nothing but the truth. And they put a spade in his hands, saying, 'You should dig holes and fill them in again.' The ground was frozen hard and was impossible to dig. Moreover, he noticed as he began his work that other prisoners had just dug a shallow pit and thrown some bodies into it. 'What bodies did they ill-treat in this fashion?' he asked himself, and he immediately cancelled the question, saying to himself, 'Any body is precious, even that of a cat.' And he refused to dig holes, trenches and other makeshift graves. Whatever you dig ends up becoming a grave: your grave, somebody else's grave. First you dig a trench and you think it is the First World War you are taking part in. And then you realise it is the Second World War and what you are digging is a genuine grave destined for a thousand officers. So you stop, lie down and begin to wait for death, for a bullet and its trajectory piercing either your brain or your heart.

The Russian priest realised all that. Besides, he was about to pass away – priests do not die; they vanish into thin air – but he could not die without carrying out a ritual to which he had grown accustomed in the course of his sanctified life. So he asked another prisoner to pick up his hand and make the sign of the cross – above his body. Had this priest told the Nazis his *unreal* age (59, for instance), they would not have offered him the spade

and other tools of the trade. Even the Nazis are not entirely insensitive to human suffering, contrary to what their partisans and followers declare in their speeches. But he told them the immaculate truth and they killed him rather mercilessly as if to punish his sincerity and unshakeable faith. My friend was not on the point of asking me to perform the same ritual by touching his hand, raising it level with his eyebrows. The rest is a matter of technique, as the Russian pianists say. And the priest was a virtuoso in this domain. My friend remained silent and I thanked God for his silence – for two reasons. *Primo*, I was led to conclude he was *not* on the threshold of death. (I gave an audible sigh of relief.) *Secundo*, I was reluctant to get involved in any ritual at that particular moment unless you regard whatever I did that night as a ritual: lavishing care on somebody, I call it. However, I was not prepared to carry his body to his flat, for I was not able to carry heavy bodies, either human or otherwise. Recently I underwent an operation, and the surgeon said to me quite seriously and honestly, ‘Six kilos is the maximum weight you can carry about. Even elevators know their limits. Have you never read the following notice, “The maximum load for this elevator is eight persons.”?’

‘I often dream of lifts,’ I answered. ‘Being a staunch admirer of Dante Alighieri, I see a number of other notices on their walls. “The sky’s the limit,” for instance.’

I know that a Russian priest would say, under the circumstances, ‘The sky’s *not* the limit. There are no limits to our ascension. Beyond this sky there’s another sky and so on, and so on. Do you realise that the expression “and so on” is extremely important in the context of our existence? You can even add, “And so forth.” You could also add, “And so North, and so South.” And so on, my son.’ My friend was lying in the mud, according to my report, and at some point I began to wait for his soul’s exit from his body. Actually embryos are said to feel the cosmos which they irremediably lose upon getting out of their mother’s body. Not quite, not quite – this loss is not as irremediable as all that. After death, your soul recovers this knowledge without which you are incomplete, incompetent. ‘You are an impediment to your own progress,’ as some mystic put it a few centuries ago, perhaps in the days when Christ was walking around Jerusalem. Apparently newborn babies retain this cosmic knowledge – for seven months, for eight months. Alas, they cannot take advantage of it because they are not mature enough for such an exploit. They break their toys, shout, scream, continually put spokes in our wheels instead of confiding in their parents and relatives – their nephews, for instance. Why don’t they tell us the following truth? ‘The cosmos is big and the world is small. We should think big instead of thinking small. Are you aware of what Plato said of the Earth? There are many rivers under the surface of the Earth, and all of them end their journeys in Tartarus. What could one say about the cosmos? There are millions of rivers in the cosmos and they continue their journeys in spite of the lack of energy. Of course they use sunbeams and other beams, but at some point they might suffer from energy deficiency. They might feel like dropping from their orbits, from their ellipses meticulously described by Kepler and his pupils. Yet they go on to the bitter end. And the end is always bitter, you know.’

So the soul is our saviour and probably the Messiah: every human being has his or her own Messiah, according to this doctrine. A man (not a woman, this time) drinks himself stupid and almost dead; and he collapses at some point or other. If he is a famous person, his biographers and worshippers follow in his footsteps – literally speaking – and put a box of matches on the spot where their idol collapsed, lost consciousness or died: this depends on the circumstances. They intend to erect a series of monuments to his (and their own) memory after this particular idol’s death. But do they watch his soul leave his body forever? What a pity they do not always accomplish this duty, for not only this departure is quite spectacular – in visual terms. It

is instructive, considering the words this soul utters as it continues to fly in the direction of the heavens or the nearest cloud. All this depends, depends, depends on many circumstances and even on weather reports, oddly enough. I think my friend's soul (if determined to leave his body forever and ever) would circle for an hour before undertaking its interstellar journey. Yes, it would fly in the vicinity of the corpse, saying under its breath, 'Can you hear me? I'd like to impart to you a piece of supreme knowledge. Actually I was in love with your vodka, with your whisky and soda; and also with your numerous wives and concubines. And also with your boyfriends, whatever they say on the subject. (Those sanctimonious prigs.) So I can't leave you in the twinkling of an eye. It is as if my eyes couldn't twinkle. I adore your body whose greediness allowed me to partake of many dainty dishes, of many succulent wines. And your concubines, your concubines. Their lips and tits – sorry, their breasts – showered me with so many pleasures that I can't remember them with topographical precision. So if you ask me, "Do you know what woman kissed me, caressed me, let me penetrate her body (to the utmost)?" I would answer quite sincerely, "I can't quote you chapter and verse."'

Speaking of matches, a Russian poet, Velimir Khlebnikov, often touched upon the 'matches of destiny' which I interpret thus, 'You strike a match and watch it, watch it, watch it. The point is some of the matches are liable to stop somewhere in the middle and so you're likely to live much longer, quite in accordance with their light's endurance. The light endures and you go on living to your stomach's content, drinking a lot of gorgeous wines that caress your throat and also the rest of your substance. (We call this phenomenon "immobile light".) And it's high time I went back to light in general because there's such a thing as dry light.'

You wish to become a shaman – just in case. (After all, you are not protected from *all* diseases and viruses.) A shaman, a medicine-man – it does not matter, provided you can cure yourself and some of your neighbours from incurable diseases. I already mentioned (if only in passing) your eyes, my eyes and even my cat's eyes which are far more efficient than any human eye. Perhaps I mentioned them in another book of mine, but that does not matter either: Joyce thought you should devote your whole life to his works, reading a few pages from *Finnegans Wake* on your deathbed, no less. Well, this dry light is made of crystals that your elders and betters stuff into your skin or internal organs in order to breathe new life into you. The new life comes and you see everything: internal organs, internal combustion engines and so on and so forth. Instead of meditating round the clock and withdrawing into deserts, you just receive a multitude of crystals that become your eyes – in no time at all. No meditations, no asceticism. You go out and say to a passerby, 'How are you today? Anyway, don't worry – I'll cure you in no time at all.' And you begin to radiate joy and happiness from one of your crystals, from two of your crystals. And if this method does not work – crystals and dry lights in general often misfire – you just put one of these crystals into your patient's mouth. 'What is it?' asks your patient.

'A fruit drop,' you answer.

'Isn't it rather a honey drop?' your patient asks.

'If you wish,' you answer. 'It doesn't really matter.'

'I'd rather enjoy a honey drop. I'm not very keen on fruit drops, you know.'

'I know, I know – I'm an extra-sense, as they say in Russia.'

'Does that mean you have an additional sense, the fourth sense, the ninth sense? Or are you just senseless?'

'How so?' you ask.

'Don't your senses go beyond all senses?'

Only senseless, nonsensical talk can cure some people.

Actually I am not aware that I was waiting for my friend's soul, for its exit. After all, there are such beings as God's messengers who come to us after our death (to our corpses, rather) and touch us or them in expectation of the same phenomenon: the exit of the soul. Oddly enough, the soul does not know anything about the Hereafter, for all its knowledge of heaven, the stars and milky, creamy ways. It is an altogether different kettle of fish, this Hereafter of ours: we created it and, given the active part we played in its advent and settlement, we think this kingdom is ours. But it does not belong to us, for the simple reason that very few spiritual, otherworldly things belong to us in the cosmos into which we are eager to probe to the best of our abilities. These messengers come in dribs and drabs and they literally (and metaphorically, and metaphysically) take care of the souls leaving corpses all over the Earth. Every messenger is assigned a definite task and this task points to a corpse from which a soul is about to depart – through his mouth, nostrils or navel – bent on distant aims, voyages, journeys and stars; bent on everything. On condition that this everything has nothing to do with the body left to its own devices on the aforementioned surface of the Earth. Of course, whenever you mention the surface of our planet you visualise beaches, trees, bushes and tennis courts where beautiful ladies disport themselves for your benefit, pleasure or money. But the messengers I am talking about do not think in terms of money.

Perhaps you did wish to be born, if only for the sake of trying to say something to your buddies, your fellow-embryos. To say *what*, for God's sake? To say, 'I was born, I was born at last. And I saw the light I'd been thinking about during my sojourn in my mother's womb.' But some of us did *not* wish to be born, as I pointed out earlier, much earlier. As for myself, in my embryonic state I thought a lot about my mother whom I was longing to see at all costs. To see my mother and her tenderness (and die). 'It's not enough to *feel* this tenderness of hers,' I said to myself day and night. So, to some extent, I *wished* to be born; at least I did not categorically *refuse* to see the light of day. Those who are adamant in this respect *are* born, in spite of themselves, their yearning, but for nothing in the world are they prepared to part with the essential part of their womb-confined existence. So even today one can see a lot of people who carry umbilical cords instead of resorting to guns, revolvers and poisonous/inflammable/toxic gas. Police officers use them as well, otherwise they would already have been gagged and garrotted by rebels and revolutionaries. The point is umbilical cords are often more efficient than traditional weapons on account of their biological, spiritual connection with mothers who always protects their sons and daughters. A police officer brandishes an umbilical cord and shouts or sings, 'I'm doing it to honour your memory, my dear Mother. You're still alive and kicking. Or rather flying, striking, hitting. You're still a hit, my dear Mother. If you knew how proud I am of your might and eternity you would kiss me on the spot.'

But let us investigate the group of babes whose future wholly depends on the world where we have been living and dying for some time. You get out of your mother's womb and the sun or just a bulb of sorts makes you happy, to put things mildly. Actually many diaries of newborn babes display the following piece of information, 'I was blinded in an accident at an early age.' What kind of accident is alluded to in this entry, one may ask? Being thrown out of your mother's womb. Even a modest bulb can blind you – if not forever, at least for several hours. But you are likely to recall these hours *forever*, which is sure to spoil all your fun to come, as H. G. Wells might have put it. And if your mother happens to give birth to you on a lawn, in your future personal

garden, you will see both God and a series of Trinities. And for the rest of your life you will do your best to discover their names and functions, and that is what they often call 'faith': you believe in God and your forthcoming incarnations. Are they really forthcoming? Sometimes they *are* if you accept both the light and the revelations it is about to offer you.

Let us go further. For some obscure reason – 'obscure' is the right word under the circumstances – you do not receive this gift. (Revelations and suchlike.) Yet you did *not* sin in your mother's womb. You did not bite her skin or internal organs – for the simple reason that you could not make them out. If asked by your mother, 'What do you think about my health, my dear daughter? Did you inspect my internal organs thoroughly or superficially? Do you think I need to undergo spare-part surgery?' And you answer your mother, 'Your organs are too small, my dear Mother. I couldn't make them out at all.' Of course your mother may take offence and go so far as to deprive you of your heritage: your father must have died some time ago. All this is beside the point, however. What counts is the revelation of which you were deprived in the very first hour of your existence. And no one ought to underestimate this crucial event which is sure to cast a long shadow over your whole life. You consult a doctor and a mystic, and the latter says to you in honeyed tones, 'Let me put a few pills into your mouth. Into your heart, rather.'

'Will you submit me to open-heart surgery?' you ask, your bottom lip trembling and tears welling up in your eyes.

'Not literally – mystically,' the mystic answers.

'How so? How so?'

'I'll put a crystal into your mouth and it'll slide and glide as many minutes as are necessary to reach your heart. This duration is called "light years", you know.'

'As many minutes as are necessary or as many minutes as are required for such a journey?' you ask, anxious about your linguistic aptitudes and social status.

Amazingly enough, a lot of babies refuse to accept this offer because they are afraid of micro-chips, of miniaturisation and 'totalitarian ascendancy', as they put it. Their benefactors say to them in the same honeyed tones, 'The invention of the silicon chip was a landmark in the history of the computer.'

'We know, we know,' they answer. 'We know that the silicon chip is a classic example of the benefits of miniaturisation. That's why we fear these chips much more than death himself, than life itself.'

'But why? Why?'

'Because using a single chip reduces the noise of the output signal by 90%.'

'So what?'

'The noise I'm talking about would allow me to detect your presence in my organism. Thanks to this chip you'll be connected to my bank account and also to my thoughts. And now it's noiseless, as silent as the grave – my grave. You'll rob me and wash my brains without my being aware of what is going on.'

I had no idea through what stage of human deterioration or rather corrosion my dear friend's body was walking, flying and crawling that night, at that particular moment. Which moment am I trying to describe at the moment I am living through instead of crawling, flying or hobbling with a stick? If I could have asked my friend a few vital (or rather deadly) questions, I would have enlarged upon this stick or the wings we are supposed to use as

we travel towards the moon in some Indian treaty or tale. Actually it is rather easy to draw conclusions from the answer you get when talking to the half-dead, to those whose shadows or astral bodies head for their future abode in their angels' company. Sure enough, they are not alone – not at *that* stage of their afterlife – because they cannot get their bearings, even if they stop from time to time, resolved to get them at all costs. By the way, these costs are so high you always have an irresistible urge to cut them. But this operation may turn out to be a bit of a damp squib on account of your being utterly disoriented: not only do you have no idea what your destination is and how to reach it in no time at all, but you are also lost in linguistic spheres. For instance, you hear the verb 'to cut' as if your guardian angel were whispering it in your ear; and you trust your angel entirely, absolutely. So, instead of cutting your costs you set about cutting off your ear. Of course you remind everybody of Vincent Van Gogh, but that is not the aim you are pursuing at this particular stage of your existence. (Even in the Hereafter you continue to exist, whatever gravediggers might say on the subject, when exchanging a few jokes.)

I am aware of the dissolution to which a corpse, a fresh, newborn corpse is exposed: the four elements about which our Greek philosophers talked with gusto begin to attack each other, turning into each other as they perform this duty-imposed task. Usually mysticism-permeated people dream of revelations and they are even capable of turning to you and uttering a few words to this effect, 'I am eternal, immortal. I am God,' which may displease you beyond measure: you also intend to become God in the long run. Those for whom Dostoevsky is still a prophet may touch upon Kyrillov, upon his Man-God (Mad-Man) doctrine and say that if you cannot kill yourself you are not likely to turn into God – even at the end of time. But is it necessary to turn into God, which actually could be done at the *beginning* of time or rather at the very outset of your life?

I am deviating from the theme I have in mind despite the many temptations I am exposed to. I was speaking of revelations and dreams which are habitually known as 'revelation-carriers'. I saw my father. Sure enough, in one of my recent dreams I came across my father – and yet I am not sure I was walking at that point – and my father, one of the sources of my being, talked to me at length about his dissolution, dislocation. The elements I touched upon many times in my writings (and musings) were conspicuous by their presence. The air was about to penetrate *definitively* the water we all contain to such an extent that our biologists endeavour to convince us of our watery essence – because we are nothing else, according to them. 'We're just water, water, water.' In this connection I recall a Russian song – I might be Russian to the core, after all – where water is omnipresent, if not omniscient. So they sing with gusto, their mouths wide open, 'Water, water, everywhere's only water. Water is on the left-hand side, on the, on the.' As for my father and his teaching, he just said, 'The cosmos is a cocktail. So are we, believe it or not. As I lay dying somewhere – I don't remember the spot to which death rooted me forever – I literally saw the four elements and I said to myself, "There's not enough interaction between water and fire," whereupon they began to interact so actively and efficiently I was no longer able to distinguish between them.'

'My dear Father,' I said to him. 'Do you think your vision has anything to do with the way we're supposed to behave on this planet and also beyond its frontiers?'

'You mean we have to love each other, making love to each other round the clock?'

'Yes, yes, yes.'

Allow me to deviate once again from whatever subject I am dealing with right now. Tantric exercises emphasise the importance of sexual intercourse and I invite you again to consider mothers and their wombs; and

to their vicinities where so many newborn babies disport themselves. There are specialists whose knowledge of Tantric ways is so profound and complete they advocate love and sex (their performance) at the very outset of our human existence. They say we should permit these babies to fornicate at the very threshold of life. Of course we remind them that the verb ‘fornicate’ is habitually used in another context – these babies are not married to anyone yet – but never mind, never mind. In short, they say that our spiritual progress depends on how fast we come to terms with sex, and our incapacity to make love upon our departure from our mother’s womb should not preclude our initiation into this ceremony. ‘You just lay a male on a female and wait for a miracle.’ Of course we ask them why we should be in such a hurry and they say that grown-ups – they allude to male representatives of our species – run the risk of losing their semen, their sperm, their *élan vital* ‘for nothing, nothing, nothing’. They repeat the word ‘nothing’ several times and then explain that at this stage of our development, of our immaturity, we cannot lose our sperm – ‘not a drop of it, you know’ – our whole substance being wholly concentrated on other biological duties. Besides, we have no sperm in our channels, in our interior organs which ‘mind their own business’, according to them, to those gurus and scholars.

When I asked my father’s opinion (I am still alluding to my dream) he said that throughout his life, even at its early stages, he thought only in terms of sublimation which Sigmund Freud ‘dinned into us’, as he put it quite earnestly. ‘Yes, my dear son, even at the age of seven I thought only about my future words, and I started one or two books at that very age, in spite of my immaturity. Actually I wonder if we ever cross this domain, this stretch of time and space light-heartedly known as “immaturity”. Are we ever immature? Isn’t every immature thought just another illustration of maturity, another experience and angle of vision? Another incarnation, if you wish.’ But I voiced my aversion to the Marxist doctrine, according to which you can and even must dabble in everything instead of working at your factory day in, day out. ‘The same goes for children,’ I said. ‘Nowadays they think that not only every culture, every age, every day can produce a lot of men and women and children of genius. They all belong to this superlative category, all of them.’ There is nothing more hateful than this point of view because a child writing his version of Hell and Paradise is not on an equal footing with Dante or Milton. ‘When I see their doodling and splodges,’ I said, ‘I can hardly rein in my disgust. The same goes for cultures, for periods and epochs. In this day and age there’s only one Hell – our homemade Hell. And Dante has nothing to do with it.’

‘Let us talk about the Hanging Gardens,’ my father said all of a sudden.

‘Why do you wish to talk about these vertiginous gardens?’ I asked him.

‘Because our life is a mixture of everything. I’d even go so far as to affirm it is *the* mixture of everything. There are no mixtures like this in the whole world, no other mixtures.’

And then he returned to the subject we broached earlier, namely my initiation through sex, the lack of sperm and all-excluding female presence. He spoke of a legendary king. According to my father and sacred books, this king married a royal princess and carried her off, away – in the direction of his kingdom where only a part of some desert or other was available to his subjects and himself. There he put her in a palace, but soon his eyes and heart did not fail to notice how bored the queen would get not only from time to time, but *all the time*. So he asked her why she was so bored. She did not answer his question. Resolved to get an answer, he began to sing, hoping she would start to giggle: he was singing out of tune. He was prepared to ask her yet another question, ‘What are you giggling about? Have I said something funny?’ But she did not giggle – far from it. To tell the truth, she burst into tears instead. So he realised she needed some water – a river or a lake or a fountain –

and also a lot of trees which he was supposed to plant with a view to adorning the fountains and cascades. That is how The Hanging Gardens saw the light of day. Some researchers could not help declaring that many suicides had been committed in those fabulous gardens: they could not come up with any other explanation. And the mystery of these gardens' name had to be elucidated at all costs. 'Trees exist only for those who have to swing,' they said firmly and convincingly.

And once again a linguistic game – human beings play with words until they both drop – gets under way, and this way lies in between swings and gallows, between gallows humour and gallows tragedy. If a child happens to be in the neighbourhood, within earshot, you should be prudent so as not to frighten it out of its wits. (I am weary of this alternative, of him and her, she and he. And when you are weary of such playacting, you just say, 'A child,' for all this is rather childish. Or you model your behaviour upon a Buddhist hermit. Once he was asked, 'The creature you saw a few minutes ago. A man or a woman?' The hermit answered, 'No idea. But I do know it was a skeleton.') Indeed this child may conclude that life is just an alternative between swings and a number of corpses hanging not in a garden, as might be presumed, but in the middle of a huge square. This child might also assume there is no alternative but to commit suicide. So a child – any child you can think of – goes out and sees a pair of trees. And this child of ours broaches the subject with the child, saying to the child, 'This pair of trees will enable me either to commit suicide or to swing to my heart's content. What should I do? What counts is my heart's content, I suppose. And my heart is sure to be content if I opt for the swings I have in mind. I'll just ask my uncle to install them on this spot, and he'll come up to my expectations on the spot, on the same spot. But if I am to swing, as the poet says, I can feel elated for a while. Not for long though, not for long though. Unless my weight prolongs the pleasure of leaving this life and existence – once and for all. A branch may be at odds with my purpose and I'll find myself on the ground, under the very trees I relied upon for my final deliverance. For once let me discard the doctrine of eternal recurrence. And also metempsychosis and its consequences. Of course I may begin this game by using the swings created by my uncle – not out of nothing, though. While availing myself of this contraption, I might say to myself, from time to time, "What I lose on the swings I'll gain on the gallows." What do we usually lose on the swings? The peace of nothingness.'

Children are liable to probe into the matter by alternately trying swings and gallows – as long as their health allows them to continue the experience – to the bitter or sweeter, sweeter end. What does this sweeter end look like? I think I saw a television programme in which they analysed the state of a man whose body was hanging from the gallows. Of course they focused mostly on his penis, for they seemed to have drawn a few hasty conclusions – before the programme or the *emission* – according to which an ordinary citizen of any country was quite aware of what happens to such a man, under these or similar circumstances. (You can be strangled in the streets of the city where you have lived all your life.) Your erection would surprise your own self-esteem if you were in a position to enjoy it fully, contemplating it from afar and also at close range; and also holding it, weighing it, asking someone to taste it, as Henry Miller would have written in one of his books. But let us not forget we are dealing with a child and his erection cannot exceed the limits set to it by his age and immaturity, by his masculine incapacity or under-capacity. Earlier I drew your attention to the umbilical cord one was likely to turn into a weapon by extracting it from his mother's womb and lashing a few humans in the same streets. I am not sure you could use your penis in the same way; even Peter the Great who was renowned not only for his penis's size, but also for the creation of Leningrad or Petersburg, would not have been able to accomplish such a deed. But children might react and act quite differently, given their obstinate immaturity.

They might decide it is worth their while swinging on a rope for the sake of their penises' sizes, even if these sizes will never be likened – ever so prudently – to Peter the Great's multiplication-instrument.

Suppose you realise after a while – at the age of nine, for instance – that you are unable to cope with the predicaments and discomfitures scattered all along the path you have followed ever since your birth, your appearance in this vale of tears and screams. So you look at yourself in a mirror and say, 'Even my double wouldn't get me off the hook. Yes, I've been exposed to the torture described in one of Oscar Wilde's poems, and I continue to mistake it for a pleasant pastime to which you traditionally pay homage in a garden adorned with swings. No, no, no – I've been trying to hang myself in accordance with the tradition known to Christians from the very start, from the very finish – from the day when Judas Iscariot hung himself, resolved to atone for his actions in the past. What actions? His last action could be depicted thus, 'He leant forward to kiss Jesus but the latter evaded him by pretending to sneeze.' Tolstoy had an urge to re-write the Scriptures, and one of the ways we have in our repertoire, one of the amendments we can suggest to the Almighty or destiny concerns the last day of Jesus' civil freedom: he was still allowed to walk with his disciples around Jerusalem and even all over the world, including the United States of America. So Judas leant forward to kiss Jesus but the latter said to him rather angrily, 'What are you about to do? Are you about to betray me, you, scoundrel?' And Jesus pulled away just as Judas was about to kiss him.

Incidentally, re-writing the Scriptures is very useful – according to many mystics who indulge enthusiastically in this pastime. They say we should participate in these divine games *actively* instead of learning Jesus' actions and words by heart. 'If you don't comment on your life you don't live it. The same goes for Jesus, you know. He'll be unable to rise from the dead if you don't re-write his life.' Well, let us go back to my father whose shadow I can see behind a rock, a boulder, at the foot of a cliff. 'Father, father, father!' He leaves the spot to which he must have been rooted for more than a century and directs his steps towards the tree where I await him eagerly, nostalgically. Are you allowed to choose your guardian angel, your guide, your daimonion? At the age of nine you realise at last that you cannot cope with the booby traps and radar traps profusely strewn all over your *Lebensraum*. So you kneel down and pray for an hour or so. And then you jump to your feet, hoping to find an angel in your room, in your bed, in your embrace – within your field of vision, to put it gently and modestly. Nothing happens; even *nothing itself* does not happen, which is horrible, terrifying, dreadful. Is there anything more appalling than the absence of nothing? Then your glance freezes as it comes across your father's dusty portrait and you say to your father, 'My dear Father, I ask you to get me off the hook, off this eternal hook to which I've been disgustingly loyal after your death. Help me, help me, help me. Recall my body, recall my shape and substance!'

Actually we might face the Hereafter on our own: destiny is omniscient and therefore knows where to send us after our (untimely) demise. Instead of sending us either to our relatives or humane, fairy-tale-oriented animals – they talk, dance and serve at our tables – the heavens should rely entirely on the *Fatum* that is used to killing us almost every second. Strangely enough, it also saves us as if filled with remorse. Some of us think that destiny does not exist, for it died with Jesus Christ – on the same cross. You believe that Jesus Christ died on the cross and was raised from the dead – or just got out of his tomb – on the third day, resolved to honour the Holy Trinity of which he was already part and parcel. The *Fatum* died with him, and since our destiny, the entity we

call 'our destiny', did not recognise the divinity of Jesus, being quite inferior to the bandit and terrorist who did acknowledge Christ's divine nature, it (our destiny) undertook no journey after its demise as if the heavens and the rest of the cosmos had not needed fate, destiny, order and murderous harmony. No, destiny stayed with us – rooted to the spot, as they often say and write. For instance, you see someone who is unable to move, on account of this person's illness; paralysis, for instance. So you see this person and say to your wife or husband, 'Do you know who this person is or could be in the world of metaphors and symbols?'

'Not the foggiest,' says your companion in fortune.

'Well, the substance you're given an opportunity to contemplate in the course of our daily walk is destiny in person.'

'How so? Why?'

'Because destiny (or *Fatum*, if you wish) is always rooted to the spot.'

'Are you sure of your doctrine, of its veracity?'

'Absolutely sure. Go and try to push this person, to displace him or her.'

'All right. I admit I won't be able to do so. But let me draw your attention to an everyday occurrence which corroborates your hypothesis far more convincingly – on account of its scope. Do you remember the article you read two years ago, in *The Times*?'

'I don't even recall today's newspapers.'

"'The building of a new dam will displace thousands of people who live in this area,'" you read in the article I'm alluding to.'

'So what?'

'Do you know what occurred a fortnight later?'

'No idea.'

'These people refused to budge from where they lived with their families.'

'Quite exceptional – I agree with you on this point. But why do you think it's an everyday occurrence?'

'Because such things happen every day.'

Suppose, however, that destiny was weary on the day about which I have spoken at some length, resolved (destined) to trace the whereabouts of effects and causes. Well, to put it in a nutshell, destiny said to my father, 'Could you please stand in for me today? After all, your son's destiny depends on your goodwill.' And my father did not hesitate to accompany me to my destination, my final abode. Not a second did he hesitate, contrary to what might be assumed, given the intricacy (and intimacy) of the problem and the responsibility connected with it.

Let us represent the whole thing graphically; and yet only metaphors and other figures of our speech, of hesitation, of what does not come out, even if you push this or that beyond everything, could throw light on the problem under discussion (destiny?). Any graphic picture of the world gives you a lecture on how different tendencies struggle for life within this triangle or Plato's solids. What is a solid? you ask yourself and then you answer platonically, analytically, 'I don't know anything, not even the mechanism that asks me this question.'

And then that becomes what is called a Bacchanalia. And what is it all about, you ask me and others?

This is a movement, a dance.

And if you can't dance, you just move

Or just sit on the floor, repeating,
 OM, realising OM, restoring
 OM, repainting OM.

All depends on your angle of vision, and this theory invades your theoretical knowledge linked to mathematics, logic and sometimes metaphysics; and mostly physics. You are dying, you are constantly, permanently, eternally dying, but the last conclusion may breathe new life into your organism: if you are *eternally* dying, you are *eternal*. You can even say to the Almighty, in passing, in passing, ‘I don’t mind *dying* eternally on condition that the process is *eternal*.’ Your cells die continuously, and you are aware of the fact, although you do not watch your cells’ demise every second, every day, every week. You know these cells pass away inside your body; and probably outside your body as well. You say to yourself – in your moments of uncontrollable ecstasy – that whatever clings to your body, however negligently and superficially, belongs to you, otherwise you would not be able to tear a sheet of paper into pieces. You can crumple it, you can screw it up, and this angle of vision leads you astray, doing its best to convince you that whatever you crumple or manipulate in some way or other belongs to you as if you were Ivan the Terrible.

You still believe – wrongly and rather stupidly – that both women and men are permanently in love with you, which protects you from old age and all sorts of inconveniences associated with it. You say to all those whose convictions are focused on the opposite pole of human reflections, opinions and traditions, ‘The older I grow the more attractive I become – not only because grey hairs can be much sexier than ordinary ones. Anyway, whatever is ordinary, run-of-the-mill and corresponds to what is commonly expected is not libidinous: it’s not *charged* with libido. Not *completely* anyway.’ One might suppose you are the best, the only friend of the man who works in a sports centre, instructing people in the use of the gym equipment. And this man says to you upon your arrival at the gym, ‘I’ll insufflate a lot of libido into your tissues, psyche and astral body.’ You are courageous enough to swallow this nonsense without throwing tantrums and other things of this kind.

Anyway, what we have to remember is that night, the one I spent in Moscow at the end of my sojourn in that city. (Or is it *my* city, *this* city? Not that one, not that one.) What I encountered that night goes beyond a lot of things, and some of these things are qualified as humane and heartfelt actions. As I told you, I saw a woman upon my return to the hotel in front of which my friend was sitting on a bench, his blood flowing abundantly from his wound so as not to miss an opportunity to express itself. I saw the self-expression of his blood – upon my arrival at the scene of his fall. And I saw a lady who was far superior to a bunch of Florences Nightingales; at that particular point. She paid for the taxi which was to bring me back. She talked to me, ‘I hope you’ll keep your friend company until you reach his final destination, otherwise you’ll never forgive yourself.’

‘What do you mean by his final destination?’

‘Death and oblivion. That would be his final destination if you didn’t take care of him for the rest of this stage of his pilgrimage. I paid for your double pilgrimage and also for your return to the hotel.’

‘I have a lot of money in my purse.’

‘You’re not Rodrigo,’ she answered. ‘And I’m rich, very rich.’

What does my angle of vision tell me at this point? There are many points and I hope I shall receive the same answer at every point I detect within my field of vision. Well, my angle of vision (my angel) informs me

that, to some extent, the lady I praise so highly might have been wrong: death inspires us continuously, otherwise the Japanese would not have written any death poems. And they do so even today: they write them, before embarking on their journey to the woods renowned for their corpses. People write a few death poems – or just one death poem, the final poem, the farewell – and take a taxi. Sometimes, upon arrival at their destination, they hear the following words, ‘I don’t need your money. A beautiful lady, a dame sans merci, paid for your journey. But there’s no return ticket, you know. This is a one-way street, if you see what I mean.’

We might say to ourselves – and I ought to have said that to the lady I continue to admire and worship – that death is a sort of engine which enables human beings and their lives to develop into other forms, into brand-new ideas, bodies and mixtures. ‘Without them human life doesn’t mean anything.’ Of course we can always say that human life means ‘dreadful, dreadful, dreadful,’ or something along these lines. You go along these lines and find a hill on which the Creator – the idea you hit upon on the spur of the moment – engraved the following definition, ‘Terror, tyranny, dictatorship, chips everywhere, they know everything about you and your next-of-kin, you are *foutu, foutu, foutu*.’ Some of our pilgrims do not even have a smattering of French – no smattering, no idioms – and so they carry on, unaware of what lies in store for them, namely ‘*foutu, foutu, foutu*’. Generally speaking, we are not keen to learn the whereabouts of our personal death about which we care even more than about global warming. That is why many people are reluctant to learn foreign languages, for they are aware (for some obscure reason) that the information related to their physical disappearance – spiritually they disappeared from surfaces and interiors many years ago – will be conveyed to them in a foreign language. So they say to themselves, ‘No need to learn them, all these languages. We’re quite happy without their obtrusive presence.’ The same often goes for numbers, digits – for mathematics in general. One is afraid of coming across the date and hour of one’s death which is bound to materialise by means of mathematical formulas, equations. Or just through ‘number nine’.

I might have told my fair lady that death is an essential ingredient of progress, of movements, however tiny and insignificant. ‘You don’t move unless you die every second,’ I might have told her. ‘The same goes for the universe. If you don’t die the universe will stop forever.’

‘What are you talking about?’ she might have said. ‘Are you alluding to its expansion? Do you wish to stop this expansion? And what about the second law of thermodynamics? Do you think your dearest friend’s death might interfere with its pernicious progress, with its very life? Are you bent on saving humanity from this insidious, rotten-to-the-core law? Anyway, if you leave your friend in the lurch, literally speaking, you’ll never forgive yourself. You’ll call yourself Judas.’

‘Judas the Traitor or Judas the Liberator? Judas the Redeemer?’

According to a famous theory, birth is on the same wavelength as death so that, once your vibration passes away, stops in its tracks, disappears, another vibration appears as if shocked by its colleague’s disappearance or unfair death. If nothing happens, nothing dies, there is no impulse in the universe – no birth-impulse, as some specialists call it. You can also call it ‘birth-urge’ and that might remind one of a Frenchman who, all of a sudden, jumps to his feet and begins to run in the direction of the nearest ‘lavatory’, as well-mannered, well-behaved people usually say, when asked a pertinent question. Actually, the highest category of the well-mannered never utter the word ‘lavatory’, let alone the word ‘toilet’, and consequently, when asked the same

question, they answer, ‘You know, I’ve forgotten my keys somewhere. I’m running in the direction of this somewhere, where I’m sure to find my keys without which I won’t be able to open the front door of my house.’ A Frenchman usually adds, ‘*Ça urge*,’ and that is what usually happens in the domain called ‘death-and-life’. If you have an irresistible urge to be born – such things *may* occur in the domain of life – you could be told the following, undeniable truth, ‘Sorry, but you have to wait a little bit – no one is about to die right now.’ Of course you can answer, ‘How so? Every tiny second someone dies and perishes in the universe. Even in residential areas people and animals drop, die and collapse like flies.’ And often you hear the following answer, ‘I couldn’t agree more, but even flies don’t seem to die today. They all enjoy their holidays on windowpanes and windowsills.’

In every world, in every dimension, there has to be some give-and-take, and even the fourth dimension, renowned for its exceptional qualities, displays no exception to this universal rule. You give me your death and I give you my life. That is how this phenomenon sounds on the radio, on television, during appropriate programmes, on appropriate channels. And even inappropriate, vulgar channels are likely to inform you that you get nothing for nothing – as King Lear declared in the famous tragedy widely known everywhere. Nevertheless, *ça urge* because our predicament and rottenness grow and grow, with the passing of the years. The old continue to grow older and older, weaker and weaker, and we can no longer count on their helping hands, helping brains and sense of honour (or humour). They often say and feel, ‘My honour is at stake,’ whereas the young do not care two hoots about their honour, and sooner or later you are bound to say to yourself, ‘Transplantation of honours from living donors raises ethical issues.’ This sentence is not as enigmatic and absurd as may appear at first glance – for the simple reason that honour is a sort of organ, and every father, every guru is a living donor; at least to some extent.

Honourable men and women are often loath to lose their honour for the sake of the younger generation unless, among its representatives, they find their own children, nephews and bastards. They might hope that, even if deprived of honour, of its huge, important part, they will be able to safeguard a sufficient quantity of their dignity and old-school manners which are mostly conspicuous by their absence from our modern society. Anyway, the young need not only dignity, but also another approach to life and the sacrifices it may require from them, especially if they devote their time and strength to the arts, mathematics, physics and telepathic cures. The young are easily sidetracked by gadgets and pleasures that can be easily acquired in the society where one comes across so many billionaires. And those billionaires do not work like Pasteur or Gödel. Sometimes they just collect money immediately, without sending it to Singapore and other safe heavens where their assistants and cronies hide them under mountains and fountains – to be on the safe, when completely surrounded by unsafe sides and minds.

There are stages, mazes, and humans spend a lot of time within their frontiers instead of flying off (or passing away, why not?) and leaving all this sordid structure, mixture and whatever, and what not and else, else: there are so many traps awaiting us in the middle (or somewhere else) of our paths, parallel or convergent. What does it really matter? Suppose there is a human being whose path is parallel to yours. So you look at each other, from time to time, when there are not too many roots under your shoes. Then your parallel colleague overlooks a root and falls headlong; and you begin to wonder whether he is still alive or not. If he is dead you might be tempted to offer him your life, which would be all the more understandable since your paths are parallel, if not convergent. You see a body lying at your feet, and you resolve to resurrect this body at all cost. You bend over

this body – that is what I did in my friend’s drunken presence – and do your best to raise it from the dead or from a coma or a drunken stupor. And then you realise you are unable to do so on account of the quantity you bear inside your body. The quantity I am writing about is related to strength, ordinary strength: any weight-lifter is better in this respect than your intelligent, gifted, virtuoso substance. In this respect it really does not matter whether your paths – your own path and that of the half-corpses still lying at your feet – are convergent, parallel or divergent. A long time ago my friend and I studied together at the same establishment, and I could rely on this piece of information supplied by my memory if I was about to engage in a conversation with my former fellow student. But this time we were both facing life and death and the matter related to them undeniably and linguistically. Yet music is *always* in the background, in the foreground. (My friend is a distinguished composer.)

Our civilisation is on the threshold of its own annihilation, and only the births of a few men and women of genius can save it from utter destruction. The birth of a civilisation, so to speak. If you rely on grown-ups or even on students, on young men and women coming and going from one university to another – not from one universe to another – you might say to God, ‘I’m not sure I’m yearning to sacrifice my life for this brood. You say my death might propel one of them to international stardom, but I think they’ve been spoiled, destroyed and despoiled by their education, by computers and other technologies. By our rottenness, as I usually put it. Could you please produce a few babies to choose from?’

Well, let us once again get down to our brass tacks. I had to get down on my knees in order to put my friend back on his feet. But first I had to find out whether he was dead or not. Of course I would never have spoken to myself in the following fashion, ‘He’s dead and I don’t even have to compare his body to a doornail to corroborate my hypothesis. Besides, it’s not a hypothesis I’m dealing with. Once again I can announce to the world my absolute truth. And corpses are removed by refuse collectors, by dustmen. Dust to dust, ashes to ashes. By ash collectors, if you wish. The taxi is still waiting for me. Why not drive back to the hotel on the spot? I mean – at once? In the twinkling of a thought.’

Apparently the dead cannot be recognised in abstract terms: we do not differentiate between our humans on the basis of their lives and deaths because we cannot define the difference in abstract terms. And our only instruments are abstract: our books are teeming with formulas and signs, and only some of these signs resemble objects and the beings we rub shoulders with in everyday, real life. So, before undertaking any operation indissolubly linked to resurrection and its consequences, I had to make sure I was facing a corpse. Of course you can resurrect a human whose only significance lies in her affinities with vegetables. One of my former friends (he might be dead by now) used to say defiantly, ‘I’m a vegetable. So what?’ ‘So not, so not,’ I used to reply. ‘You’re not, not, not, not, not. You’re not what you’re supposed to be. You’re not what your mother gave birth to. You’re not what your father hoped for, when making love to your mother on that fateful night. You were not created in the image of God. So you’re not, not, not, not, not.’ That is why I have no idea whether he is dead or not, that friend of mine, my vegetable friend: we have not seen each other for 25 years at least.

Abstractedly my friend was almost dead, and once again I recalled the sorry plight of those who wish to improve humanity’s output. One of them said quite recently, ‘If we want to produce a multitude of geniuses we have to raise not only Beethoven from the dead, but also Mozart, Haydn, Flaubert, Proust and so on. The matter stands differently with saints – their number never dwindles.’ Apparently a saint can be recognised by the radiance she gives rise to – even during her sojourn in her mother’s womb. We can easily visualise the scene – a

dinner interrupted by an exclamation, ‘What? What is it? Where does this light come from? Did you put a candle in your trousers?’ A man rises from his seat and looks at his wife’s belly – in astonishment. (Sure enough, he gasped in astonishment and stared at his wife’s belly for at least 30 seconds.) ‘Of course not,’ his wife may answer; in astonishment. And she often adds, after much soul-searching, after thoroughly studying her thoughts and recollection, ‘I think it’s our baby, my dear husband. Often I see this light in my room, in the dark, before turning in. Sometimes it pierces my clothes, but when I look at my body in a mirror, I see only this light, our baby’s light. It’s as if it were streaming in through the open door, as if my belly were open, if you see what I mean.’ ‘I see what you mean. And I also see this light.’

We know (even if we are reluctant to admit it) that a few geniuses will never straighten out our problems and crooked paths. What we need is a messiah whose charisma would be liable to warm our world up, chasing away our rubbishy, shallow ambitions and other shallow pieces of nonsense. Messiahs do not come out of the blue, and if they do, they announce their coming through stars and the crowd fanatically cheering and urging someone through this someone’s journey. We hesitate as to the identity of this someone, but the crowd continues to produce the sounds associated with messiahs and their likes, their associates. We cannot affirm we have seen many messiahs in the course of our history, personal and general, but for some reason we are convinced that a certain kind of shout reveals to us the presence of these exceptional beings. ‘It’s him, him, her, her!’ shouts one member of the crowd, another member of the crowd. ‘What are you shouting about?’ asks yet another member of the crowd. ‘Can’t you see, can’t you see?’ shouts yet another member of the crowd. ‘I can hear, I can hear!’ shouts someone else.

Eventually the authentic someone arrives and almost everybody says or shouts, ‘It’s him, it’s him, it’s her!’ Almost, almost. Let us not disregard the importance of this quasi-invisible word. Traditionally we hear only keywords such as, ‘Beautiful, magnificent, everybody, unanimous, the whole Earth, throughout.’ But often these words are accompanied by a sort of warning enclosed in the adverb ‘almost’: almost beautiful, almost magnificent, almost clever. The so-called Messiah stands in front of the crowd, but one has the feeling he stands everywhere; and this everywhere is the very centre of the crowd – its very core, so to speak. Or its *cœur*, as the French often say; not only when speaking of the Sacre Cœur. However, in every crowd there is at least one person who has Cartesian doubts; and this woman has no hesitation in voicing these doubts of hers. She questions the very essence of the Messiah, which deprives him of his aptitudes directed towards what the crowd calls ‘rectification’ or ‘recovery’ or ‘renaissance’. This woman does not necessarily step forward: she does not need to stick out a mile (or to stick her neck out) to make her voice and ideas resound around the globe. She just says to the fake Messiah:

‘The news you’ve brought to our planet is fake news, my dear Sir.’

‘Why do you question my assertions?’ asks the Messiah.

‘Because your light (if any) didn’t traverse your mother’s skin.’

‘It did,’ maintains the Messiah.

‘I’ve known your family for more than 50 years. I saw your mother before your birth – many, many times. I even saw her on a Californian beach, to tell the truth.’

‘So what?’ asks the Messiah.

‘Even on the beach her belly radiated no light, no light whatsoever.’

‘But you can’t see spiritual lights on beaches, on sunny days.’

‘You can see them everywhere, in all weathers and moods. They’re *spiritual*, these lights, these superior lights.’

‘Had you seen my mother in her room, in her *camera obscura*, you would have seen my radiance.’

Human beings yearn for their deliverance from Covid 19, and any sign, any tendency associated with messiahs and their secretaries make them jump for joy. If a policeman happens to walk along the street, shining a torch into every car, you are sure to find a group of individuals whose jumps are every bit as spectacular as Nijinsky’s or Nureyev’s flights.

What do I know about my dying friend and his ways? He is as treacherous, disloyal as many other friends of mine, to put it mildly. If you put everything sharply, darkly, you are sure to commit suicide within 24 hours or one day, as they say, when tired of figures, numbers and arithmetic. Are you really tired of arithmetic, of multiplication tables and differential calculus? They say, ‘You’re seven today. It’s your birthday, isn’t it? Do you yearn to add one or two to your present age?’ And you answer, ‘Yes, yes, I do.’ So you add one, two and three to your age, hoping to use differential calculus one of these days. Then you begin to count these days and add cubes, squares and something incomprehensible to your real life about which they know next to nothing. Who are they, this time? All those who think only in terms of their wives, meals and children. These continue to shout, even when they do not need anything; as if there were days and nights when they do not need anything at all. Suppose your son needs nothing at all; he behaves, for once, contrary to what might be expected (as if you *could* expect anything in this life of ours). He says so (‘I need nothing at all, my dear Daddy’) and then you talk to him about life and death; or rather about death, death, death – exclusively, if you please. And this does not please your child at all, and so your child says to you sincerely and frenetically, ‘I’ll learn a hundred multiplication tables if they can ensure safety in this world. My longevity, my immortality.’

That is how you should teach your children both mathematics and life because they are not likely to learn anything about their existence if they know they will never make the most of it. And how could you make the most of it if you live only 80 years? At best? You are dying of liver cancer at the age of 39, and you say to yourself, ‘Why did I learn the multiplication tables? What for? Is that what they call “the irony of destiny”?’ We know next to nothing about everything – even about our friends, our closest friends. If asked, ‘Do you think your friend has passed away?’ you can answer, ‘I know my friend rather superficially. I suppose he could pass – in every sense of the word, mind you. But I’m not sure he was mature enough to pass away, for all the respect I’m prepared to show in his corpse’s presence.’

So I am called upon to investigate this murder or nothing at all: after all, people die and drop like flies or helicopters or any other engine they send upwards, anxious to conquer the cosmos and whatever is situated within it. They send something up and this something and many other somethings drop and cover the Earth. And we have no alternative but to bury all these things. So we are involved in a cosmic burial day in, day out, from morning to evening as if there were no money, no stock exchanges, no gold.

Suppose someone like David Hume comes to the scene of this death. Not only does he come to this scene, but he also bends over the corpse. And he says, after a while, ‘This corpse is dead, according to my philosophy. Let metaphysics overstep the bounds of reality round the clock. I’ll always stick to the reality I’m taking into

consideration. So I'll always stick to this corpse. And this corpse is dead, to all intents and purposes. And I'm sure there are no intents, no purposes, where this corpse is not a corpse.'

My friend drank all his life – throughout his youth, throughout his mature years. And I said to myself, 'He's likely to drink through his death as well,' although I was not quite sure I was right as I spoke at length about his death, for the simple reason that I did not know whether he was dead or not. Of course if you drink one litre of vodka every day and every night and every morn, you are likely to pass away within a week or within a month; at the utmost. I have no idea what 'at the utmost' means in the context. You have to study structures, as they say; details, nuances and colours will always escape your notice/attention. And vodka is colourless anyway so you die without enjoying a sort of rainbow which might have embellished your deathroom if you had not drunk so many bottles of what is called 'our vodka, vodka,' in Russian-speaking countries. '*Voda*' is water and so you can drink this essence all the time, saying to yourself, 'They advocate this procedure called, "Drinking water all the time."' I just prick up my ears, whenever they say anything of the kind; or along these lines.'

So I know the structure of my friend and draw the following conclusion, after much soul-searching, after much structure-searching, 'My friend isn't dead because, within his body and soul, there's enough room for a few gallons of vodka.' While waiting for his demise or resurrection, I wrote a poem I dedicated to the lady who had removed a lot of blood from his features:

Your dark hair is as dark as the void
Scattered around the stars, around the moon.

A lot of moons gleam and glisten in your hair.
Why are you so dark? What's the matter
With your dark matter? We've got everything we need
To become the happiest couple in the universe.

The universe is light in spite of the dark matter.

Love is a thread, a string.
It resounds somewhere and so
You hear its sound.

No one hears it. It is a sound,
A sound, nothing else.

And you'll never reproduce it, even
If you sing for hours, outside yourself,
Outside the world, outside the sound.

You are not a solitary traveller, a character from Schubert's *lieder*-cycles. You have a twin sister you are in love with, and you wish to propose to her on the spot. You look for this spot for a while and when you finally find it,

you realise your sister is no longer by your side. Where is she? ‘Where *are* you?’ you shout, and your voice resounds within her hearing distance. You look around and see her by your side except that she no longer rubs shoulders with you, shoulders, breasts, legs and other parts of her body. Why? Because there is a lot of dark matter in between your bodies. Astronomers and lovers call this variety of dark matter the ‘black cat’ who usually prevents you from pursuing your activities on account of her renowned collection of bad omens.

Our relationship with animals is ambiguous – on more than one account. We have always regarded ourselves as the highest animals – the animals situated on the highest rung of universal hierarchies or ladders. We are far superior not only to insects and bugs, but also to the horses, dogs and cats who keep us company, being the most empathetic animals in the world. But we do not care about empathy and often forsake our fellow creatures for the sake of our own pleasures and comfort. Scientists are not so sure we are right when enlarging upon social and intellectual ladders, and they even go so far as to question Darwin’s evolution, the theory according to which we appeared on the Earth in the wake of our inferior brothers and sisters; in the wake of dinosaurs, for example. Darwin said, ‘Dinosaurs paved the ground for humans who needed to inherit the dinosaurs’ grandeur and rapacity to become lords of the flies and other insects.’ I am not sure we would have become the lords of the dinosaurs had we lived in the same day and age.

Well, some theorists present another theory which makes us both inferior and superior to all these animals. The point is we might have been born *before* them instead of following in their footsteps. They – those theorists and archaeologists – found a lot of bones linked to *homo sapiens*, to our race, to our ancestors. And those bones seem to tell another story if not of the Big Bang, at least of what came after this explosion or rather this series of explosions. (Apparently there were lots of big bangs which gave birth to a corresponding number of universes.) We look at these bones and say to ourselves, ‘How old we are! How old we are! How clever we were!’ The last part of this exclamation conveys to everybody the following truth: our ancestors were more intelligent and skilful than their offspring – ourselves. We used to believe that Beethovens could be born in our midst, in our times, more or less, more or less – not 20 million years ago, anyway, anyhow. And we pick up these bones and they look at us, look at us as if to let us know they belonged to Mozart, Bach and Shakespeare. *Their* Mozart, *their* Bach, *their* Shakespeare.

So let us look at my friend once again, which might permit us to see his quasi-death from a different angle. Actually, in spite of many appearances and proofs to the contrary, I have not forgotten my father whose shadow is supposed to lead me through the mazes of the Hereafter. My friend has not budged from where he was lying one hour ago, and consequently he is still lying in the same mud, in dire need of help. I wonder if his body does not point to the weird trend I outlined in the previous paragraph; the anti-trend, the backward trend – going into reverse, so to speak. Scientists say we might pay homage to this trend if something monstrous happens in our cities. For instance, ‘Power lines were blown down and we had a blackout lasting several months.’ For instance, ‘Storms caused power cuts in millions of homes last decade.’ A score of tsunamis swoop down on the world, and men and women start swimming, even if they do not know how to swim. In this case, however, they are *forced* to take swimming lessons in the course of their exploits accompanied by their wills’ heartrending screams, ‘Not to drown, not to drown!’ Their wills are at breaking point; so are their nerves. Sometimes their wills throw in the sponge – a lot of sponges, rather. Yet they continue to shout, adding sometimes, ‘At all costs, at all costs.’ A few instructors succeed in bringing to the surface half-drowned representatives of human species,

and these people, half-drowned, half-human though they are, go on struggling for life. Unfortunately they mostly fail, for life struggles for them no longer.

So what happens under the circumstances? Is it another flood, another 'ad', as the Russians and Nabokov say? (Hell, hell, hell, in another word.) Deprived of luxuries and electricity, human beings begin their descent towards the realm where gorillas and other representatives of inferior species, animals and insects, await them triumphantly: they are aware of what is lying in store for these unfortunate humans. Yes, they are already on all fours, and there is a clear family resemblance between all these brothers and sisters – there is no denying it; although some humans do their utmost to convince themselves they are still human beings and not chimpanzees or gorillas or what not. (Not *who* not, mind you.) Instead of shouting, 'Not to drown!' they murmur nowadays, 'I'm not a gorilla,' or 'I don't belong to *their* world,' or 'I'm human and I'm proud of being a human being because everything is beautiful in the domain where human beings thrive and prosper. You may just walk around, enjoying the fresh air and a few cityscapes. But if you're a human being, everything salutes you and bows to your superiority.'

But the downward drift, drive or propensity does not come to a standstill, contrary to what ingredients of the inferior (human) race expect and hope for. Alas, that is what they are called in this day and age – 'ingredients'. Whenever some of those ingredients come to the fore (for some obscure reason) both chimpanzees and gorillas shout in unison, 'Ingredients, ingredients, ingredients! Down with ingredients!' The way down is infinite. If a former Englishman happens to walk down the street, reading a book by Graham Greene, a former inferior substance (a gorilla) is sure to burst into laughter and say, 'Not intelligent enough to read Proust and Musil, are you?'

My father was looking at the quasi-corpse over which we were both bending in the hope of spotting some life, a particle of life. We saw a lot of particles, red particles, and my father said, 'I don't like the look of his blood. Do you know that blood counts a lot in the Hereafter? Do you know that blood sings the praises of *other* creations, to what seems inaccessible on the Earth? And I think the blood that covers your friend's face and clothes is impure. Of course I'm not prepared to talk in terms of evil and the satanic verses which many of us write without knowing it. What *do* we know about our own unconscious verses, our dreamy, half-distinguishable poems? Our blood collects little satans – the Devil's brood which goes here and there, climbs trees and mountains, drops from them, swims in water, in many waters, holy or not. I, for one, don't think all waters are holy. There's such a thing as unholy water, and those who drink it become quite similar to your friend, I'm sorry to say and realise. I don't think it's high time for him to settle in the Hereafter – he didn't expiate all his sins in this world. And you don't expiate anything in the Hereafter. You don't even expire, you know. You just live, live, live, sometimes going through your former lives, sometimes not going through them or other things, other people's lives. You go backwards and forwards and whatever you do, you have the feeling you don't do anything as if the world were coming to a stop and you knew for sure it is pointless to do anything. You know that, according to quantum leaps, quantum mechanics and quantum quirks, your soul is quantum, unpredictable, and it exists both here and there and probably everywhere. You just point your walking stick at an object or a subject and say, "This is my soul," and everybody believes you unless everybody is already drunk. You set out on a round-the-world cruise; at least that's what you think. Actually you just walk along a wall, a huge wall that reminds you of both the

Great Wall of China and the Berlin Wall, and while walking along it, you ask yourself the following questions, “Which wall is longer? Which wall is higher? Which wall is thicker? Which wall is thinner? Could I walk through this wall? Is it thin enough to allow me to walk through it? Is it thick enough to kill me on the spot? Is the spot I’m talking about thick or thin? Could I say through thick and thin, when talking about this spot? Am I allowed to jump? Am I allowed to break records?” The other day I glimpsed a ruined abbey from the windows of the train I had boarded somewhere, once upon a time. I wonder if our present world doesn’t look like this abbey; or any other ruined abbey. If you devote enough time to your thinking process, you often think about ruined abbeys, and you’re also likely to ask yourself a multitude of questions linked to your life in these abbeys which seem to correspond to your views, attitudes, doctrines and moods. I think your friend’s abundant flow of blood corresponds to this vision, to the ruined abbey I glimpsed from the windows of the train or bus I had boarded in days of yore. I wonder, however, if it hadn’t been a grain I was travelling in. You can journey in a grain of sand, especially if the purpose of your journey is the world. Blood flows through the world, even if the world does not need its flow, its vitamins. But blood is a pillar of society and if we inadvertently touch this pillar everything collapses. You have to ensure that the blood you rely upon for the future of mankind flows through this time, its tune, not through another tube you can see in the distance. We are duty-bound to preserve the flow of blood through our veins, through the veins of the world. In civilised countries you often see a number of people who seem to caress branches, tubes and twigs as they happen to walk along. That’s what they call “ecology” or “harmony” or “eternity”. Now and then you can even read these words flying over trees, parks, humans – right in front of the stars. So, for all the changes and books devoted to them, we can feel something permanent on which we can rely, instead of shivering with fear, cold and disgust. Blood speaks louder than water. Blood says, “My flow is so beautiful as to exclude any ugly interference, any gesture not concordant with my overall, cosmic beauty. Who would dare murder the Milky Way? And I am the Milky Way – in disguise. I am the Bloody Way, if you must know.” There is a pivot in human life and also in human society, and in this case, in the latter case, it is called “the pillar of society” about which Ibsen spoke rather eloquently in his eponymous play. (Not everybody knows this play by heart, I’m afraid.) It is a line you follow, even if you’re very fond of zigzags, which might happen even in the lives of those who are addicted neither to whisky nor to drugs. There’s something inside your body – or soul, if you prefer – and you always coordinate your behaviour with this axes, with Mount Meru. (There are people who call it “Mount Mary”, but that’s not the point.) And many of us deviate from this centre, pivot or pillar, especially when you encounter drugs – not in your own, private life; God forbid. God forbids many things, but God has many things to do and He cannot watch all your movements and gestures; those that pick up drugs, for instance. Nor does He always control your consumption of alcohol and so you drink the whole glassful of vodka, without noticing any resistance to your gesture and consumption. What kind of gesture could you encounter in the course of this so-called ritual? A hand descends from heaven or some ceiling or other, and you are prevented from drinking whatever you find within your field of vision or action. Is this the pivot I’m talking about on this occasion? Well, a pivot descends upon you from a ceiling and you forget almost everything – or everything – about the glass you were prepared to empty in one gulp; in one fell swoop, so to speak. And what if it doesn’t? You drink a few glasses of vodka in one fell swoop. Then you fall on the ground, in one fell swoop, and you probably swoon or faint or sing rather intimately your swansong. Your friend is silent, though. Whenever we broach the topic “underground”, we think about metro stations and diamonds, but intellectuals always think in terms of writers and their readers, of those who have to work and enjoy our life in

the shadow of life, as it were, being constantly within the shadow or the dark of their underground existences. You write a book, finish it and dare insert it into one of the holes you see above your head in the hope of finding a reader. You do your utmost to draw your virtual reader's attention to the book you've just finished. You move your hand that clutches your book and consequently the book reminds an unbiased observer of a tree submitted to the will of the wind. The reader whose attention you captured in the course of your unremitting labours touches the book, reads the title and decides to take it, for some obscure reason. (Reasons are often obscure if no money is involved, in some way or other.) The reader peruses a few pages and puts the book where it belongs: your hand, your own substance that cannot communicate with other substances, according to this unfortunate experience. You begin to shout, doing your best to attract whatever or whoever you can attract by means of your screams and other manifestations of your impatience and ambitions. You shout, "This is my book where you'll find not only my life, but also an exhaustive description of whatever has ever occurred in the history of what we call our planet or humanity! Aren't you interested in our own history? Don't you wish to know who you are?"

PART TWO

A WORM

Have I ever heard about how an animal eats his brother or sister or both? I must have heard about it many times in the course of my life on earth where only wolves do not eat each other. I wonder if ants eat other ants and I am prepared to spend a few hours in front of an anthill, anxious to find out if my presentiment corresponds to anything real – to an ant dismembering another ant under my very eyes. Even if one limb drops off the body under attack I shall be satisfied, although I am not interested in ants as such. I was not surprised to learn the Chinese frequently eat ants – they are renowned for their unusual tastes in the domain of food and many other domains – but I am keen neither on ants nor on their hills; on their mountains, as some of us call them.

What or who am I keen on? Whenever this question is asked – it is actually never asked, for want of interlocutors – I might answer: 'Myself, on myself.' Logic leads us from one subject to another; so does causality or causal relationships. Is there a causal relationship between violence on television and violent behaviour? they ask, whereupon many of them begin to nod their heads. And even if they do not deign to disturb their heads, their faces express their approval of the link tentatively emphasised by the above question. And what about my question; and about my answer: 'Myself'? Do I mean to say I am about to eat a part of my body, for the whole discussion hinges upon eating and *Sein*, be it he or she or an ant or myself? What is the difference between an ant and myself? Of course I am much bigger than an ordinary ant. But there are other differences as well. I have already pointed out that I am not in love with anthills, although I adore and almost worship mountains, especially those you come across or drive across in Switzerland. Well, to tell the truth, I have nothing against anthills as such. What I do object to is the community they hide, harbour and look after; to some extent. How on earth can all these people – we are all equals, ants, humans – live in such a monstrous communal flat? Their fundamental promiscuity appals me beyond measure, and if one day I find another measure beyond this measure (with the aid of the principle 'measure for measure') I shall say again: 'Beyond measure, beyond measure,' erecting thereby a monument to infinity.

What does all this amount to? To my declaration that I am not in favour of collective work; and anthills (ants themselves) are just symbols of collectivism, of collective farms. They are collective farmers, all of them, however far-fetched this affirmation may appear at first glance. But if you happen to isolate one ant by extracting him or her from his or her habitat, you may even fall in love with him as if she were your domestic animal. You may spend hours and hours in his or her company, watching him or her as he or she climbs your ladders or cupboards. Even a horizontal movement executed by your ant may fill you with pride, admiration and envy. (Filled to the brim with envy, as they say sometimes about Iago, among other individuals.) Yes, you envy this microscopic creature his or her ability to move forward without falling every two seconds; or every two minutes – it does not really matter. What counts is not to fall at all, which is a feat situated beyond your comprehension and feeble capacities. Besides, this ant of yours seems so elegant, so light-hearted, that you realise at once he has no fear of death about which this miniscule creature knows next to nothing; or just nothing without any next. The only next you can find in the neighbourhood of any self-respecting 'nothing' – its self-respect is emphasised by inverted commas – is another nothing. Nothing, nothing, nothing, nothing, nothing; in the same words. But this succession does not mean you train yourself assiduously for a Kierkegaardian leap which happens to be one of my leitmotifs. You cannot help leaping from time to time and it is better to leap in this fashion; at least that is how I understand the expression 'to be on the safe side'. Or 'in the safe hands'. Or 'as safe as houses'.

Why should you think in terms of ants? Your terms can include dinosaurs whose strength is far superior to that of ants; and even your ant, whatever her status, would be unable to withstand the onslaught of a dinosaur. I can bet my bottom euro on it. But your aunt is dead; and so are the dinosaurs you are talking about as if you could not just switch to another subject or object – more fruitful in the context of the discussion you are taking part in; often without knowing it. There are other elements in the sphere of your disgust, and at this point I might point out you are not after ants as such: you have loftier goals and lower moles – in case you need to go under the earth and water and what not; in case you are approached and almost attacked by a superior animal whose capacities and aims include your utter destruction. Let us suppose the destruction we are talking about is not really complete: it is partial, to put it mildly. But what is this ‘mild’, you wonder? To what ‘mild’ are you subjected this time? Well, they detach one thought from your brain, one member from your body. So you wobble along without some of your members and thoughts. You wobble around with a number of your numbers and modes. So what? What could you put to (your) advantage, when tinkering with your heritage, with your personal gift of God? You could withdraw one member, one number from it; nothing else, not much. What could you do with this number? You could put it in a number of equations of which you know nothing, as usual. Of course you could not really *put* it in the *midst* of them, of those equations. You just put them side by side. Someone comes and you say to this someone, ‘I’d like to put my number in the midst of these equations.’

‘What kind of equations are you talking about?’ asks this someone.

‘Aren’t they equations, the things I see over there?’

‘They are, they are. So what?’

‘I’d like to put my number in the midst of them.’

‘What for?’

‘I’d like to belong to them. I belong *in* them, you know.’

‘How do you know you belong *in* them?’

‘I have this feeling. And I can’t do anything about that, about this feeling.’

‘Please, do *something* about it. It is most inconvenient.’

So you try your best to do something about this feeling, and very soon you realise you are unable to do much about it. This feeling persists in spite of your efforts. You are not sure that, on this occasion, you are mustering *all* your efforts and not just *some* of them. Well, you feel out of sorts, out of all modes and substances you can lay your hands and thoughts on as you continue to live your life in a communal flat or elsewhere – just nowhere, from time to time.

I read somewhere about ogres who eat themselves instead of just getting rid of their limbs and sinews by means of meditation. Usually this meditation takes the following form. You sit down on a cushion and say to yourself: ‘This member of mine does nothing special. Others drink wine and eat to their stomachs’ content, while I sit on this cushion and ask myself the traditional question: “Which limb of mine should I submit today to Ockham’s razor and its torture?” There are individuals who eat their fingernails, and we can see them everywhere: in a train, under the wheels of a vehicle they do their best to repair. A number of nails or rather fingernails stick out of their mouths and slowly but surely disappear, for those people are hungry and have nothing else at their disposal, not even a grain of sand. At least that is how they explain their predicament and the bad habit they contracted in their childhood. Actually this is the first step on the road that leads you to self-devouring, the method I am about to advocate for the sake of my personal salvation. This process ensures your

safety in any situation, be it a war, a blockade of your native city or just lack of money. You wake up and realise you are hungry. You experience the feeling of hunger which is quite superior to what you faced only yesterday. And yesterday you sought your revolver with the intention of putting an end to your miserable life whose deprivations deprive you not only of food and other goods, but also of your *élan vital*, of your vital momentum. You have a variety of momentums at your disposal; yet only some of them are vital, so that now you take a walk in the ninth heaven and now you begin to dig your own tomb, for the momentum you are subjected to is called a 'deadly momentum'.

Well, you sit on the same cushion and say to yourself: 'It is time I began this self-devouring process I've been discussing with myself for some time. Let me recapitulate. Why should I eat myself? In the first place I'm chronically hungry. Doctors say it's a chronic fatigue syndrome, but I disagree with them, saying, "I'm just hungry. If you hand me my clothes and take me to a restaurant I'll be back on my feet in no time at all." But they answer me thus: "We've already sold your clothes because we honestly think you'll never be able to put them on again. You suffer from an incurable disease to which all your members or limbs are succumbing, one by one. Soon you won't be capable of leaving your bed, determined to proceed with your morning-scheduled ablutions. These rituals are all over. Done with, done with, done with." That is how your doctors and nurses talk to you, and you thank them as you look at your sheets, blanket and the same cushion. You still touch the cushion we talked about some time ago. Nothing changes in the world. That is the remark you hear as you raise your eyes and ponder your next move. But why should you ponder this move? Now you know that nothing changes in the world, whatever you might do. And someone even reminds you of Parmenides who epically said that there is no anti-one in the world. There is only 'One' written with a capital 'O', and that 'O' pursues you everywhere, even if you fly to the moon. You fly to the moon, you approach it supersonically, but your glance continues to capture the same 'O' as if there were no other letters in the alphabet. You know for sure there is such a thing as the letter 'n', otherwise you would not be able to utter the word 'One' in the course of your lectures on Parmenides and his philosophy. And consequently there is also the letter 'e' and equally the letters you find when exploring the name of Parmenides linguistically. Of course, when delivering your lectures, you do not have to say where all this comes from: you do not *always* speak about origins, do you?

You are still on the same cushion and so you can give a thought to your discomfiture; a thought, two thoughts. You are obviously the 'One' they (Parmenidesians) are always talking about. If you wish to eat something, for the sake of your countenance and sustenance, you must dissuade yourself on the grounds that nothing else has ever existed either around you or above your head. Any sandwich would be a negation of the 'One' and you negate this negation, to start with. And you also finish with this negation so that the whole formula looks thus: 'No, no, no, no, no.' 'Are you a Russian?' they ask you. (They do not exist either.) 'Why do you ask me this stupid question?' you ask those who still do not exist, those non-existent beings. 'Because you remind us of Mr Niet, the former Soviet foreign minister.' Even in the 27th century they will still remember him, I bet. For the sake of the argument, *natürlich*.

But you cannot negate a morsel of meat you see before your very eyes. Even your eyes seem on the point of devouring this piece, without waiting for the proper instruments of the human body designed for this task. So your eyes begin their job and devour a part of what they see in front of them. If you take the trouble to look at yourself in a mirror, you will see how some bits of meat disappear within your sockets as if you needed to prove to them their very existence. Of course you ask them why they engage in such a procedure; after all, they see

whatever they want to see. And they answer, understandably enough, that they want *to feel* what they see, for without feelings the world looks obnoxious and sterile. So you continue to watch the process during which some portions of meat disappear within your sockets and body as if there were no other way for them to disappear, to die.

All this seems rather nebulous, and my wish to eat my own body in order to pass into myself, to know myself, thyself, yourself, she-self, he-wolf is as virginal as it was at the outset of the whole operation. The point is I have no idea how to eat myself in order to remember what I have stored in my lungs, heart and elsewhere in the course of my life. I know that my body knows a lot – much more than what is allotted to my brain. But how to get access to this part of my knowledge of myself and the world where I eat? Whenever I look at myself in a mirror, I realise I look at my own knowledge where both Parmenides and Heraclitus are stored, side by side. And I also find a few Russian landscapes in this vision or collision or harmony: for the moment I have no idea what I am dealing with. What you cannot deny boils down to your desire to appropriate whatever belongs to you, and unfortunately I don't know what kind of appropriation can be envisaged in this connection. Of course you can say to anybody, 'I have every right to eat my own body, and nobody can interfere with this process of mine. But how do you envisage this process of self-consumption, self-consummation? You cannot just bite your nails in the hope that they will connect you to the rest of your body, slavishly prepared for consummation. What should be done is a big question and at this point you had better look at Francis Bacon's paintings, at *his* way of dealing with numerous crucifixes, among other things. (Can you write 'among other things' in the neighbourhood of some crucifixes? There are no other things in such neighbourhoods, apart from the body of Christ.)

Look at his *Crucifixions*, at Francis Bacon's *Crucifixions*. You are under the impression that the meat detaches itself from bones (probably under the influence of the sun) and begins to sink, to subside, so that you can eat it without fearing the resistance of the Cross. There are dogs under the Cross, but you chase these dogs with your cudgel and eat the flesh descending to you from the Cross. At this point you should not get bogged down in the problem known as Who is Who. What would you eat if you were able to take a bite out of Adam's apple? They often confuse Jesus Christ with Adam. The worshippers of the former eat the Cross; or whatever comes from it or descends from it. That is what they call, 'The Descent from the Cross,' and according to William Blake or rather to Francis Bacon, what really descends from the cross is not a relic: just a piece of meat. The sun of Jerusalem is too hot; the human flesh succumbs to the temptation and becomes the primeval element. Westerners say, 'Water.' The Ukrainians say, 'Fat.'

You look at a *Crucifixion*, for hours on end or for hours on no end. What do you see? You see a tiny amount of meat, according to contemporary explorers (Egon Schiele, Francis Bacon) of this eternal enigma. And then the enigma begins to dislocate our minds as if everything were called into question; every piece of meat, that is. Where do they go, all these pieces of meat? They cannot stay on their crucifix: in harmony with the atmospheric conditions, the elements hanging on crosses dissolve into tears or laughter. They either defy their condition or deplore it, which seems rather natural in the context of undemocratic countries. Usually, at the root of the Cross which is both the Tree of Life and the Tree of Death, there is a pack of hounds. They wait for the same meat as if there was no difference between your hunger and theirs; as if the spiritual dimension was discarded once and for all. Yet the meat you are waiting for contains a lot of wisdom, pity, empathy and promises among which you find the most prominent promise of all – that of our resurrection. So if they resume their eternal talk about Parmenides, you can say you are not interested in the absence of others because they also

participate in the aforementioned resurrection, otherwise nothing makes sense, nothing at all. Even sense itself makes no sense – under the circumstances. The circumstances under discussion are so nonsensical that no sense can ever take refuge under this cover, roof or notion.

If you eat just for the sake of eating, if every morsel you consume under any circumstances does not belong to Christ's body and soul, you eat in vain; and your veins receive no blood from the food you swallow almost automatically, mechanically, thoughtlessly. You don't even say to yourself that what you eat is succulent or disgusting; unless it is really disgusting to the point of making you sick. Otherwise you do not feel anything in particular. You eat, go to bed, fall asleep, dream, wake, rise and greet yet another breakfast by saying, 'Hello my wonderful, health-begetting meal. I hope I'll live until the end of eternity after consuming your beneficent ingredients, your organic gifts of nature. No, you cannot join the chorus in which so many philosophers have taken part since Parmenides' death. They say he denied every right to every object or subject he came across because only the One meant something to him; somebody to him and his followers. Whenever he saw a couple, a married couple, or a couple of friends, he would imperatively, with a number of imperial gestures, imperial accompaniments declare: 'They don't exist, these impostors,' whereupon they would disappear, almost obediently, as if subjugated by his order. That is why they called him a shaman. They said he used to sit by a bonfire which prompted him to utter many formulas, equations and incantations such as: 'Aleteia, alemeia, alleluia.' And people who might have gathered in front of his lotus-embellished body would disappear as if at the last stroke of midnight; like Cinderella or someone else. Sometimes onlookers wondered who had really disappeared from their field of vision. They asked each other, 'Who did he whisk away this time? Cinderella, her stepmother, her sisters?' 'What does it matter!' (The answer they heard.) Everybody disappeared on a regular basis, within the same space-time; or within the same space of time.

Parmenides' poem – he was really a poet and he has always been ranked among the greatest poets of our times and spaces – reached us almost in its entirety. We know how it starts and why it gets under way instead of staying where it *might* have felt comfortable throughout eternity, without getting involved in all sorts of controversies and fruitless discussions, symposiums. The poem *might* have sounded thus:

O Goddess! Can you hear me?
 If you do hear me, give me a sign, I beg of you.
 Can you hear my begging, the beginning
 Of my poem?

And the divinity answered as follows, 'I'd rather hear its end. I'm fed up with philosophers who hanker for truth. Don't you ever have a hankering for a different lifestyle?'

There is no point in trying to find out why I write this or that because whatever you write or think comes from heaven; or from earth, and this time there is no difference between them, heaven and earth as if their marriage had been accomplished at last. So you hang yourself on a cross and every cross is a cross in its own right. You can say, in the final analysis, that only one cross adorns human history; and you hang yourself on this cross. Let us not talk, on this occasion, about imitations of all kinds; anyway, we always imitate something and identify

with someone, whoever this one can be or can turn out to be, in the long run. Well, you are hanging on the cross in expectation of a delicious meal made up of your own ingredients, of the meat trickling from your bones under the influence of the sun, of some temperature or other. But this temperature is certainly not on the low side, according to numerous commentators. Why should you consume your own body, your tissues, organs and diseases? Because it is the only way to survive, to outlast yourself, to become yourself – doubly, so to speak, if you feed on your own substance. (Many anti-scholastics call this phenomenon ‘nonsense’.) Let us analyse this process more closely, under a microscope, as the saying goes.

You read a lot during your lifetime and this knowledge nourishes your body – and your sinews, as I usually add, probably because I know the word ‘sinews’; what is more, I like it, its sinuosity. Your whole existence has been materialised, and your body you partake of – as they used to say in the middle of the 20th century – supplies you with all these pieces of information. As if, on the brink of a sudden death, you were living through your whole existence again; but not in the fraction of a second, contrary to what happens when you drown in some sea or other. Some episodes come to the fore and you see everything so clearly you begin to question yourself on the subject; on the subject of clarity, obscurity, life and death. You ask yourself whether life is not really death, and vice versa. Or versa vice, or versa versa, or vice or vice. But instead of watching a scene from my childhood I suddenly remember or rather reinvent the beginning of Parmenides’ poem. And, frankly speaking, I know almost nothing about this poem, partially on account of my complete ignorance of ancient Greek. Isn’t my mother far more precious than the beginning of this wretched poem? Is that what involuntary memory teaches us throughout our lives, former and future?

You wonder what happens in the course of your life; or during your lifetime. You see something, read something, and then you set about digesting this material, either material or spiritual; as the case may be. Sometimes they call this process or procedure a ‘commentary’. Yes, under the influence of the Talmud you are likely to call this phenomenon (one of my key-terms) a commentary. Well, if they ask you why you are bent on eating your own body you may answer, ‘Know thyself. And that’s the only way to know thyself thoroughly, not just from the outside.’ But to digest something, you have to eat this something first, even if there is no dinner table within your field of vision and action. But if you fall prey to your memories, acquisitions, pieces of knowledge or ignorance, you are likely to go through the whole spectrum of algorithms. In other words, you are bound to encounter not only Parmenides, but also Empedocles, Anaxagoras and other Greeks to whom you owe a lot, in spite of your utter ignorance of their mother tongue. We are locked (or double-locked) in the prison of algorithms, and it is enough to read some interior monologues – not necessarily of Joycean origin – to realise to what extent we rely on this nonsense, on these unparalleled parallels which mean nothing outside a narrow compass, a compact compass. (Not a compact cosmos, mind you.)

Meanwhile I seem to be accompanied and even cared for by the divinity I found one day in Parmenides’ poem which has been preserved only for the sake of my immortality, it goes without saying. Otherwise I would not have dedicated a single line to this creature about whom some philosophers of yore wrote with rapture as if they had obtained knowledge through her airy interference. (All such interferences are airy and unreliable, I’m sorry to say.) But let us go further or climb, climb, climb, given that we are still hanging on the cross I partly described somewhere, probably in this particular treatise. Anyway, there are so many crosses in the history of humankind that you can pick and choose for hours. According to Gilles Deleuze who is still within my reach, thanks to my computer (just another cross I bear rather patiently), first and foremost you have to establish, set up

and exhibit to the world, whatever it is, a diagram which is the most reliable tool in your struggle with chaos. You open your eyes, yawn and say several times in a row: 'Chaos, chaos, chaos, chaos.' Now and then you add the adjective primeval or primordial to this word which you picked and chose from some dictionary or other.

Suddenly, on the spur of the moment, you decide not to choose or pick any longer; anything, anywhere. You have an urge to pick something, and you struggle with yourself, for you know for sure that choosing anything breeds anathemas and broils. But, in your modest opinion, you have to choose *something* instead of lying down and doing *nothing*, which might lead to your untimely death. So you hang yourself on a cross or just on a mast that seems to be part and parcel of a yacht, and begin to choose your salvation, your private, personal salvation. (Every salvation is personal, private and proper.) Then you pick up whatever you wish with a view to finding your eternal rest; and this spot happens to be situated on the floor of your kitchen. Then, little by little, you change your mind and begin the process of choosing. Yes, you are allowed to choose or to pick – such is the decree of God. First you pick, then you choose, and you never regret your second choice, namely your choosing. You are a beggar and then you choose, you dare to choose. Isn't this the most wonderful demonstration of your freedom of spirit, of your liberty of mind, of its scope and spiritual power? And then you hear the voice of your divinity, of the one who seems to have kept you company since your encounter with Parmenides or Heraclitus. If it is a river your mental eye conveys to your mind, you opt for Heraclitus, even if you are unable to swim in his rivers, for all your gymnastic exploits. You cannot swim, but you understand without making any effort either with your brain or within your mind or within your memory, that nothing repeats itself; nothing except the eternal recurrence at which you have always been aiming; ever since your childhood, one might say. And one does say that because it is the same One we are dealing with, the One inherited from Parmenides and probably from Bradley. But let us eat a lot of books before making momentous pronouncements. Let us stick to the part of our tale which allows us to pick and choose instead of making us decide something once and forever. You decide something forever (you can also decide *someone* once for all; by killing him or her).

So you pick and choose, you pick and choose; and you have no idea whether you are hanging from a tree or sitting on a cross, on the top of it. You watch your meat and sinews trickle or even drip from where you must have ensconced yourself some time ago. Then you remove a few nails from your body, get down and eat the trickle. And if they ask you, 'What trickle are you talking about?' you answer unabashedly, 'A trickle of melted butter made its way down his chin. So he licked the butter. So do I. You know, there's a dish called "Butter Chicken", if I'm not mistaken. Suppose there's such a thing and being as a butter man.'

So you receive a lot of information; in the course of the same lifetime that seems to belong to you, to you alone. This information, its pieces, come from right and left – from communists, now and then – and also from the ceiling, which allows the Russians to say to their fellow-citizens: 'Where does it come from, the information you've just voiced? From the ceiling?' The point is this information may leave us at once, without any further notice as if these manifold, numberless notices were in the habit of disappearing once in a while, without leaving any trace, any vestige, however minuscule and misleading. Human life is full of mysteries, but we are determined to unravel all those knots we come across everywhere. Some of them are Gordian Knots – that is why we always carry a pair of axes in our bags – some of them are not. We look at them once, twice and then say to ourselves: 'This knot isn't Gordian, far from it,' and we put our axe back, in our bag. In short, we are supposed to digest all this information. Let us not forget that our teeth are also axes in their own right and so the chunks of information we found in our mouth undergo the same treatment – as if they were genuine Gordian knots. And most interior

monologues lead us astray, for they remind us of Alexander the Great instead of helping us resolve a philosophical dilemma. And any philosophical dilemma is more important than drunken Alexander who is about to kill yet another friend of his, his invincible warrior.

Of course our digestive process has nothing to do with the readers who digest *Anna Karenina* as they consume a cup of coffee. At some point they are likely to begin to cough, saying in between their respiratory problems, 'This particular morsel has gone down the wrong way. Do you know that Anna Karenina died? She was rather young, according to my calculation.' No, our digestive process caresses Anna, makes love to her first at a distance and then on a train; and finally in our bed, our own bed. No need to seek refuge in a hotel where you often face an invasion of mice, if not of rats. I remember reading *Anna Karenina* in a Soviet hotel, in Siberia. I bravely defended her from those potential rapists. I was young at the time, but I am sure that one category of readers – those who identify with heroes and heroines – often defend themselves and their beloveds from rats and flies, let alone from cockroaches.

Anna Karenina is far away and it is Empedocles I impersonate to the best of my abilities. In the days when everybody speaks about Ukraine and her war with Russia, the best refuge one can find on our Mother Earth is a volcano. You identify with Empedocles, jump into the nearest crater and shout at the top of your voice, 'Don't come closer! Don't come closer! Don't you remember what happened to Pompeii? There are other volcanoes, you know. And I am one of them. I am the volcano that isn't described in the book entitled *Under the Volcano*. I am the One whose mouth sends a multitude of rivers of fire – into the air, into the air. The whole Earth will be engulfed in my ashes, but I won't die. I shan't! I'll live alone in the universe, after my death. And I'll continue to smoke my cigar, and no smoker-hater will ever interpose between my cigar and my lungs.'

'As when a man, thinking to go out through the wintry night, makes ready a light, a flame of blazing fire, putting round it a lantern to keep away all manner of winds –' This is the first piece of information I had to digest while sitting and dreaming on my cross. You go from one fire to another fire, and there is no need to have a great quantity of fires in your bag: they all amount to the same, all these fires. They mount, mount, mount and your eyes and spirit end up seeing only one fire in the sky and everywhere else – in your outer volcano, in your inner volcano, on your dinner table; in the shape of a candle, if you please. That is a candlelit dinner for you! And life is a succession of wintry nights and only the lantern you put round your fire protects your flame and your thoughts from foreign visitors. They are aliens, all of them aliens, and your flame, your volcano keeps them away. Now they are under your volcano and you put a lot of ashes on them. As if adding a few grains of salt to your dish.

How to keep away all manner of winds? Logos is also a manner of wind, especially when it issues from a mouth; and there are so many mouths around that it is a real hurricane we have to face as if our faces were hurricane-proof. They are neither hurricane-proof nor future-proof. Today you have a face to speak of. I mean, you have a face about which someone might say, 'It's a face I see in front of me.' Of course all these people often add, 'If I'm not mistaken;' and yet it is unmistakably your face you look at whenever you take the trouble to look at yourself in a mirror or to bend over a lake. But this face of yours is not bullet-proof, and that is why you see so many blood-saturated faces on your television screen, on your computer screen. The same goes for another proof I touched upon in this paragraph, in its first part. Your face is not a future-proof object and in this respect I can tell you a story about a Soviet actress whose beauty was for years a good starting point for many discussions. At the end of her life, of her career, she realised that her face had stood the test of time and

consequently she could still hope to take part in some film or other – preferably in a film devotedly shot by her beloved husband. But her hands left a lot to be desired. She could not ask her favourite surgeon to put another pair of hands on the hands she kept as if they were her keepsake. In other words, she was powerless in the domain they call ‘getting rid of wrinkles and unwanted members of your body’. Yes, she was prepared to say farewell to her hands, for the sake of a young promising star (herself), a beautiful Cinderella. (Cinderellas are not *always* beautiful, but they are always young and kind.) In short, she would put on a pair of gloves, whenever a camera got within shooting distance. (Her hands, a camera, the shooting of her latest film.) She also went so far as to ask one of her young nieces to lend her the pair of hands she had owned ever since her birth. But the film was a total flop – to such a point that many of her colleagues (of this woman’s former colleagues) would say half-jokingly, half-seriously, whenever she happened to be within hearing distance, ‘Flop, flop, flop, flop’ – in a Russian translation. They also made a lot of gestures that corresponded somehow to this translation, to the Russian imitation of the word ‘flop’. As a result, the actress found herself in a hospital. So did her husband, a famous film director: he also found her in a hospital, in the same hospital. ‘Too late,’ she said and died. ‘I hope she said, “The rest is silence,”’ said one of her worshippers.

So your face is not hurricane-proof, for all its beauty. And the recent conflict I watched assiduously on my computer screen gave rise to such a hurricane that all sorts of embassies and ambassadors left Kiev for the sake of Lvov, their favourite refugee camp. So many faces wilted in the heat of the discussions unfolding in the United States, all over Europe, all over the rest of the world! They talked and talked about the forthcoming Russian aggression, the invasion. Russia versus Ukraine. Ukrainian children carried out their gymnastic displays underground, while their parents and grandparents spent their time in queues, queuing for sugar, vodka and cigarettes. Politicians, journalists and generally speaking all those who had at least one mouth talked about dates, hours before repeating once again the word ‘invasion’. Stock exchanges were rightly compared to a yo-yo so that, in those days, one could distinctly hear – and hearing distances were literally everywhere – the following dialogue:

‘Yo, Mickie! How’s things?’

‘Yo, yo,’ answered Mickie.

‘Which part of yo prevails right now?’

‘The first yo.’

‘So I’ll buy the second one. Bye-bye.’

One group of people – and they are people, not animals, not insects – think the war is inevitable, ineluctable. Another group voices its or their grievances because, according to them or it, or him, or her – the war is evitable and even electable. One individual says, ‘The war will start at 4 a. m. and many other individuals sit up in their beds instead of going to sleep, slipping into sleep and bitter-sweet dreams. (It is as if those dreams were seasoned to taste either sweet or bitter or both.) So they wait and wait, while others sleep and see a lot of dreams devoid of wars and brimful with peaceful episodes during which many people kiss each other, hug each other. And even bears do the same so as not to be distanced, outsmarted by humans. The first individuals listen to their clocks and computers, and now and then they are rewarded by sounds of bells which, however, do not announce the approach of tanks and other instruments of doom. Doom seems to be asleep as if it could not accept the behaviour of those who sacrifice their dreams for the sake of fear, dread and imaginary death. (Death is never imaginary. And the war is on.) Then you hear a pram and a pushchair; neither of them sounds like a tank or a

bomber. The participants, the members of the club called ‘waiting for bombs’, keep on repeating the following phrase, ‘The invasion on land was supported by bombers in the air.’ They know that the land invasion was programmed some time ago. A number of American computers realised (all of a sudden) that they had been tuned to IUBCFSDSTY – the sound of invasion, war and utter destruction. All built-in radios are still tuned to this station and consequently the whole city of Kiev is at action stations for the Russian invasion. As they say now, ‘I’ve nothing against the Russians, but I don’t like their president.’ As for myself, I might say (and I do say exactly that) that I like the Ukrainians whose most magnificent present, Nikolay Vassilievich Gogol, keeps me company through thick and thin. But I do not care for the fortune tellers to whom they listen now and then and also all the time. These fortune tellers look in the direction of Russia, point their canes in the same direction and say or vociferate, ‘Sanctions, sanctions, sanctions! Such are Russian fortunes or rather misfortunes. Today we’re misfortune tellers, you know.’

Je ne suis pas assez mûr pour le trépas. You listen to fortune tellers and then you switch your program on. We are all computers, aren’t we? According to them, to another language, and this action or station is tantamount to the urgent, ‘Give me a break!’ Plea, plea, plea, plea – that is what you hear in the midst of those who wait for the Russians in the streets of Kiev. First you hear the word ‘plea’ which denotes their states of minds, and then you hear the contents of the plea, ‘Please, give us a break, give us a break, give us a break! We’ve got another business to attend to. We’d like to cook a wonderful dinner with a lot of fat instead of waiting for the Russians, their tanks, their planes and the materialisation of their plans. American generals, presenters and ministers look around and say to themselves and to each other, ‘Have you seen the break? I wonder where I put it and when. When did it all begin, my dear colleagues and friends? Why?’ Because of the Russians, because of the Russians, because of the Russian army. Shortly afterwards, a huge echo takes over and you hear over and over again, ‘Army, because, invasion, tomorrow, at 3 a. m., m, m, m, m...’

The break is nowhere to be seen. As for the echo, it flies towards the Carpathians, bounds off a multitude of mountains and initiates re-entry into the atmosphere of fear. And once again the individuals hear, ‘Army, army, mummy, my baby, *aïe, aïe, aïe*, sanctions, actions, functions, Kalashnikovs.’ And once again the voluntary memory offers an outlet, for want of a real break; a great, all-appeasing break. ‘In Empedocles, what enters from outside, alien to the body in which it finds itself, is the *daimon*. It is there as a punishment for following the ways of Strife, and to earn its release it must turn, like the blessed ones of an earlier age, to the worship and service of Aphrodite or Love.’

The Russian army. Its onslaught on Kiev and other cities protected by Europe and the United States suddenly reversed the judgement of American specialists, their verdict, so to speak, and began an honourable retreat into some distant corners of their (the Russians’) native land.

One wonders where Aphrodite swims nowadays, being always on the threshold of a new incarnation, of yet another appearance from the ocean or foam or whatever. After all, Botticelli might have been wrong. (Actually I don’t remember whether there is some *foam* in his famous picture.) I think this episode dates back to the 19th century and at the time it was situated in Bavaria, in one of its beer gardens. A beer drinker raised his tankard, looked at it attentively and finally said, ‘I hope that from this froth another Aphrodite will emerge with the intention of harmonising and beautifying my life.’ The story does not tell us whether any Aphrodite made her

appearance in the course of the night, but one thing is certain: this Aphrodite is no longer in our midst and therefore the Russian battalions were in no way influenced by her legs and breasts. But Empedocles also speaks of the *daimonion* or demon or Socrates' infatuation with his own doppelgänger. What about this creature's identity in the context of the war we are talking about?

Well, at some point the Russians annexed the Crimea and some regions where the Russian language was more popular than its Ukrainian counterpart. Its history or their histories – these counterparts' history – is too intricate and so the right time for their treatment has not come yet. What's more, I am not sure it will ever come, at least within the scope of this book. The British Minister of Foreign Affairs said at some point, 'I'm not interested in the past. I'm exclusively interested in the present.' This statement contradicts so many points of views (so many views, so many points) that for once I do not feel duty-bound to enlarge upon the mysteries we are confronted with in our daily lives. And also in our eternal life, within the infinite series of our incarnations. After all, Aphrodite is not the only person whose propensity for rebirth is well known and abundantly commented upon.

All those who are well-versed in the lore called 'mythology' cannot help thinking about Aphrodite, whenever a beautiful woman crops up within their field of vision. And even their fields of vision – although not quite detached from the rest of their bodies – say to themselves, 'My goodness! Just another Aphrodite! I wonder how many of them are still hiding in the depth of our seas, at their bottoms.' We are irresistibly and irritably (to some extent) drawn towards these visions and bodies because our sense of beauty is first and foremost connected to humans; often to the detriment of trees and animals. Pity, pity, pity: there are trees whose beauty is much more attractive, magnificent and lofty than any noses 'adorning' human faces. Of course Gogol's *The Nose* is on a par with any branch, however beautiful and suggestive, but we should not forget that, on this occasion, we are dealing with a literary masterpiece, not with a human being as such. And these as-such beings are full of flaws, even if we take an oath of allegiance and loyalty to them; to all humans beings and their members, organs and what not. This oath induces us to overlook human flaws, defects and overall ugliness – they *are* ugly, in comparison with cats and trees – and often you hear something along these lines, 'What a beautiful lady. She must be death in disguise.' (Some humans still recall John Keats' exemplary poem.) You interrupt your walk, turn your head and cast a glance at the lady in question. Slowly but surely you begin to question the remark you imprudently overheard. Once again you realise to what extent (or pitch) these humans are stupid, blind and devoid of any aesthetic judgement. Your day with all its expected enjoyments is spoiled forever; until midnight at least. You say to yourself that the meal you are supposed to have in someone's company will be dull; another instance of what is rightly called 'our waste of time'. You shake someone's hand and once again you get the feeling that this hand deserves neither its name nor your touch. And once again you remember either your cat or your dog or a tree majestically growing in your garden. You often touch this tree in the hope of being morally and physically and psychically supported – at least until midnight.

But what is the subject matter of this part of my book? Is it beauty, Aphrodite (just another instance of tautology) or the retreat of the Russian troops? My computer lets me know that these troops are still on their way and no one can use the expression 'back to barracks'; not yet, not justifiably. Let me explain once again. A number of Russian troops – some Westerners are impressed by this number – relish the beauty of their own movement; within the Russian territory known as Russia or Great Russia or our Mother Russia. The Americans protest and the Russians ask their ritual question, 'What fly has bitten you?' What's got into you? in other words.

The Americans answer thus, ‘Nothing, nothing, nothing has got into us. And there are no flies in our God-protected country. The Chinese immigrants took care of them and annihilated them many years ago, during their so-called Cultural Revolution. It’s you and Ukraine we’re worried about – rightfully and justifiably. What are you doing in such proximity to their border? Can’t you see this border? Are you waiting for another portion of well-aimed, well-adjusted sanctions? Morons, criminals, criminals, morons!’ I am not very fond of exclamation marks, but this time they seem to be in order: they are opted for during the so-called ‘exchange of niceties’. You can exchange these niceties by launching rockets and dropping bombs. And then they show you a documentary, according to which it is much safer to hurl abuse at your enemies. In this film you see a bomber which drops a bomb on civilians, on those who hate wars and never take part in them. A bomb lands on a *bambino* who, understandably enough, dies at once, his body having been torn to pieces. They show you every piece of his or her body and they say unambiguously, ‘The death of a human is a tragedy. The death of a baby is a triple tragedy, if you must know.’ Now you know; now you know. So you hurl abuse at each other and one can hear the same words that sound in minor keys. Moron, cretin, and so on. ‘And so on,’ resounds in the air and you know what they (these words) are talking about. You hurl the same abuse at a child instead of flinging a bomb at her, her, her, her; and her or rather she drops like a fly or a bee poisoned by pesticide. The child laughs until she cries so that you do not really know whether she is crying or laughing. And then she begins to throw stones in your direction, in the direction of your face and crotch. So now you know for sure it is much better to hurl abuse at people, even if they are in their prime.

The Russians retaliate and, naturally enough, this goes without saying. How do they retaliate? In their turn they resort to the word ‘morons’ which resounds all over the world; even polar bears hear it. And then a few American satellites notice movement within the Russian troops. (These troops are still in question.) In addition to this movement, another movement gets under way, and inside this movement one can see a number of Russian soldiers and officers. They rise from their beds in Siberia and take a couple of steps towards Kiev. The Americans take notice of their movement and so, whenever the Russians take a couple of steps, the Americans take notice of a multitude of arms holding weapons. And sometimes a weapon can hold a few pairs of arms, and the best example of this phenomenon is a tank, an ordinary tank. Suppose this tank of ours takes a couple of steps, of symbolic steps, that brings it – for once there are no hers, no his, no hims, no himself – closer and closer to Kiev. So you (the Americans and their allies) decide to count the number of steps separating this tank and other arms and metal belts. On the same screen you see a gun; and this gun fires a shell designed to pierce the armour of an enemy tank.

They count these steps and presently deduce human weakness from their stretches, spaces and goals; and what you are left with does not even amount to ten fruitful, melodious steps. All this is for nothing, you say to yourself, and a Chinese poem comes to your mind, slowly but surely, taking its cue from some book or other; or from a remark you are likely to overhear in the streets of Shanghai. Well, your starting point is the imaginary retreat of the Russian army which retreats, whenever it has to be shown on television. A few television crews say to the Russian generals and colonels: ‘Please, start to retreat in two minutes. We have to prepare our cameras for this magnificent, unforgettable show. In other words, we must ensure this show’s immortality, otherwise there’s no point in filming anything, not even the smoke issuing from your cigarettes and cigars. (Some of those generals smoke Cuban cigars.) You retreat and consequently go back to distant times – not only to Moscow where your army can rest for a while. No, you move in times – not just in time, in one time only – and space

doesn't really count. For all I know, you can settle in Peru and enjoy an ordinary life made up of local cuisine and a few beautiful ladies from cabarets and also from elsewhere; and you don't always know where they come from. But you don't care, given that knowledge is nothing: only instinct and imagination are supposed to influence, affect and destroy our lives.'

What have we lost in the course of our evolution, existence and history? Almost everything, one must admit. But what happens if one does not admit this obvious truth? At least one – as usual, you have no idea as to this one's identity – can show you a list of your losses which stretch from the middle Mississippi Valley to the southern Middle Atlantic States, as some American poet put it. You undeniably lost Ancient Rome and also Ancient Greece, *tant qu'à faire*. You might have lost the French language, but you continued to study it throughout your former lives; for some reason. And you still know what *tant qu'à faire* means. As long as you do something; or as long as you do nothing, nothing at all. In the meantime tanks are pierced, shells are pierced – everything (down to your life) is pierced. And you think in terms of China. And what *are* its terms, you wonder? (You went down so far that you reached the bottom situated within the Chinese kingdoms.) And what does that distant, nebulous wisdom dictate to you? 'Don't take away the Beautiful of the Day. Nor should you care for the Beautiful of the Night. The fruit you see on your right is right, right, right, you can believe me. Listen to this fruit and you'll know the truth forever. You'll never lose it, come hell or high water.' And both (hell and high water) come and you lose fruit, hells, bells (they toll for you) and a lot of incarnations which seemed to have ensured a number of beautiful eternities.

One eternity. I love you so much
 I'm convinced I'll love your brother
 Even better, provided I can live
 For another thousand years and one
 Night. Three million steps
 And Kiev is taken. Or Moscow.
 Taken, given. And you travel
 From one as long as you do
 To another, as long or as short.

And once again we return to the domain of our perversity which is not everywhere, contrary to what one might presume. There are so many contraries in our world that one always hears antinomies, dialectical oppositions and reconciliations; and a lot of *Aufhebungs*, as Hegelians add precipitously and smartly. Yes, all this looks and sounds like my life and brain inside which, suddenly, for no reason at all, I hear a piece of music, some snatches from it. I recognise it – not at once, not at once, I must admit. What kind of algorithm drives this music through my being? That is what happens in everyday life and in eternity, as I always add, not to lose yet another opportunity to live forever. One algorithm comes, another algorithm goes, leaving in its wake a Chinese drawing, a Japanese poem, a Brahms quartet. Even such a modest word as 'retreat' can trigger off all sorts of associations, parallels that you draw, draw, draw until you drop, drop, drop. Another poem teaches me the following truth:

At the sea whose name escapes me
 There are crimson, king-crimson fruits.
 They'll endow you with redness,
 Much-vaunted and wonted redness.

Apparently this song was quite popular in the communist midst. Meanwhile, the Russian tanks continue to retreat and we come to Rousseau and his eternal problems linked to our corruption, badness and madness. We are born into a beautiful world and we are as pure as water, angels and every incarnation of the Blessed Virgin. And then we begin to pronounce, utter some words, and we realise – and so do our parents – that our vocabulary is spoilt for choice. There are so many words inside and around us that we cannot help making errors, misspelling them, misusing them. As a result, our soul loses its lustre and becomes as black as the night depicted in *Macbeth* (by Shakespeare and Verdi). Horrified and disgusted, we set about cleansing our soul. We remove whatever can be detrimental to its natural, organic growth. Presently, however, we ask ourselves if there is anything in the world; and we stop for a while. Anything, anything, anything, we repeat helplessly and hopelessly, as usual. Anything included in the overall purity, we add, anxious to round our monologue off. And where are we supposed to stop? We are reluctant to go as far as the kingdom of apes from which we arguably emerged many millennia ago. Why not? Why not? Why not ape apes? They are much better than our friends, to say nothing of our enemies. At times we are even unable to distinguish between these groups. So we ask every member of those groups, personally, personally: 'Are you my enemy?' And we hear 'no'. And every member of every member endeavours to assure us of his or her eternal and most productive friendship. And then a word emerges from the fog and mist, and also from the mist and snow. And this word is HYPOCRISY.

As I have pointed out many times, on many occasions, we alternatively advance and retreat, and the Americans comment upon our movements as follows, 'They seem to retreat. But let us wait and see what happens tomorrow. No, they march forward towards Kiev and Paris; or towards Absolute Truth, according to their fake declaration.' It is pointless to go on with this rigmarole, especially that our itinerary and even our body resemble a multitude of Francis Bacon's pictures. Someone sleeps inside these pictures, these triptychs. Indeed, we see and admire three bodies instead of one – instead of the One, as Plotinus and Bradley might have pointed out. We study and dissect these multiple pictures and say to ourselves, while doing so rather successfully, 'What an itinerary, what a sinuous way of thinking and acting! I wonder how many stages, hesitations and doubts these bodies have traversed in the course of their endless wanderings. No, no, they're not endless after all. Here's is the end, in this very gallery.' And then I hear, 'Valery, Valery,' and willy-nilly I revert to using my own body, sinews and sinuosity.

Yes, I should not forget I continue to eat myself, to relish my own meat, so to speak. And I must admit I am succulent, delicious, and that is why I am not on the point of giving up the whole enterprise, for the sake of some imaginary bliss connected with spirituality and invisibility, admittedly cherished by the Chinese, by their Taoists or Daoists or Daotzendenists. What would I do with my invisible body, with my astral, disastal body? I remember putting yet another morsel of my muscles into my mouth which is neither invisible nor inaudible: I do speak from time to time; to myself, mostly. And I also recite poems, in three languages; and even some prose works of Nietzsche or Lucretius. (In Latin, in Latin.) But what does all this mean? Must I necessarily search for the meaning of this gorgeous meal? Eating Homer who is also myself; and Aeschylus.

At this point I must point out that I am fed up with Emerson and Borges or rather with their followers who offer us – on a plate with the blue *bordure*, as the Russians put it; or edge, if you prefer – the following list of identifications, of metamorphoses, of doppelgängers and triplegängers:

I was Jesus Christ (this morning, at the end of my traditional, uplifting visit to the local church),
 I was the Buddha (whenever I hold a rose I am the Buddha or one of his disciples),
 I was *Burda*, I was a glossy magazine,
 I was a plateful of borsch and I ate myself,
 I was Bergman and shot *The Seventh Seal*, *Wild Strawberries*,
 I was Toscanini and performed Verdi's *Rigoletto* at Madison Square Garden,
 I was an ordinary beer drinker and I drank a lot of pints of beer in a nearby *biergarten*,
 I was in Moscow, I was the Unboring Garden where no one gets bored,
 I got bored and became an ordinary Brahman.
 And once again I was born into the Bergman family.
 And I became Ibsen or rather John Gabriel Borkman.

The matter stands differently if you feed on your own body. Not a shadow of abstraction engulfs your statements, however contradictory and illusory. You say for instance, 'This morning I thought about Francis Bacon, but I wasn't a new incarnation of the painter, not quite. On the other hand, I was influenced and even affected by one of his favourite authors – Aeschylus – whose *Oresteia* the painter studied assiduously, while sitting on one of his studio-impregnated chairs.' The old trampled by the new. This is a morsel of my body and I still relish it as it lingers on my tongue, not far from my palate. Not only do I chew on this line – I totally agree with it, which may seem rather logical, given the context of what is unfolding before our very eyes, inside my mouth, in close proximity to my palate, not far from my stomach. Yes, the old *are* trampled by the new in this day and age. All these youngsters sitting at numerous pianos, destroying the sacredness of music. But in the domain of figure skating they are rather brilliant, especially the Russian skaters, a maiden who turns and turns in the air, three times, four times, five times, seven times; and also nine times – to honour the author of the *Divina Commedia*. And often you see an old man lying on the pavement, under your very feet. If you are old yourself, you bend down, on condition that you are in a position to execute such a manoeuvre without losing your equilibrium and also your life (while you are at it). You say a few words in consoling tones. You try to raise this half-dead body as you recite W. B. Yeats or any other poet whose involvement with verticals and walks can be relied upon; whereas any youngster takes advantage of the situation and tramples all over the body, sometimes trampling it to death. While committing his crime – let us leave women out of this – he says to himself and also to the police, 'You, old age pensioner. Do you really think our country is meant for old people? And what about us, you, old, rotten fish? What about our boiling blood? Shouldn't we use it at the earliest opportunity? But let's have a look at *your* blood, first.'

Calmly and self-approvingly, the teenager draws a knife from his pocket – I have no idea what this knife looks like, but I am pretty sure it is not a sword, although Siegfried was not really different from our teenager – and sets about preparing a number of ingredients for his forthcoming meal. But let us return to the young ladies whose ice-inspired glissandi triggered off avalanches of admiration and applause during the last Olympic Games.

I wonder why we all go down the drain – with the exception of these ladies and some other representatives of the sport. Of course it is easy to measure your greatness in the fields where seconds and only seconds really count. Or meters, or knockouts. But what to do with the arts which cannot and should not be measured in accordance with Olympic clocks and jump-meters? Why are we so sterile in the matter of greatness, in the matters indissolubly linked to philosophy, literature and even poetry where some greatness seems to survive, in spite of the overall littleness? I compared the Russian figure skaters to Peggy Fleming whom I adored in my adolescence and even later, in my mature years: I recalled her glissandi rather frequently. Recently I saw a few videos dating back to the Sixties, and I was unpleasantly surprised by her slowness, by the shallowness of her jumps. I did not take the trouble to ask myself why I had admired her so ecstatically in my youth, within the space of my relative immaturity. Yes, she was beautiful and graceful. (Soon the number of my yeses will reach that of *Ulysses*.) But the speed of her performances was not as overwhelming as that of the young ladies I am talking about. And the speed I am talking about should be overwhelming, breathtaking. If your breath is not taken, if you are not quite literally robbed of your breath, then a skater has failed almost irremediably; until the next championship at least.

What image comes to mind, to my body-consuming mind? It is China that set the stage for the Olympic Games of this year. (Let us forget its number so as not to sink into the deepest despair unimaginable.) So let us stick to this fact or truth without which I shall not be able to select an appropriate trophy for the young ladies I am still talking about; logically enough: they deserve an endless talk, not an endless night. ‘A bunch of flowers and a shadow that reflects its beauty on the ice. A resplendent crown in the sun.’ This poem is accompanied by a picture on which one can recognise – and one does – a few chrysanthemums which symbolise successes and triumphs. That is why this picture, together with the poem written in capital letters (to make it look more important) is offered to victors, not to losers. We give a lot to losers, the Japanese, among other people and nations. On this occasion, the Russians too showed their propensity for rewarding losers – the skater who lost her place on the podium. But she got much more attention than the winners as if she were a Japanese princess exiled, whisked away, writing poetry on a desert island.

Curse on you younger gods who override the ancient laws and rob me of my due! Is that my way of dealing with the situation which allows my inferior to stand on the podium prohibited to my own persona, substance and essence? They have always said the new is better than the old, and now they can switch their TV sets on to show you the Russian skaters who turn in the air as if they were new planets in their own right; swift-turning planets setting another tempo to our lives. What do we know about life? (The question we ask ourselves from time to time, and we search for an answer either in the past or in the fog called the future; by some of us. Who is this Some or Uncle Sam? I wonder.) Now to appease the honour you reviled vengeance shall fester till my full heart pours over this land on every side. That is how T. S. Eliot proceeds when writing (once again, always) *The Waste Land*. Usually you waste your breath and lose your time, but this time you waste someone’s land. Why not? For a change. My honour has been reviled many times, on many occasions, in many lands that look quite waste and wasted now. But what do I care? It is not I whose revilement seems to resound all over the earth. Someone is reviled, viled, willed and so on. And this so on lasts as long as on can last and so can last. And they last, last, last, and that is why we are in a right fix or rather in a wrong fit because nothing is right in the situation or space or time or house you find yourself in. Fester till my full heart pours over this land or rather body, if we take into consideration Francis Bacon’s pictures. All this looks and sounds like one of his pictures, be it dormant or freshly awake. You see a conglomerate (a rock which consists of small rounded stones that are

held together by clay and sand) in front of you and say to yourself, 'I see a human body, a human life in its most authentic state or predicament or discomfiture. Or just a sort of human *confiture* or marmalade, an orange marmalade.' That is how most of your searches and researches end instead of putting an exclamation mark at the end of every sentence of yours.

So I continue to compose T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*, and consequently I am duty-bound to include in it yet another quotation or moderation of my own élan. Poison from whose killing rain a sterile blight shall creep on plant and child and pock the earth's face with infectious sores. Yes, I allow this poison to pour its own wrath over women and children, although I am a well-known lover of animals, and those who love animals so dearly as I do cannot hate humans, according to the wisdom of nations. You love either life or death, and the latter variety is called 'our death instinct', as we all know; until further notice. This further notice comes and we proclaim in unison, 'It's our life, bliss, paradise and joy, joy, joy, joy instinct. Zarathustra and Nietzsche we call this instinct of ours. Hail to you, this instinct of ours! Hail to you, hail to you, hell to you!'

But how could you bring yourself to harm a child? they ask you. You paint a man whose sleep is above all suspicion. He sleeps, dreams and some of his dreams must be sweet, in spite of the expression of his body that speaks volumes about his state of mind, according to Francis Bacon. Well, they look at a picture we owe to Francis Bacon's passion, patience and inspiration, and they say to us, 'Where's this man's family? Where are his children and wife?' And we answer them jokingly, 'There was some poison – we don't remember its name, it just skips our mind – from whose killing rain a sterile blight crept on this (and that) man's children, and it also pocked the earth's face with infectious sores so that this man (and those men and women) has no dwelling place at his disposal. You wouldn't like to live in one of these infectious sores, would you? So you might easily understand why the man we're looking at prefers to live within Francis Bacon's picture where he is highly, majestically protected from rain and hail. On the other hand, he is widely open to the grain coming to him from all sides, otherwise he wouldn't survive the onslaught of time. Every masterpiece is nourished by this grain coming from nowhere.'

Why should I weep? Hear, Justice, what I do! Soon Athens in despair shall rue her rashness and her mockery. Daughters of Night and Sorrow, come with me, Feed on dishonour, on revenge to be! According to our gurus, we are still in Athens and Jerusalem, which will permit me to resort to the Bible and the Talmud as often as I wish. And I always wish to live with them. And to live with them means to quote them, voice them, recite them in the dead of night. But for the moment I am preoccupied by what is going on, stumbling on in Russia and Ukraine. In two thousand years no one will remember this conflict and NATO will cover the Earth from head to foot or from Australia to Kentucky. But now they speak about it; not all the time, as might be presumed; just partly, meaning: a part of the time we live through, up and down, is devoted, almost dedicated to the Russian army and also to NATO which was not supposed to advance, to cover other territories after the majestic, historical collapse of the USSR. (That is how we make history. That is how history makes us.) The USSR collapses. First it falls on its knees and then these knees begin to give way. To whom or what do these Soviet knees give way? To the world that applauds its or her or his collapse. The applause grows and its intensity overcomes difficulties/obstacles/problems/resistance. You applaud Creation and joys we experience on our way to eternity and the Hereafter. But there is a lot of resistance within our ecstasy, our Nietzschean acceptance of life. We feel uncomfortable within this world and even a splinter (in our finger) can induce us to curse everything and everybody, down (up) to God. We continue to applaud, whatever the cost of this applause of

ours. That is what happened during the collapse of the Soviet system and state. I applauded this fall myself: I was in Moscow when the Soviet flag dropped, went pop, slipped down all along its mast. Another flag appeared: flags never go out of existence; they just yield their position and power to other flags.

So now the head of NATO says, 'Our organisation has never promised anything to the Soviets.' And then *Der Spiegel* – no one remembers this name and its importance now – issues a document, according to which (according to, according to; and nothing accords, there are no chords) at the end of the last century (neither last nor least) the representatives of NATO, its feet and probably stomach, said publicly, in front of a few cameras, 'We'll stay where we are. We'll stick to our guns. And that's why there'll be no more guns in human history.' In the meantime, people are shot at and they succumb to the law of gravity which has not been abolished in the course of our history; not even for the sake of elderly women and children who continue to succumb to the power of bullets, bombs and other methods of destruction. What are other methods of overall destruction? (If you don't add 'overall' to your account, no one pays attention to what you voice.) There are bombs, as I pointed out earlier, perhaps last night, according to my recollection. These bombs fall on kindergartens and other gartens where there are also a number of children and elderly women. So what?

The Russians are the guilty party because, at some point in our history, there was such a thing as the Soviet Communist Party. I do not weep; and yet I should perhaps react more vehemently, more patriotically during this conflict spreading all over the East and the West. Cheese/chocolate/fish spread. There's bread and various spreads for tea. And one of these spreads contains bombs and other lethal weapons. So you have it on your dinner table and even in your garden where you drink your tea in the company of your flowers and birch trees. So, slowly but surely I am getting involved in this conflict, which is all the more understandable since I live in Belgium whose hospitality extends to NATO, its highest and most important office. Suppose one of the Russian missiles falls on this head, on NATO's head and also some other members of its body. On NATO's penis, for instance. What am I supposed to do? Should I go on quoting the Greeks and their immortal authors? How could their immortality help us?

You look right and your lips murmur, 'What a drama.' You look left and your lips whisper, 'What a tragedy.' You go on looking round, up and down, but your vocabulary does not vary much: you still stick to your Kalashnikovs, bombs, your atomic threat flying somewhere, overhead, over clouds; or inside those clouds. You see a cloud and then you realise it is just a mushroom you always see in the wake of an atomic explosion. It is as if our heavens were supposed to supply you with a quantity of boletus. By the way '*bol*' means 'pain' in Russian. A soft 'l' at the end; and yet there is no end (and no softness) to this pain and many other pains that you are tempted to enumerate, to adumbrate. Your numerous pains were adumbrated in the report you sent to God. In expectation of an answer you read them again, having kept a copy of your complaint. So, if an angel knocks at your door and says, after opening it without your help, 'What's your problem? How are you today?' you pick up the sheet of paper in question and recite your dolorous poem. After a while the angel begins to shake his head and his lips whisper the following words, 'Your rhymes are lame. So is your meter.'

'My poem is free,' you explain.

'If you are bent on writing free verses, you shouldn't be surprised to find that your pains feel free to stay where they are, all over your body.'

'What am I to do?'

‘You should arrange your pains in such a way that rhymes and reasons replace the utter disorder which, for some unreasonable reason, you call freedom.’

You pick up the poem of your suffering again and set about arranging the words which turn out to be as disobedient as a boisterous child. To all appearances, they are loath to array their syllables; and try as you may, you will never make them understand they are on parade. In other words – and yet the words are the same – they literally rain on your parade. You cannot say it rains in torrents or even ‘it pours’ because the sun does its best to shine religiously, awakening a number of religious (mostly pagan) feelings in the chests of men and women. Well, as usual everything and everybody depend on letters, on how they happen to look on a sheet of paper, in the sky. A plane flies over the world and you see its trace which reminds you of a letter or even of some Shakespeare monologue. Sometimes it flies across your brain and once again you discern a figure in the darkness. This darkness denotes the amount of your incomprehension, ignorance and idiocy, to tell the truth. But there is a bit of hope in this chaos and nonsense: the figure proves to be yet another letter dragging behind a multitude of words. While anguish flies through flesh and bone my breathless rage breaks every bound. You can comment upon this verse for years and years, considering that Shakespeare is not far away; he never is. His merchant of Venice and his bond literally rush to mind, but there are other associations and peregrinations. Even outside the domain of literature you are bound (bond) to dwell on this verse or line or sentence for some time. You ask yourself whether your anguish’s flight through bones is more excruciating than the same-self flight through flesh. Out of scientific curiosity you begin to pinch your arms, legs and even go so far as to expose your bones to your hammer’s well-meant, well-aimed blows. To the hammer-and-sickle’s blows. To name but one.

The way you eat during a war is slightly different because war is different from peace: every Tolstoy reader knows that. Many restaurants are closed when armies march along the streets of your native city or just in some capital or other. Soldiers look around and see a lot of restaurants, but they are closed, contrary to the expectations nourished by the same soldiers who think mainly in terms of spoils, booty and plunder. Some of them call everything ‘food’ and even jewellery falls into this category, although no one eats all those diamonds: it is much more efficient and productive to exhibit them on your neck or fingers. You raise your finger – not with the intention of helping your neighbour, of getting him or her off the hook, needless to say – and say, ‘Can you see this?’

‘Yes, I can,’ she answers.

‘What do you think about this object? What’s your opinion, may I ask?’

‘It’s beautiful,’ answers your interlocutor.

‘Do you realise to what extent I’m rich, powerful and mighty? And don’t forget I never fall, whatever the circumstances.’

During a war you are supposed to eat slices of life. Usually, when crossing a peaceful, Tolstoy-programmed period of your life, you are terribly finicky about your food. Being dramatically influenced by Tolstoy’s heroes and heroines (not by Tolstoy himself) you dance, savour a lot of petits fours, smash champagne glasses and kiss one Natasha, two Marias and so on. Then you turn a page and the first word you encounter on this page is ‘war’ or ‘bomb’ or ‘Napoleon’ whose name is tantamount to war, to a declaration of war. That is why, before ordering the invasion of Ukraine, Putin uttered the word ‘Napoleon’ several times. At some point he

even added, 'Buonaparte.' Well, let us not forget – we do not allow this piece of information to slip our mind or to sleep in it – that the soldiers I described at the beginning of this war continue their triumphant march. But their triumph is not complete, and they are fully aware of their predicament, of their partial discomfiture. Food, food, food, they say, but let there be no misunderstanding about their vocabulary: in spite of their hunger, they are reluctant to consume fast food. So even when they say, 'Quick, quick, quick,' any specimen of what is rightly called 'fast food' is not on their agenda. The same goes for their schedules: they do not feature the words 'fast food'. Sure enough, these words do crop up in their diaries and other notes they take in the course of their military actions, but they do their best to space these words out, to create a huge distance between them with a view to avoiding any contact with the slices of life in question. Yes, fast food is part and parcel of life, of our contemporary, miserable life and so we cannot cut it from the slice of life we have within our field of vision, within our field of action. But soldiers eschew this item to the best of their abilities.

What do you eat during a war? (There are wars that have nothing to do with Tolstoy and his Sebastopol-suffused stories.) They come across a slice of life which looks like a slice of death. Under another set of circumstances they might enquire, 'When was it killed, this slice of life? Whose slice of death is it? Is it a child?' The point is you are forbidden to kill, murder and otherwise destroy our children in the course of military action, but so-called collateral damage knows what to do. Duty-bound, so to speak. 'Was there any collateral damage this morning?' asks a hungry soldier.

'Three examples,' answers another soldier.

'Which one is more succulent than others?'

'The second one.'

'On account of children or what?'

'That's right. How would you like them cooked?'

'I don't like rare or underdone meat.'

'That's why I suggested the second portion.'

'A bomb or what?'

'A bomb.'

'But not an atom bomb, I hope.'

'Not an atom bomb. Don't worry your pretty little head.'

We all know that civilised people who chiefly live in democratic, highly developed countries are capable of putting up with many perversions, on condition that they remain 'within reason'. And when they are asked, 'Could you please show us the reason you're talking about? At least show us its border, otherwise we won't be able to comply with your wishes.' And our civilised leaders give you an example. Suppose you are one of the aforementioned soldiers. You just *mention* these soldiers, *touch* upon them as if they did not really count; as if they were harmless. And then you realise they are in a position to touch not only individuals, but also cities, countries and some civilisations. They touch them and everything around their hands and legs collapses; and some of our fellow citizens forget about the hurricanes they were horrified by only two weeks before. But let us leave these massive destructions aside: there are other, more intimate destructions in store for us. So the soldiers grow hungry and voice their grievances, saying to each other, 'I wish a bomb was dropped on some kindergarten or other, otherwise I may faint – right in the middle of this street. And then we'll lose several battles in a row.' Generals are reluctant to listen to such ramblings of annoyance, such examples of gallows humour. So they pull

out their Smart phones and obediently a bomb falls on the foreign land across which there march a million soldiers. A few children lie dead, but not carbonised so that the soldiers, a group of soldiers dash towards these children and start devouring them. After a while they slow the tempo of their meal, bent on relishing the food instead of just swallowing it. The point is the quantity of the food they are relishing is far beyond the volumes of their numerous stomachs. Consequently a lorry comes out of nowhere, carrying fridges. We are used to another piece of information related to lorries and trucks: ‘Hundreds of refugees were herded into cattle trucks for the gruelling ten-hour journey.’ Let us concentrate on the fridges that are carefully, almost maternally conveyed to the mock dinner room by a multitude of lorries.

Up to now we have stayed within reason: only dead children were consumed in the course of this improvised meal. Many factors were taken into consideration: the freshness of the food, its tenderness, to name but a few (factors and facts). But where are the borders of this reason? Our opponents justifiably point out that storing corpses (a virtual ritual) is located *beyond* reason and humanitarian customs. ‘Fridges are not appropriate cemeteries,’ resounds in the air which has been poisoned by such utterances (in the course of the 20th and 21st centuries). Their opponents – our opponents’ opponents – shrug their shoulders as they expose their own doctrine inspired by frozen food, as they say. ‘There’s such a thing as frozen food, and corpses are better off in fridges. Keep refrigerated, store away from light,’ they round off.

They go so far – we often go so far we do not know where we are – as to suggest the creation of a few cemeteries covered with refrigerators, punctuated by refrigerators and their corpses. From time to time your relatives come, open the fridges and smell your body, touch it. They have the feeling it is your body they touch because it is fresh – *pim pant*, as the French put it. And the English-speaking groups decompose this word, saying pimp (and on this occasion they may even remember *Troilus and Cressida*) and then they evoke Pan, who puts them in another setting where nymphs swarm and dance as if there were no war in Ukraine, no Russian troops. Nymphs are carefree, happy-go-lucky – *insouciantes*, as they say; as the tourists say, after consulting their guides. Well, in some frozen-food cemeteries they opened a few restaurants – just in case, as they explained at first. At second they said their restaurants were on a par with their three-star rivals – in the same category, to put it mildly. And if you were inclined not to put it mildly, you said their restaurants were far superior to what could be found on the surface of the Earth, in the kingdom of the quick. Quick, quick, said the bird, someone said; but sometimes no one listens to someone, luckily for us. Otherwise I would have to write a lot of uncontrollable nonsense.

Personally I am not sure I prefer a refrigerator to the moist, motherly Earth who knows us by heart, whereas refrigerators see (or rather feel) no difference between a chunk of meat and our brain. Of course you could accustom yourself to your favourite refrigerator, firmly hoping your love will be reciprocated. I know those who, when touching a chair or a table, say, ‘This object is a subject, you know. It is as organic and alive as we are. Actually it is not *it*: it is *he* or *she*. Or *androgynous*.’ Well, instead of heading for your bed, you get closer and closer to your refrigerator and open its door without fear, without fearing the cold you will be attacked by a few moments later. You visualise a forest, a Christmas tree, you recall your childhood and all the toys you received during those proverbial celebrations. (New Year and no tear – one of those proverbs.) You do your utmost to feel cosy inside this refrigerator in spite of its metal structure that might hurt your bones – especially at the beginning of your exercise. But then you say to yourself that metal is also your friend, being as organic and joyful as you are. Joie de vivre is not foreign to objects; or subjects, according to our new vocabulary. Suppose

there is a war somewhere, probably in your very neighbourhood. You are totally affected by this war: not only your eyes are hurt when you see its funeral march on TV, but also your legs: you don't have a leg to stand on. It does not really matter whether such and such an idiom cannot be applied to the situation in which you found yourself some time ago. (At the beginning of the war in question.) You say to yourself – and you repeat it to yourself for several minutes – that even if you have *two* legs at your disposal and can prove everything to everybody, the war you are watching on TV and on several computers at once seems to cross your body, invade your legs (yet another invasion, as if one invasion were not sufficiently huge and distorting) and suddenly you realise you don't have a leg to stand on. So you collapse in the middle of your study, in the middle of your train of thought. And you say to your neighbour or wife, 'I have two legs, but I can't stand on them. To accomplish such a feat I need a leg on which I could stand, if only for a few hours. Come hell or high water.'

And then both hell and high water come, arrive, settle in the middle of your room. But your mind is still concentrated on legs, in spite of other idioms literally crowding around you as if you were Lady Di. All idioms – and idiots, as you surmise – talk to you about the war that Russia declared on Ukraine. You sit there, flabbergasted, flabber and gasted, and they respond to all these fakest news, 'Idioms, idiots! What are you talking about? Pull the other one it's got bells on! We're brothers and sisters, Russians and Ukrainians. Didn't you read the following piece of information, "The various groups eventually fused into a single brotherhood"?'

That noble deed was not noble –
To pierce a parent's flesh with a fire-born blade,
And show to the radiant sun
The sword black-laced with gores.

You gather momentum as they go on talking, talking, talking, weeping. You gather yet more momentum lying under your feet and begin to weep yourself, using Euripides as a majestic, poetry-sanctified crutch:

A man can weep, and tell his sorrows to the world,
A king endures sorrows no less; but the demand
For dignity governs our life, and we are slaves
To the masses.

Of course you can talk about our brotherhood and sisterhood until our cows, who are also our brothers and sisters, come home. They do come home. What shall we do? We should count them before making decisions and reconciling our minds to the world where our minds, brains and souls are pushed around daily, hourly and secondly (and second-handedly). This is not my cow, says someone, and immediately this cow is put to death because there is nothing else to do: death is the equilibrium we are looking for. As someone put it (and he really put it somewhere): 'Cemeteries are the most harmonious societies within the human race.' They say there are neo-Nazis within the frontiers of Ukraine and they should be dealt with in the manner of the Nuremberg Trials; or Dials, as they call it now. They mean, our clock should run along the same line, hanging neos and Nazis every two hours or minutes. Others say they should be spared our punishments for at least two years. In the meantime, people are killed, as usual. This usual is unjust, unfair, and what is more, this is not a funfair, all of it. You take a

rifle, a toy rifle and take aim; and take many gifts, prizes and so on. She raised (we should not forget women) her gun, took aim and fired. She fired and counted her victims; some of whom were still alive. And they asked her a lot of questions, ‘Why did you kill me?’

‘You’re not yet killed, are you?’ she answered.

‘But I’m going to be in a few seconds. Can’t you hear my death rattle?’

‘I do hear a rattle, I can assure you. But I think it’s a baby waving around a plastic rattle.’

‘I’m not plastic, you know.’

‘Are you made of metal, of electrodes? Are you a Robocop? Are you just a cop?’

Well (or rather Bad, Worse, the Worstest of All) the Kiev inhabitants find a rifle or a gun or a bomb on their doorsteps. First, they clean their doorsteps as they stumble upon all these weapons in the nick of time – no, no, I’m confused. Just in the morning, upon awakening, assuming they slept and had one thousand-and-one sweetest dreams. They know this distribution has nothing to do with shops and dealers, whoever they are. It is the government itself whose task amounts to supplying the population with supplies. What are these supplies, one wonders; rightfully, for once? These supplies should rhyme – in the kingdom of absolute rhymes – with bread, butter, salt, milk, alcohol; bread and wine, as Hölderlin put it. He put it in German, this goes without saying and German: this pronouncement is meant for the whole world so they distribute, diffuse and radiate it in English.

How do my algorithms work? What is my nature made of, apart from ordinary flesh, meat and dreams? Well, I hear my inner voice and also my ordinary voice which talks to me about my brothers and sisters. I already said a few words about Gogol – in this particular work of mine situated in between this and that. But how could I measure and weigh the debt I owe to the Ukrainians? Everything is private in this cosmos, even the state, whatever they say about contracts and communism. What do my sisters and brothers mean to me? I might appear mean, from some angle of vision (I wonder where this angle is situated) but I am a poor judge in this field; I have never had any brothers or sisters. I am pretty sure I wouldn’t have judged them mechanically, musically, as Stalin did in his famous speech. No one recalls it now. Everybody remembers the last surge or fall of markets, whatever these markets are – there are only markets in the world, as everybody knows; and *everyone* knows it, even if *one* forgets it for some reason or other – but Stalin said, ‘Brothers and sisters!’ What is remarkable in this prelude amounts to this truth: No one was his brother or his sister. Only his stooges were his cousins and he manipulated them, turning their and other people’s screws; all the time.

No one knows not only what will happen in the future, but no one knows the past, the present, the moment you hold in your hand, the flower you contemplate from a distance, at close range. Nor do you know close range itself, or range *tout court*, considering that your microscope cannot even show you your own fingertips. I watch the news and I am speaking now of the conflict engaged, disengaged, and I realise that these gages have little in common with my Gogol, my tears, my emotions related to what I saw in Ukraine many years ago, in my childhood. We would drive, my parents and I, in our car to the Black Sea. Let us not forget that I continue to eat my body, my numerous experiences and the world and words and wonders, and I wish I could recall something pertinent; adequate, as the Russians say now. (I am drinking the Black Sea.) What is pertinent in this scheme of things, in this diagram, to use Gilles Deleuze’s word? For instance, a song I heard many times on the radio; it was sung by a woman. ‘You, never-to-be-quiet-if-only-for-a-second will never swap a lorry for

love.’ Well, I am more than prepared to swap a lorry, a Bentley and whatever I can swap for love, love, love; this time, in this space. No love comes my way; so I keep my Bentley.

Many people leave Kiev, in their cars and on trains, although there is no petrol and very few trains run somewhere, perhaps on the Moon. It is true that many people look at the Moon, saying to each other, ‘Perhaps we should settle on this satellite of ours. At least there’ll be no Russians within its borders.’ Then someone says, ‘The Russians are everywhere,’ and we all remember the joke we told each other, and many others, about the Americans who land on the Moon and are about to create a farm in the desert they contemplate with amazement and awe. Suddenly a small (weeny, teeny) ET comes out of the blue or rather of the dark of Blake’s endless night and says, ‘You’re too late. Some time ago one Soviet boss paid a visit to the Moon and ordered our salinities (serenities) to sow corn. And then we received the following pieces of information: “A surplus of corn has helped depress the grain market. Do you feed your chickens corn? The corn grew waist-high in the fields. The corn was stored in large sacks. The corn was cut and tied in sheaves.” We set about deciphering this document born on the Earth, in the heads of those creatures called “earthlings” about whom we knew next to nothing. Do you know how we proceed? First we are duty-bound to locate the nothing we come across in our sayings. “Where is this nothing?” we ask each other. Then our scientists find a spot where this nothing *could* be situated. Then we start drawing circles or squares around this spot, hoping that one of the triangles will coincide with our knowledge, the piece of knowledge we’ve been talking about for so many years. In the long run, we find something approximate, a line, a zigzag and we say to each other, “This is what our piece of knowledge looks like. Let us assume this piece is our starting point or starting post or starting polls. Does it really matter whether we are dealing with polls or posts? Or postmen, for that matter? Or postwomen?”’

Why do I think about love at this particular moment which is not as particular as might appear at first glance: there are many moments like that. You just think about love, all of a sudden (and you may even say to yourself you *always* think about love: there is nothing else to think about) and you remember a lot of nonsense, a lot of arabesques you find in Verlaine’s poems. What is one of these arabesques, to name but one, to single out something worthy of our attention? A woman you are in love with dances with someone else. (By the way, the word ‘with’ often causes trouble, problems and other causes that engender the same trouble.) You are in love with, she dances with. And our ‘with’ dances with itself. What kind of *Totentanz* is it? (Toten, toten, toten, toten, toten, toten, tot and trouble.) How many times was I exposed to this danger? Just one glance and you realise you are out – out of love, of life and even out of ‘of’.

And she said, he said. That is what life and love mean to you and almost everybody else, given the influence these words exert and exercise almost everywhere: even animals succumb to this influence. We look at an animal, be it he or she, and say to ourselves (as I always say in my books): ‘This animal knows what love and life means, otherwise it would fall asleep at once, without waiting for the advent of death, for his crown.’ Yes, I remember many things, some of which are probably out of this context called ‘the context of love’. After a while, however, I realise it was also a piece of love, a slice of it – whatever I experience on the spur of the moment – and tenderness, warmth engulf and pierce my heart and the rest of my constituency. When you are in love, you feel both: something pierces you and also engulfs you; at the same time. How is it possible? you ask yourself. (Several months later, for at the time of the process, of the ritual – for once or twice, I don’t know the exact word you can apply to this phenomenon – you do not think at all: you are invaded, usurped and ill-treated by love.) Well, what else? What is there? You are engulfed, pierced and wounded, and your wound is exposed to

the cosmos that does not understand the first thing about love. Our scientists know the cosmos does not know the first thing about love, but they hope it might understand the second thing or the third thing – anything, to tell the truth. No, neither the cosmos understands you, however imperfectly, nor are you in a position to understand anything about the cosmos. Not even the tenth truth.

Only in poetry, as they always say. What about poetry? A woman I was in love with kept calling someone else, and I knew this someone and this else almost by heart. He was a composer whose masterpieces I listened to from time to time. I thought I was a genius and he was a mediocrity. But she met *him*, spoke to *him* during their interminable dates, appointments, whatever. And as I usually say: it is whatever that counts. If you meet someone inside this whatever, other people can just say goodbye to their loves, passions and their whatevers.

So I must compose a poem where my love is expressed to the utmost, going to the very bounds (bonds) of love.

I was in love. I'm still in love with
 With this image, I suppose,
 This recollection or collection
 Where you can witness my failures and humiliation.

Is this really more important than the war I look at, whenever I switch my computer on? (It is not whatever, not whatever, not in the least.) And once I was on the point of falling in love inside a concert hall, and I did not manage to hide my admiration for the woman I saw in front of me. Affront, affront. My so-called wife regarded the comments as an affront to her dignity. What comments? I just said, 'What a spectacular woman.' And my wife headed for her – and I am not sure her head was guiding her in those moments (it is always heart, always heart) – and said to the future Carmen: 'My husband is my husband and I have no intention of allowing anyone to approach him for any reason, be it sentimental or just detrimental to our union.'

'What should be preserved in our scheme of things, in your scum, to put it bluntly?' I ask them or my opponents. But my opponents have myriads of arguments at their disposal. So they say, 'We are scum, but we'll be a crown in no time at all. We're all alchemists, if you must know. And an authentic alchemist takes a piece of scum in his mouth and converts it into gold. What about that?'

That is why you see so many people in our streets, and these people seem to be chewing something – not chewing gums, though. They chew, chew, chew, chew, but oddly enough, you do not take them for cows, not for a moment. What do you take them for? You take them for nothing, and it is pointless to hide this truth from tabloids and other papers of no value, be they (those newspapers) intrinsic or just trinsic. *Trinquons, tringuons*, and the wine resumes its course, seeping through your sleeping body, through your intestines and so on. These ons are arrayed in purple velvet and you have an urge to drop a bomb on them. You continually ask yourself whether the war you are partly involved with is tarnished by the presence of neo-Nazi elements. Ordinarily they utter the word 'element' and visualise Mendeleev's chart or whatever it is. Then you remember – this just comes into your head without warning – 'elementary, my or your, our readers' dear Watson'.

But I continue to chew on the piece of scum and you wonder if this scum does not have any other relevance, dimension and revelation. When you hear today's politicians proclaim from the rooftops: 'However unsavoury they might be, by definition, I'll eat them all to spare my fellow creatures, and dogs, and cats, and

plants and even the stars that suffer from idiocy. Just look at that star, up there! Can't you see it is idiotic?' Not a star seen and touched upon by Dante, by his body.

This search for a place to die
 Was waiting for you, father.
 It *was* waiting for you, farther.
 Everything was waiting for you,
 Everything was *not* waiting for you.
 Isn't that an ultimate triumph?
 No one is waiting for you, but you are
 There. So no one waits for there
 Which is already here.
 So one attends to one's affairs.
 No one notices, takes notice,
 No one, no notice, only takes,
 Takes, takes, takes. And cakes.

THE END

FOR AGENCIES

Our attention span is much smaller than what we encountered and what writers could count upon only 30 years ago. Algorithms, however, continue to influence our life rather advantageously, offering a substitute to the brains which fight shy of *War and Peace* on account of its length and breadth. Even in my tender youth I thought that literature – and any realm of art – should be judged only in terms of texture, of sparks that enliven whatever we come across; or fly over, as the case may be. Suppose that the idiom 'a turn of the screw' means something else: you just turn a screw and this action of yours unscrews a masterpiece, bit by bit, patiently and gorgeously. And that is what I advocate in the domain of literature where you should not follow plots and characters too closely (for fear of losing them in the end). When reading *War and Peace* we had better not pay too much attention to Natasha Rostova as such, but to Tolstoy's words, poetry and predicament: how could you write about such a war, such a peace without falling back on your own life and worries?

In this text of mine, one is likely to come across some heroes of our time such as the Dalai Lama and also Trump, although I think that Covid – another hero of our times – is far more significant. Russian poets devote much more energy to God, death and time than Western or Eastern writers. After all, the Russians are rather behind the schedule, being focused on the values forgotten even by Flaubert, let alone by Jane Austen and Dickens. Of course both Proust and Musil were aware of them, but I wonder if I do not go too far in this respect. Sometimes going too far may remind one of Dante who is probably my greatest literary hero; along with

Shakespeare, needless to say. Well, I am not a storyteller unless anything, even a few words, can tell a story, provided they follow an order and form a pattern, however miniscule. I speak of the soul which is about to leave its own body. One character bends over a blind drunk character while waiting for the exit of his soul, which is important after all: you may capture this soul and stuff it into the body it has just forsaken; or in any other body. You can also leave this body, your friend's body, in the mud where your companion in misfortune found his temporary refuge, being incapable of walking straight or even walking, just walking: vodka is not supposed to keep you company during your extensive walks amid cities – and landscapes.

The narrator's father is eager to guide him through the maze of the Hereafter, but I am sure this description or the text itself cannot appeal to modern, common readers, deprived as they are of guides; at least in these matters. And even an uncommon reader might wonder what all this is about. About death, time and God, given that one can rely on guardian angels, even in the grips of Covid 19. But it is no use being in the news if you do not write what everyone understands and hails as a profound human document. Or as a *divertissement* designed for our escape from covids, poverty and all other miseries. Anyway, there is a friend whose attachment to alcohol overpowers him to the extent of tolerating his numerous falls, which gives me an opportunity, if only for the space of a paragraph, to dwell on Adam, his falls, and the proximity of death linked to the aforementioned departure of the soul. I hope that the advent of Covid 19 widened the scope of readers' responses to art and whatever can elevate our spirit instead of pushing it down. As for my book, it may remind one of Goethe's *Second Faust*, for all sorts of trends and thoughts pop up on almost every page to signal yet another approach of death, to death; or another appearance of guardian angels. But this is not as abstract as might seem, for Covid is always present – as it is in our life and death. And the Hereafter can be explored only with the help of ancestors or Virgil who awaits yet another Dante to keep his hand in.

As for the Second Part of my book, it pursues the same leitmotifs which are more akin to real *obsessions* in spite of apparent unrealities. Knowing oneself can be taken to extremes, especially if you follow Spinoza and Nietzsche as you emphasise our partial (if not utter) ignorance of our body. And not only Christ teaches us that the best way of dealing with the body-problem is a gorgeous, necrophilia-advocated meal. Slowly but surely you get physically acquainted with your past, your full-bodied present and even with the future: the body is aware of its intricacies as much as the soul.

Incidentally, the book might be entitled *In Search of a Father* whose identity has nothing in common either with father figures or Oedipus complexes. (The father I have in mind has a body, not just a figure.) Well, the rest is literature.

Some of my biographical data can be found on my site.

Valery Aleff (Afanassiev)