

VALERY ALEV

SOUND LETTERS

SOUND LETTER ONE

FIRST CASSETTE

My dear friend,

The silence is broken at last.

The Royal Academy of Mutism. Is there such a thing, I wonder?

Be that as it may, you became an honorary member of this academy on the day of your departure for the better world—for the West, in other words. So did I. I mean I also became an honorary member of this academy—through no fault of mine, mind you. I would have talked to you day in day out, for years on end, had you generously offered me such an opportunity. Alas, your cruel, irrevocable departure deprived me not only of your presence but also of the only person I could always count upon during my frequent outbursts of outspokenness.

Hopefully my self-restraint is a thing of the past.

I received your cassette the day before yesterday. No visible clue guided me during my search for the identity of the sender. No name was scribbled on the thick envelope that had protected its contents during the perilous trip across the Iron Curtain. But Fate does Iron wedges drive—

No sign foretold the reunion of two friends. Frankly I had no inkling of the bliss that lay in store for me. My sixth sense was in the grip of Cartesian doubt.

Your voice, your way of thinking, our conversational style, our epistolary style. Those were the days!

Somebody must have slipped the cassette into my letterbox. Not the postman, God forbid! A stranger. The third man, the fourth man. An anonymous envelope. A UFO, no less! An anonymous cassette: *BASF, C 60. Compact Cassette. LH. Unbespielt, unrecorded, 2x30 min. Made in Germany.*

I put it on my writing desk. The twilight was unwilling to emphasise the difference between the indigenous furniture and the outlandish object I was staring at in fear and amazement. How many people had touched it during its space odyssey? Yes, my dear, you live on a different planet now. You live on a distant star.

The parks of London. Why didn't I recognise their fragrance?

I thought I was the victim of some technological blackmail. I all but flung the cassette into the rubbish chute. One never can tell, you know! I spent a sleepless night.

Next morning I called my friend S. who solemnly promised to lend me his cassette recorder as soon as R. had given it back. I telephoned R. to ask if he still needed the Philips. I implored him to finish his recording within a few hours. And when he told me he wouldn't finish it before the end of the month I begged him to interrupt it.

Well, I have to bring him the Philips tomorrow morning, at the latest.

Pause.

A lot of water has passed under the bridge. I knew we would repeat this expression rather often on the day of our reunion. And two months later, and three months later. I'm tempted to say it now. My grandfather clock has sung itself hoarse. The melody of Time. Is Eternity a Wagnerian infinite melody?

How many times have I seen Eternity since your departure?

My mirror has drawn four wrinkles on my forehead.

And I didn't recognise your voice.

My ears must have grown old, for I don't think you're a different man, a different friend. No, you're the same friend, a lifelong friend. Nothing will ever be different.

You're the same, my dear—you didn't salute me at the beginning of your recording. What's the magic word?

Just a joke, as Stalin used to say.

As I listened to you the years fell away and I saw you again as a young man, as a fellow student.

I had no idea who you were talking about. For the sake of camouflage all our friends were reduced to initials in your soliloquy; worse still—to mere letters which had nothing in common with their initials. Nor did those letters sound like their nicknames. However, your numerous allusions conjured up a few relevant situations and I recognised our mutual friends, historical and intact—such as they had been five years ago, seven years ago, nine years ago.

And thanks to them I recognised your voice. At last.

Pause.

The cassette recorder I'm using is not stereo, I'm afraid. So I heard your voice in one dimension only. What a pity! The search for your identity was hindered by a technological deficiency. Your voice lacked acoustic perspective; it wasn't deep enough as if Time and

Space had thinned it out. As if Time and Space had watered it down, in oenological terms. The Philips' fault, I hope.

You sounded cheerful, happy. When in the doldrums, one enjoys the happiness of one's friends. I'm quite aware of the fact that you're not my neighbour any more. Never mind, my dear. Never mind. The stars are not as far as all that.

Tu as le vin gai, if I'm not mistaken. Your wine is joyful, beatific; my wine is melancholy. The wines we drink are not the same, I suppose.

Pause.

At first I thought you'd been tipsy throughout the recording session. Your articulation, you know. In English and in Russian.

I ought to have taken into consideration the gaiety of London.

Your monologue—even when you speak your mother tongue—models itself on the topography of London, on that fabulous cityscape I cherished so much in my childhood. Russell Square, Hyde Park Corner. Beauty is inaccessible. Beauty is always beyond the ever-receding horizon. The Iron Curtain did nothing but legalise this aesthetic paradox.

Green Park is far away. Even in those days its grass and trees were unapproachable, untouchable, as it were—in the days when I was strolling there with my sister.

Pause.

The bonds of friendship and love are not subject to Time; yet our memory is a perpetual victim of Time's disloyalty. In the palm of my hand one can decipher the paths along which I walked in those days. The parks of London, my past. Alas, fortune tellers read nothing but the past in the palms of my hands. And my future is right here, not in the parks of London. Not even in the car parks of London. My future can be deduced from this room of mine, from the ruins that tyrannise my window in the daytime.

I read my melancholy into the furniture of my room.

I was born and bred in London.

I shall not die in London.

Pause.

Would my face be different if I were born elsewhere? And the palms of my hands? I might break all my mirrors, one by one, if I were born in Moscow.

Your cassette has enriched my collection of mirrors, I'm sorry to say. The older one grows the more one trusts reflections. They're not disloyal, are they?

Pause.

I'd better answer your questions. I really get bored listening to my rambling on.

Click.

When I switch the cassette recorder off I hear a noise that sounds like a shot. Everything sounds like a shot in the Soviet Union, even the footfalls of innocent pedestrians. The footfalls, not the footsteps. Something always falls around me, inside my body. And I fall too, if you see what I mean. I fall rather often.

Click.

I spent three hours preparing my answer to your questions. The love I bear you forbids me to clutter your leisure hours with the bits and ends of my interior monologues. My stream of consciousness is muddy, you know. All day long I just muddle about in my thoughts and hopes.

I'll leave nothing to chance. I'm a very methodical person and write lists for everything. Besides, I can't afford to talk rubbish—I've got only two cassettes. And they're not mine, you know.

To pay homage to our meticulous youth, I've divided my speech into fourteen parts. Our rendezvous and parties were structured, if my memory serves me right: an afternoon dedicated to memory, a night of unverified rumours. I still remember the 'night of old people', whatever it meant in those days. We weren't old in those days.

We're not old, are we?

Pause.

I'll begin at the end. The fourteenth part. Myself.

I think I'll adopt your method that enhances the effect of your words and makes me feel your life almost palpably. You've not eliminated the background noise from your recording. On the contrary, you seem to have welcomed any noise, however irrelevant. Any noise, any sound. Nothing is irrelevant, my dear, and whatever noise can be heard in your house is a part of your life. A part of my life as well. Nothing is irrelevant, neither slips of the tongue nor the footsteps of passers-by. They don't really pass beneath my window, all those people, all those men and women. They remain beneath my window as if to remind me that Time is insubstantial—temporary, as it were. Nothing is irrelevant, nothing disappears.

You open and close a great many doors. In Bloomsbury, near Russell Square. Your doors sound different; our doors' tendency to wail gives rise to all sorts of unpleasant associations. Indeed I'm constantly under the impression that there's a coffin in my room, a coffin surrounded by the relatives of the deceased. Our doors wail like disconsolate widows. So do our windows.

Do you want to hear the whisper of my slippers? By walking to and fro I'll let you hear the size of my room.

Sound of slippers shuffling to and fro.

My room is rather small, isn't it? I'm about to open my window.

Wail of window opening.

You're listening to the life of my courtyard. It's neither Hyde Park nor the Chelsea Physic Garden, but I've nothing else to offer you.

Long pause. Noises from courtyard.

Can you hear our birds, their arias? Most of them have left the country, in your footsteps, in your wingbeats. Sorry, I've no time for the *mots justes*. But the birds you're listening to are patriotically-minded, if you please. They sing patriotic songs. Patriotism is the last refuge of the scoundrel. Do you think there are scoundrels among birds?

Long pause. Noises from courtyard.

Can you hear them? Our sky isn't empty yet, not quite. Some birds live up there; and they sing their arias.

Long pause. Noises from courtyard.

As usual, my neighbour has parked his car in front of a rubbish bin. He's magnetised by rubbish in all shapes and sizes. A brand new *Volga*. This car made its appearance in our courtyard on the day of my neighbour's promotion. During the period of the 'Thaw' he distinguished himself in the secret service. He was afterwards transferred to a local branch—on account of an accidental misdemeanour, I suppose. A slip of the tongue, something like that. For five or six years he tapped the phones in our area. Now he's working on a larger scale again. If you happen to give me a call, don't forget to greet him heartily.

Pause.

Enough's enough!

Wail of window closing.

I should have begun at the beginning. I might have got tangled up in my thoughts. I would never have reached the last part. Why listen to my own misfortunes?

Oh, to be in England

Now that April's there

Click.

I've made no recordings ever since our last talk which took place almost a month ago—twenty seven days ago, to be exact. I gave the Philips back to its owner. Waiting, writing poems, polishing my reply. I had a lot to do. By the way, the twelfth anniversary of our first poetical *soirée* is drawing nigh.

Today I'm in excellent mood. My sentimental life is in full swing. Apparently I've grown more handsome over the last seven months. Nothing ages like happiness. Nothing preserves one's looks better than unhappiness. And a miserable life turns you into a handsome

young man. I wonder what I'll look like at the age of seventy. Will a Hollywood producer ask me to play the part of Prince Charming?

Pause.

Not even at ninety will I understand why human beings despise old age, mentally swapping its advantages for the dubious lustre of youth. Why should we replace a bottle of old claret by Coke or Fanta? The generous blood of old claret—that's what flows in old people's veins. In our cradles we have no idea how to avail ourselves of all the beauties the world can offer. Only with the passing of the years do we learn something from our bitter experience, from our sweet experience, from our oenological experience. We learn how to take advantage of the situations in which our youthful counterparts find nothing but failures and disappointments. Late in the day we learn how to arrange the molecules of pleasure, providing decrepitude doesn't turn us into mummies and dummies.

'L'enfance n'est si heureuse que parce qu'elle ne sait rien, la vieillesse si misérable que parce qu'elle sait tout,' writes Chateaubriand. Old age isn't omniscient; nor is youth really ignorant. Teenagers are well aware of their failures which are all the more excruciating since they cannot be avoided. Old people's knowledge is limited by the infinity of the universe—no glance is capable of probing it to the bottom. Or to the top. And they're aware of their limitations, old men and women.

But the knowledge we acquire as our bodies get closer to death and its implements—tombs, tombstones, flowers—prevent us from committing deplorable errors such as leaving a bottle of champagne in the fridge for weeks, for months, for years.

And some people grow more handsome as they advance in years. Maturity stamps its harmony on their old faces. Maturity ennobles their deportments and movements. And their senses come into bloom instead of insinuating the inevitable decay of their bodies.

Click.

Today I can permit myself to indulge in intermissions. I'm not supposed to give the Philips back until the day after tomorrow. And I've got four cassettes at my disposal. They're not mine, *natürlich*. Between ourselves, nothing alters in my household.

Their duration seems to rival the leisurely pace of *Parsifal*, its ritual slowness, its laggard disposition.

I have an eternity before me—piled up on my writing desk, these cassettes represent the Tower of Babel.

My eternity scores a point over the commonplace eternity they teach at convent schools—my eternity lasts.

Mystics affirm that no one is able to appreciate Eternity at its true value, for the human race is corrupted by Time, by the temporal nature of the world. But let us scrutinise the search for a rhyme. The search for Time, in a way.

And Time is always lost somewhere, either in the past or in the future. Or in the present, even.

The wrong and right tracks we stumble upon during our search create a network of delight which is inconceivable in the realm of timelessness—in Paradise where all rhymes have already been discovered and printed. And enjoyed.

Mozart sometimes heard an unwritten work in one chord, in one harmony, as if it were enclosed within one instant. A rare, precious sensation, apparently.

I should rather listen to a piece of music from beginning to end so that tunes do not turn into harmonies and the final movement remains where it is—at the top of the Tower of Babel. Deprived of duration, Stravinsky's musical rhymes—his rhythms—would become monotonous, flavourless; and Bruckner's symphonies are bound to lose their majesty, power and passion.

Pause.

In my boisterous Muscovite youth, I dreamt of making an apparatus which might allow me to know exactly the intentions of beautiful women: their thoughts, their attitudes towards me and my fellow students. Just imagine a screen where the words 'love', 'indifference', 'ardour' appear in succession. A sort of programmable calculator—a pocket calculator at that.

I'm happy I did not succeed.

I'll never go to brothels. My relationship with women is firmly rooted in duration. My courtship is a melody, not a harmony.

Time is a breeding ground for arts and pleasures. The breeding ground par excellence.

The mythic madeleine has no particular significance beyond Time, outside its sphere of influence. A mere word, a pastry—nothing more. The way it softens, dissolves, disintegrates in the narrator's mouth...the duration rendered palpable, material, corporeal by his memory's ascents and descents. The immortality of a remembrance. The way his relatively short

memory stretches out, extends, expands, dilates and widens during the search. Proust's way. His madeleine is lying on the tea table of Time; on the huge timetable of memory.

Deprived of duration, my sound letter would have lost its poetical elasticity, becoming a mere sigh, a twinkling of an eye. You might have seen the tears in my eyes, that's all. Instead, you'll see a splendid array of tears; you'll hear a Brucknerian symphony of sighs. The trappings and the suits of woe will pay homage to our interrupted friendship—*la sérénade interrompue*, to borrow Debussy's terminology.

A sound letter. *Zvukovoye pis'mo. Une lettre sonore*. What would you call it in English? A voice letter? But, in addition to my voice, there are other sounds on this cassette. And I've no wish to denigrate these sounds. Why should they be relegated from the Premier League to the First Division?

My sound letter, the soundtrack of this afternoon. I am on the right track for once, am I not?

My unsound letter, rather. The testimony of my sadness.

Pause.

Sound letter. 'Audio letter' would be an alternative. I don't have a copy of *Brighton Rock* to check what Greene says there, though the recording was made on a disc. In that instance.

I should stick with 'sound letter'. Getting rid of it would undo my wordplay.

Click.

Just like old times! I'm ensconced in my favourite armchair; I develop my ideas out loud. Everything looks and sounds exactly like it did three years ago. But you're conspicuous by your absence.

How difficult it is to talk without being approved or disapproved of by a friend.

Pause.

The doctrine of eternal recurrence seems to hold out a real prospect for our future meetings.

Let us chase away morbid thoughts! If handled professionally, suffering turns out to be an inexhaustible source of bliss. Your absence is my muse, my Clio, my Erato, my Melpomene, my Mnemosyne.

Before Einstein space was regarded as a formless void. Now I live and talk to myself in this void. Waiting for Einstein.

Mad Russia hurt me into poetry.

My present life is nothing but an attempt to fill the void left by your escape from Soviet Russia, to till the rocky land of your absence. But it's easy to fill a void, isn't it? There's a lot of room for whatever you feel like stuffing into it.

Click of a lighter.

To console myself I think about Parmenides who had no fondness for modification—not even for seasons and celestial colours. His world was paralysed with indecision—rooted to the spot, so to speak. His world was on the harmonious side. A chord, not a melody; a Mozartian ecstasy, not a Proustian madeleine. His symphonies were as motionless as statues. And he used to *swallow* pastries, not to let them melt in his mouth.

You're in my room, my dear. You've never gone out. You're sitting in the same armchair.

'I'm still the same,' as a Russian song has it. I'm still the same. And my room is a motionless symphony.

Pause.

I moved into this flat two years ago. And I won't stay here for long. I'm always on the move.

Pause.

I'm always in the same room. And this room of mine is located beyond the flats that witness my comings and goings. In vain do they get used to my furniture, to my monologues and moods. I'm on the move. And yet I never leave my room, my favourite armchair. My stars do not twinkle. My stars do not budge from the firmament. There are no black holes in my existence.

A shooting star is just a tear,

A tear dropping from an eye.

The eye is always open.

Pause.

The whole thing is a black hole.

Pause.

But a black hole carries electric charge, I'm told. At least some of them carry electric charges. A charged black hole has an electric field as well as gravitational field. And both can store energy!

Love is a gravitational field. And an electric field. And both can store energy.

Pause.

The other day I was walking around an old district of Moscow, which is less appalling than other areas of my native city; and yet I dislike its architecture. All of a sudden I noticed my painting in one of the windows, the painting inspired by Izumi Shikibu's poem. My friend had not removed it from his wall in spite of our recent disagreements.

Neither objects nor their whereabouts undergo any modification. And we are walking beneath the same windows.

Click.

Unfortunately I can't help thinking about Heraclitus, about his capricious, chameleon-like river.

The diversity of Greek doctrines has rendered our world contradictory. It is both fluid and immobile.

Even if one runs in circles

One gets away from the starting point.

One gets closer to the dead end.

London. I'm getting away from thee, even when I walk in the right direction. Shall I walk in the opposite direction? The earth is round, isn't it?

Long pause.

Everything is the other way round in this topsy-turvy world of ours. In this tipsy world of ours. In this gypsy world of ours.

Click.

*Unless the giddy Heaven fall,
And Earth some new Convulsion tear;
And, us to joyn, the World should all
Be cramp'd into a Planisphere.*

Click.

Truth depends on the beauty of proofs and conclusions.

Unmindful of truth, knowledge becomes pleasant and poetical. Scientists propose hypotheses; their rigour is borrowed from music, their harmony is inspired by painting.

And philosophers propose interpretations, endless interpretations. History doesn't lead us to the Absolute and total knowledge. Nietzsche contra Hegel.

A clash of human temperaments. William James boils the history of philosophy down to temperamental likes and dislikes. The philosopher he describes 'feels men of opposite temper to be out of key with the world's character and in his heart considers them incompetent and "not in it" in the philosophic business, even though they may far excel him in dialectical ability.'

And Montaigne affirms that philosophy is an orotund form of poetry: '*La philosophie nous présente non pas ce qui est, ou ce qu'elle croit, mais ce qu'elle forge ayant plus d'apparence et de gentillesse.*'

The wise compose poems.

Their lives are a long rhyme,

A never-ending rhyme.

Our partial ignorance is more precious than omniscience—a synonym of immobility and boredom. Like the petals of a rose, charming associations unfold during our poetical tours and detours. Temporary truths that nourish philosophy and the arts are the only pleasures we can derive from our existence.

The truth would blow the petals off our roses in no time at all. Even the manifold rose of English and French poets would not survive such a treatment.

Pause.

For any set of rules of inference there are valid proofs not designated as valid by those rules.

Moreover, any such set could never validate a proof of its own consistency.

Long pause.

Truth depends on our moods.

Pause.

We also did justice to frivolous matters...those down-to-earth—

END OF SIDE ONE

SIDE TWO

The cassette recorder censored my speech. And yet it's a Philips, a machine born in Holland where sex life knows no bounds.

I'll go on. Side Two.

As the evening drew nigh we broached more frivolous, less abstract subjects.

Night is drawing nigh in Moscow. Soon my neighbour's car will pull up in front of its favourite rubbish bin.

Pause.

Have you seen *Le Jeu de l'amour et du hasard* at the Comédie-Française? There's no more love, my dear. But I encounter a lot of women. By chance. Actually chance *is* a fine thing. Chance diversifies gestures, attitudes and the expressions of one's face.

And some of those meetings are premeditated, intentional, purposeful.

Long pause.

The destruction of the Tower of Babel is a happy event in our history, the symbol of its inherent optimism. Our life would be dull indeed, but for the post-Babel confusion in which all our pleasures originate and blossom. The diversity of idioms. The coexistence of Andrew Marvell, Paul Celan and Paul Valéry! What would philosophy and literature have become without the diversity of images and opinions, without the variety of colours and hypotheses?

Click.

You mention the slogans in art. 'Our writers and film directors used to pepper their works with ideological slogans. Now it's the slogans of soul that dominate the cultural life in the Soviet Union.'

Indeed there are too many omniscient *babas* in recent novels. Those peasant women seem to have a monopoly on truth. Magic realism, as you say in the West.

There's no magic in it, I'm afraid. And no realism.

Pause.

Truth with a capital T is a spelling error.

Click.

My girlfriends. How do I court and trap the women I set my heart upon? I begin from afar, my dear. I don't speak to those women—I admire them from afar. I love them from afar. First my friends describe the candidates standing in the election and awake thereby my somnolent ardour. Before seeing them in the flesh, however, I luxuriate in the epistolary game that enlivens my curiosity with unexpected tints and tangs.

Large as life. Small as a billet-doux.

I send them short poems in which I express my impatience and my determination to hold it back as long as necessary:

Meteorites often burn up in the atmosphere

Before they reach the earth.

Why should we love each other quickly?

Let us be two candles

Burning far into the night.

Two candles on a dinner table.

One candle on a bedside cabinet.

Supersonic speed, lightning speed. There's no speed limit on the motorways of our century. But love is a path winding through the woods. Let us walk along the path. Let us dawdle on our way. Let us doodle in the margins of life. Often margins are more important than texts. I can't sing too fast a languorous song. But for the ambiguity of metaphors and the hesitation of commas, the final 'yes' might seem coarse and indecorous.

Long pause.

A woman one encounters at a cocktail party weaves her way into one's heart and soul too fast, in my opinion. No obstacle precludes her entrance into the red pavilion of one's longings. And lodgings. Her material presence leaves nothing to the imagination.

My potential mistress. For a while I keep her at bay. The postponement of our first meeting holds us in eager anticipation for several weeks—for several months sometimes. Fondly I cuddle the figments of my imagination related to her persona. I spin a multitude of yarns about our future ecstasies. All my Shererezadian stories are built around the epistles I receive from her. And when we meet at last I recognise neither her features nor her voice.

But I recognise our future.

I feel betrayed somehow—she has concealed herself from my perspicacious glance, from my infallible intuition. My God, what a delicious betrayal! The ever-widening discrepancies that creep in during the epistolary period nourish and sustain my tenderness.

Pause.

The Sibylline aura I thus create is often the only aura she has got. My mistress, my mistresses, my goddesses. My idols, the heroines of my pastoral idylls. But for those erroneous, erogenous images, many of them might seem insipid and common.

Click.

The recording is frightful. But what can I do? I don't want to speak louder, for there are things which, like sweet nothings, ought to be murmured into your friend's ear.

Bitter nothings, my bitter nothings. No murmur will ever sweeten them.

If uttered *wrongly*, a word might lose its impact and meaning, its *raison d'être*. More often than not voices destroy our ideas.

And what about cassette recorders?

The microphone is in-built so I can't bring it closer to my mouth without removing the whole contraption from my desk. And where am I supposed to put it?

First I have to clear up the mess my last mistress made in this room. Actually I should start by clearing up the mess I made *everywhere* when I tried to cook dinner for another mistress of mine. There are several layers of dirt in my flat. By which layer should I start? By the upper one? It's too high, I'm afraid. And the only ladder I've got is too far away. I mean it's pretty close to where my armchair stands—my flat is extremely small. But there are so many obstacles in between us that I'm not likely to reach it before the weekend. And I'd like to rest during the weekend. I think I've deserved it.

The mess I live in is a net where I've been caught. In a dream Tsuang-tse realised he was a butterfly. Am I a butterfly? Or just a fly?

And I haven't been to Mass for ages.

Click.

I've listened to the recording once again. The sound quality leaves a lot to be desired. What's more, I've detected an indecent noise that seems to come from the bowels of the Philips. Does the mechanism disapprove of my style? What does it detest? My way of reasoning, my arguments, my voice, my pauses?

When I listen to the cassettes I've recorded for your benefit I recognise neither my voice nor my sentiments. Worse still, I'm loath to recognise myself. Whatever I say irritates me beyond measure. Everything irritates me: my words, my accent, my mannerisms.

I'm not like that, I can assure you. Do you still remember me, my real self? My flesh, my blood? I'm bloodless on these cassettes. Even the texts I write beforehand seem to fawn upon the fiendish apparatus.

I'm under the impression it's too far away from my mouth. And I can't get closer to it without leaving my bed. So I speak too loud, I strain my vocal cords.

'He always seems to be straining for effect,' your friends might say if you played this recording for them. Don't show my cassettes to anybody. Keep them in the bottom drawer of your desk.

I adjust my ideas to the cassette recorder. *C'est le monde à l'envers*. The other way round, as usual. I'm almost tempted to remonstrate with the Philips: 'As a machine you have to adjust your aptitudes to suit the needs of your client.'

Click.

Last night I shifted the bed against the wall. And I shifted the armchair against another wall. And I shifted the bedside cabinet against the armchair.

Last night I tried out another socket, the one that is nearer to the kitchen. And I used an extension cable. In the States I would have used an extension cord, I suppose. In the States I might have talked to another tape recorder. Last night. And in London, and in Paris. And I would have slept in another bed.

I really need a double socket so I can use the kettle and the cassette recorder at the same time.

Well, I didn't get a wink of sleep all night.

My recorded voice is fading out. Is it a bad omen? Is there such a thing as electronic death?

I'm taking no notice of this machine's threats—it can't do anything.

Click.

Armchair creaks.

If I bend forward I run the danger of falling down. My armchair is rather rickety, you know. My armchair doesn't always succeed in keeping its balance; and yet reliability is the only quality of modern furniture.

Armchair creaks.

My armchair becomes even more rickety whenever I broach a lascivious subject. Is it jealous? Or is it a stern moralist like my mother?

She often calls me right in the middle of my love scenes. And if I happen to be alone she interferes with my most licentious reveries. What a pity I can't buffer myself against her harangues by means of an answerphone. What a pity I'll never have an answerphone in my possession.

In spite of her sclerosis she forgets neither her son nor the whereabouts of the address book in which her son's telephone number can be found.

Almost a year ago my mother broke a leg but this handicap doesn't prevent her from paying me visits every other day, as is her wont. Luckily for me I can't reach the front door any more. Nor any other door, for that matter.

Actually she hasn't come for two months. But she makes up for the lack of visual and physical contact by doubling the dose of our audio tête-à-têtes. She rings me up in the mornings and in the evenings. She spies on both my activities and my sloth. Now and then she orders me to shut up. Submissively I comply with her wish and she listens to the music of my flat which, in her opinion, harbours a dissonance of debauchery.

She complains about her decrepitude. For hours and hours she talks about her broken leg. And I listen to her long-winded accounts as if she was my favourite disc.

Long pause.

Does she intend to put my raptures in a deep freezer? Fortunately those machines cannot be acquired in Soviet shops.

Pause.

'You're a dissident,' she proclaims over the phone and her words reverberate throughout the Soviet Union. Even in London you could hear them, I suppose.

In cases of severe mental handicap, constant supervision is recommended.

I assure my mother and all those who are exposed to her verbal incontinence that I've no intention of leaving my fatherland where 'nobody dies of hunger'.

'Stalin wouldn't have tolerated such behaviour,' she vociferates. My mother hasn't forgotten Stalin despite her sclerosis.

Long pause.

I'll tell you two stories. The first seems to have originated in Kafka's *Ein Hungerkünstler*.

I know a woman whose distant cousin, being allergic to our food, used to partake of imported products only. But somebody or other was arrested, imprisoned and executed. No more Western food, alas. Our hunger artist is starving to death. And when he is force-fed he resorts to vomiting, I'm told. The Soviet variety of crash diet.

The dignity of Man

Resides in refusals.

The second story touches upon naïveté and spontaneity—the qualities that Wordsworth sang with gusto in his poems devoted to infancy and its transports. The other day an actor invited me to a provincial town where, at Christmastime, almost every year, the members of his company perform for children. There's no Christmas in our country, but Christmastime hasn't been outlawed yet.

A small hall, which seemed to have no heating, was swarming with children and their relatives. The hall was dirty; the children were even dirtier than the hall.

A number of fairy tales followed each other in rapid succession as if they were ashamed of themselves, of the hall, of their interpreters. Actually the performance looked and sounded like a funeral procession, notwithstanding the multi-coloured costumes and the explosions of applause. My friend wore a crown throughout the performance, a plastic crown. Once in a while three actors bowed to him. At the end they brought him a huge apple so as to prove to everybody he was a *real* king. The apple was so gigantic that for a moment I thought it was as artificial as the crown. My friend bit into the apple—he *was* a real king after all—whereupon a child in the first row shouted: 'Not bad, his part.'

Long pause. Click of lighter. Telephone rings.

Whenever I light a cigar—

Click.

Is this woman really my mother? What genes do we have in common?

She recounts in great detail her friends' cancers and heart attacks. She quotes their last words; she imitates their groans and death rattles. She describes their tombstones. My mother is very fond of death. Death is my mother's lifelong passion. She speaks of death in the way others pontificate on parlour games and fashion designers. She seems to try death on in front of a mirror. Death Number One is too broad at the shoulders; Death Number Four is too tight. Do you have anything slightly looser?

Only a suicidal maniac can wear a tailor-made death.

Long pause.

If genetic rules had been observed my father wouldn't have become my brother-in-law.

Pause.

He died seventeen months ago. My father is dead.

Aristotle says that in a country where, in accordance with a longstanding tradition, men used to share women one could go only by resemblance when assigning children to their fathers.

My *real* father. I happen to recognise him at the Hermitage and even at the Pushkin Museum. I come across him on Olympus where he whiles away the hours between feasts in the company of muses. Recently I chanced upon him in Delvaux's painting *Hommage à Jules Verne*.

Long pause.

In the course of a dinner party a lady dropped a chocolate truffle. Industrious and pompous, my father knelt down and crawled on all fours to where he was hoping to lay his hands on the unruly titbit. After a long search the worthy successor of Schliemann scrambled up and deposited the truffle on the lady's plate.

'Whatever falls is lost,' says the proverb.

Whatever doesn't fall is also lost.

Pause.

He bribed my concierge, putting a finishing touch to the worldly happiness of that former KGB official.

Pause.

Be that as it may, I owe a lot to my father—I was born in London, in the capital of the British Empire. It was my father who granted me the privilege of being born in London. He was nominated to his post at the Embassy in 1946. And we stayed in England until 1955.

Where'er I wander, boast of this I can:

Though banished, yet a true-born Englishman.

Click.

The quick are supposed to shower praise on the dead. Yet, within the walls of my memory, my father is crawling on all fours as if incapable of rising to his feet. In a way, our memory disables its lodgers. Some of them are paralysed, others suffer from rheumatism. Within the

circular walls of my memory, my father will never get up. Nor will he kiss the lady's hand instead of pursuing her truffle. Forever his eyes will follow its itinerary.

Will he always bribe my concierges? They're multimillionaires already.

His death modified neither his postures nor his words.

Nor did his death modify *my* words.

Memory isn't a glass of Mouton Rothschild—

You can't empty it. Even amnesiacs remember

Something. They remember they're amnesiacs.

Pause.

Shall I love him one day, my father?

Pause.

My mother, her espionage. I don't remember what I wanted to talk about.

Often I get carried away by my own words. They drag me into a remote corner of my memory and a half-obliterated face looms ahead of me, all of a sudden. And a half-extinguished eye stares me down.

My father's face, his eyes. I lost the thread of what I was saying.

Long pause.

I'm exhausted. I've never spoken so long without being interrupted. People interrupt me even if they whole-heartedly agree with my ideas and theories.

The cassette recorder interrupts me as well. This undisciplined machine cuts in on our conversation.

I think the cassette is almost finished.

Click.

Not quite, not yet. 9 p.m. I'm already tired. You are what you eat. And I've eaten nothing since last night. So what am I? Nothing, I suppose. I could eat a horse but there are no horses in my room.

I've even forgotten my five-o'clock tea. Well, it's never too late to have five-o'clock tea. Or a five-o'clock shadow.

Click.

Sound of tea cup being placed on saucer.

My brain is desperate for a rest. My throat is desperate for a rest. My lungs are desperate for a rest. Even my legs are desperate for a rest. Yet I seldom go out. I'd like to become a 'rest artist' for five weeks at least. I'm already a weariness champion but I'm yearning for new laurels.

The world champion.

I should go to Kislovodsk.

Long pause.

Tiredness is my principal occupation. In this field I have no rivals. I'm a tireless worker, as far as tiredness is concerned.

I must go to Kislovodsk.

To a nunnery!

Pause.

I've had no holiday this year. And a few days of rest which, like a time artist or a time beggar, I obtained from my superiors were spent on trifles. On truffles.

My birthday. What do I care about my birthdays or deathdays!

A monotony of toasts, a monotony of smiles. A Gregorian chant of jokes. In the end I got weary of my holiday.

I've no wish to dwell on my maladies. Why should I? I'm not a masochist. And I'm in excellent spirits into the bargain. Today. Let your Western gaiety be mirrored by the champagne glasses emptied in my honour.

My birthday lasted a fortnight.

Pause.

My tea is cooling down.

I can't talk and drink at the same time.

The cassette isn't over yet. It seems to expand as I talk. The cassette adjusts itself to my loquacity, to my verbosity, to my wordiness. To my worthlessness.

Long pause.

To a nunnery!

Go south!

I must go to Kislovodsk.

It's the only spot in the Soviet Union where one can picture to oneself the Garden of Eden. Naturally, with no effort.

Foreseeing, forefeeling, forehearing the Garden of Eden.

If I remember rightly.

Pause.

Why should I be right? I'm always wrong. And I can't rely on my memory. Nobody can rely on my memory. Nothing can rely on my memory.

And I can't trust my arguments.

Pause.

I'm longing to see mountains again. And the sky. In the Caucasus the sky is still virginal, chaste, monastic. If you see what I mean. To a nunnery!

I hope I'm not mistaken. The quota of disappointments for this year has already been filled.

Have I filled the quota of errors?

I'm longing for the transparency of heaven and for whatever comes out of the blue. I hope the mountain air won't make me feel dizzy.

I'm afraid I can't stay in the Caucasus for more than three days.

Click.

The attempted holiday was badly bungled.

I'd rather stay at home.

Click.

I think I made a wise decision not to go to the Caucasus at all.

With the passing of the years I may become a 'prudence artist'.

Click.

The cassette is over, I think. And I hate being interrupted mid-sentence.

Long pause.

END OF FIRST CASSETTE

SECOND CASSETTE

Snow, snow, snow, snow, snow. I used to love it. I still love it but I fear it. I'm cold, my dear. I'm cold. And winter is drawing nigh.

Despair, despair, despair, despair, despair, despair. Do you remember this poem by Hopkins?

Cold is the absence of heat. The absence of heating, to be exact. My neighbours leave their flats in November. They go south. They come back in April or at the end of March. When the heating is out of order humans adopt a more flexible approach to life. They become migratory birds.

I'm staying at home. I've got no relatives in the Crimea, in the Caucasus.

In Ancient China a musician could warm up the air in his house, in the town square, at a lakeside. He would sit on a cushion strumming gently. All he had to do was touch the notes that symbolised and incarnated summer, south, warmth.

In this flat of mine there's no room for my clavichord. Anyway it's out of tune. Everything is out of tune, my dear. Even my voice is out of tune. Despair, despair, despair, despair, despair, despair.

Do you remember my clavichord? Do you remember its hammers? The drawing pins? The thumbtacks? Do you understand my English?

Do you understand anything?

Do you remember anything?

Pause.

I know what I wished to talk to you about—the bicentenary of the Bolshoi. Where could I borrow two hundred cassettes?

They installed a sort of gallery on the stage. A grandstand—call it what you will! Higher than the roof, as the saying goes. That gallery was really higher than the roof—in the literal sense of the word. That grandstand went up in terraces. They must have made a hole in the roof. Only legs could be seen. No heads, no bodies. Dancers, directors, stage designers, ambassadors, conductors, ministers, make-up artists. Their legs, all those legs. Higher and higher. As high as the flies. And myriads of décolletés in the orchestra. Necks and shoulders. Plunging necklines, V-necks, pearl necklaces, gold necklaces. A few couples necking in corners. What a spectacle!

A pyramid on the stage, a living Tower of Babel.

Our *ballerina assoluta* surpassed herself. She changed her clothes three times. They ought to have transported her to Madame Tussaud's. At once! She conjured up the images—the photographs of Semionova. And I'm sure Pavlova would have dressed in the same fashion for the Bolshoi bicentenary. At least she might have chosen the same fashion designer.

Pavlova, the spitting image of Pavlova. I consulted my albums, you know. And I made a few telephone calls. Only the diadem was different. Pavlova had a predilection for feathers.

Long pause.

The programme was long-winded. Long-winged, rather. There were too many swans on the stage. And very few sleeping beauties. No wonder I fell asleep after a while. I slept that night. I slept, my dear, believe it or not. I was a sleeping beauty myself, for once. Why don't they celebrate their jubilees every night?

Long pause.

They seem to have died, all of them. In the house opposite. Their windows are black. A funeral procession.

They have left me alone. They have left me in peace.

Pause.

Tsouang-tse admonished us not to bother about others, about our neighbours.

They will thrive and prosper, provided we take care of ourselves. In other words, if everyone nurses their own hearts and angst, there will be no need for helpers.

Once upon a time, an American tourist went to India. On a sightseeing tour of Rajasthan he chanced upon an emaciated Hindu who, crouching behind a bush, did not seem to notice life and its representatives on earth. After a careful survey of the skeleton-like body, the American deposited by its side two ham sandwiches and a bottle of Fanta. On his way back the humanitarian stopped by the body on which he had lavished so much affection a few hours before. A few days before. The Hindu was dead. The sandwiches and the Fanta were alive, however. Alive and well. Even flies and cows seemed to despise them. In India flies and cows know that destiny cannot be altered by a slice of ham.

What is short? What is long? Love makes one little room, an every where.

Where should I go? Should I go somewhere? And what if I stay in my room forever?
Let sea-discoverers to new worlds have gone—

Should I sleep in my bed? Should I commit suicide?

Or poserai per sempre,

Stanco mio cor. Peri l'inganno estremo

Ch'eterno io mi credei. Peri.

I drink four glasses of fine champagne and fall asleep in my armchair. Am I on the wrong track?

Whoever falls must rise again.

Otherwise

He'll fall asleep.

Why not? Let me fall asleep. Anyway it's the same nightmare. Everywhere. The same mare, the same night.

Am I on my final lap of the track? Am I running? Am I riding?

My legs are killing me.

Should I kill my legs and leave the rest of my body intact? I don't need my legs, do I?

Pause.

Ever since Gauss's discovery mathematicians successfully challenge Euclid and his absolute truth by endowing Space with various kinds of geometry, all logical and non-contradictory.

There are as many styles as human beings and my way of dying bears no resemblance to the deaths depicted in books and newspapers. Roads do not converge on the horizon. An optical illusion. Why reject numbers and accept the common denominator? Why reduce history to one point only? To one point, to one idea, to one object? To the Cross?

And the rest? The remains?

The remnants of our city's former glory?

According to Chateaubriand, Plato was a precursor of Christianity; and 'red philosophers' maintain that Hegel was a herald of Lenin.

Neither Plato nor Hegel relied on pure guesswork in calculating the future of humankind.

Pause.

Fortune tellers are jobless in the world where nobody strives to reach a distant goal, to meet the highest standards ever, and so on and so forth. Anyway we cannot budge from our armchairs. There are no goals, no trips, no stars. Just a curtain in front of a window. And that window is a mirror. Tomorrow will bring misfortunes and misadventures, but nothing can spoil my present delights. So tomorrow will never come—neither tomorrow nor the day after. I'll just extend, prolong my delights beyond dead ends and deadlines. 'The whole area of research is pregnant with possibilities for future developments,' I read in The Times. Stuff and nonsense! Nothing is pregnant with possibilities. Everything has happened already. No woman is pregnant because everyone has been born. Everyone is living today and therefore no one will ever die.

Carpe diem. I'm happy when my inspiration doesn't fade away too soon, when the sentence I'm writing adheres to my thoughts, obsequiously following their contours. I can delete the sentence afterwards, but the joy I experience upon scribbling it in my notebook is hidden forever on Treasure Island.

Pause.

I've no desire to sacrifice myself either for the sake of future generations or in order to ensure my own posthumous felicity. Any work in progress would stain the beauty of the instant I luxuriate in now—throughout my life, as a matter of fact. Striking from the Calendar unborn To-morrow, and dead Yesterday.

No, yesterday is alive. *Our* yesterday.

Pause.

Mystics have always enjoyed a good reputation. I think, however, that scientists and *bons vivants* deserve a higher praise on our part, for they constantly deal with reality—the primeval source of unpleasantness. Anyone can take refuge in the lap of the Absolute. The mood of the

multitude is more attuned to surrender than to a voluntary agreement with natural laws. Mental suicide is rightly appreciated; yet the Hereafter is easier to handle than reality.

*Ben sento,
In noi di cari inganni,
Non che la speme, il desiderio è spento.*

The Hereafter always models itself upon our hopes.

Or is it the other way round? Do our hopes mould the Hereafter into something we want to experience after death?

Pause.

'You'll never become a painter,' I said to a greenhorn student whose watercolours faithfully mirrored his mediocrity.

'I'll become a painter if such is God's will,' he answered. 'Whether I'm talented or not makes no difference.' The bastard was regarded as a mystic by his comrades.

I respect Ruysbroeck and Sufis, but I also respect Brillat-Savarin.

Long pause.

I'm sleepy. I hope I'm not mistaken. Come on, sleepyhead, let's get you to bed.

Good night, dear friend. Sweet dreams.

Long pause.

I'd better fall asleep before my neighbour's car leaves the courtyard. His car has been having engine trouble recently.

'High noise levels may be even more damaging to children than to adults,' I read in The Times. Perhaps. But I don't like being awakened by my neighbour's car.

He gets up at 6 a.m.

Long pause.

I'm throttled by the tyranny of my environment. And by the absence of another environment.
So I'm doubly throttled.

One of my schoolmates asphyxiated on his own vomit after taking an overdose of sleeping pills. Last month.

Naturally enough, my instinct for self-preservation does its best to mitigate the blows of fate; and the pleasures I derive from literary masterpieces postpone my suicide.

Posa per sempre. Assai

Palpitasti.

What's more, I accept the need for postponement. Yes, my dear—thanks to the *Divina Commedia* and Shakespeare's sonnets my suicide has been put off indefinitely.

Pause.

Leopardi makes me think about it again.

Pause.

'*Il n'est pas d'oeuvre d'art vraiment grande qui n'exalte et ne tonifie l'âme,*' says Bergson. But is it enough? Beethoven's quartets, German poetry, English essays. The salvation of my soul depends on rhymes and rhythms. Not on my reason. I mean I can't reason myself out of my suicidal tendencies.

Pause.

I don't want to burden you with my problems, with my virtual suicides.

'Who'll be chief mourner?'

'I,' said the swan,

'I'm sorry he's gone,

And I'll be chief mourner.'

Pause.

Anyway, tonight I'm in excellent spirits.

On the other hand I'm reluctant to suffer without airing my grievances. Epicurus doesn't forbid his followers to scream with pain and beg for anaesthetics.

Pause.

Ah, my dear, it's wonderful to speak to you. Happy days are here again. Right here, in my room.

Pause.

Only my misery prevents me from being happy. And my bad health of course. My liver, my stomach, my small intestine, my large intestine. And yet the fact that I've so far managed to hold in check my suicidal impulse is a tribute to my intestinal fortitude.

It's an American expression, I think. Intestinal fortitude is bravery and determination.

I thought I'd brush up on my American English before the recording session.

Pause.

My health and my environment—a double curse. Tonight I'm seeing double, my dear.

A wicked witch put me under a double curse.

Pause.

4.30 a.m. Another sleepless night.

'Everybody is a blacksmith of his own happiness,' says the Russian proverb. But I have no smithy, my dear.

Et c'est en forgeant qu'on devient forgeron.

Long pause.

I've been deprived of my freedom. I've been deprived of adequate sleep. I've been deprived of my dignity.

I've been deprived of your presence.

Pause.

My colleagues worship St Russia and Slavonic open-heartedness. And Slavonic open-mindedness. They'll never leave their motherland. According to their doctrine, the place of birth is a symbol, a sign of destiny which, on the day of the ultimate departure, is demoted to a mere fact—an item in a data bank.

I remind my colleagues that I was born in the capital of the British Empire.

Click.

You opened three bottles of champagne. And I heard a dozen oysters. I heard their shells knocking against the Sèvres china. May your future cassettes model their *joie de vivre* upon the discretion of silent movies!

Pause.

I recall a novel I read in my youth. A science-fiction novel. Its protagonist fed on sounds.

If music be food, play on!

Pause.

Oysters, oysters. Do you serve them on a bed of crushed ice?

Long pause.

Silence. The total absence of sounds has a beneficial influence on my brain. At such moments the voice of my thoughts scarcely rises above a whisper.

But a drawn-out silence doesn't help my body to build up resistance to hullabaloo. And I'm running out of earplugs. I keep a stock of earplugs, you know.

Whenever I have an opportunity to speak to those who can cross our border without being shot or put in an asylum I point out that earplugs are less expensive than a glass of ale in a pub.

But my friends and acquaintances suffer from amnesia. And they're always in a hurry. And they're afraid they might miss their planes, their trains, their ships, their spaceships. Anyway their suitcases are too heavy and too numerous.

I call this kind of amnesia an 'outside amnesia'. They never forget themselves, mind you. And they always forget the man who sits up all night, his fingers pressed against his ears.

Long pause.

And the voice of my desires! And the iridescence of my passions!

Passions are insomniacs.

My room is illumined

With strings of coloured lights.

Earplugs are powerless in the matter.

Sometimes my desires overtake me on the path to sleep, on the path winding through the woods. Then I have to endure hours and hours of torment. I begin to hear the desires of others: the heavy and spasmodic breathing of my neighbour, the screeching of brakes. Where do all those cars drive to? How many dates do their drivers have in our dismal city between midnight and dawn? How many divans execute their duos and trios?

Long pause. Click.

I've managed to sleep for a while, believe it or not.

Pause.

There are cancer patients who live until the grand old age of ninety-five and die in their sleep. The main thing is that you should fall asleep.

Pause. Sound of tea cup being placed on saucer.

If I had slept until the evening, I would have been in perfect shape.

I'm high-spirited today, but I'm not in perfect shape. I'm low-shaped, as it were. Nor am I on top form.

Sound of cup.

My neighbours think I've been confined to a passive role over the last five years. Indeed I am too passive—I let them walk all over me!

But I can assure you that my passive resistance to life injures neither the suppleness of my thoughts nor my sense of humour. My lifestyle doesn't have a deadening effect on my senses. On the contrary—it sharpens my sensitivity and tastes.

The infirmities of my body are not omnipresent. There's an iron curtain between my brain and my diseases. My brain is always on top form, even during the periods of insomnia. I know how to disengage pain from my life, from my daily occupations. In other words, I disentangle my brain from the web of pain.

Sound of tea cup.

You ask me how my novel is getting on. Well, I'm so engrossed with what I'm writing that I can't distance myself from my work; and I have to see my novel from afar to describe it. Ideally, I should keep silent so as not to disturb your judgement and my future inspiration.

On the other hand you seem to question the very existence of my work in progress. So I've no alternative but to speak about it until midnight. And then I'll try to go to sleep.

What hath night to do with sleep?

I will not recite anything from my novel because I've not finished it yet. Actually I'm putting the finishing touches to the second part. Why should I make public my imperfections? And I've made it a rule to practise an even more drastic self-censorship in the presence of my friends and colleagues. So I'll give you a rather *approximate* description of what I'm writing at present.

How to describe a book of such dimensions? I've embarked on a very ambitious project, you know. A large-scale enterprise!

How to describe a book in a few words? Even a short story? Tolstoy attempted nothing of the sort when asked an indiscreet question about *Anna Karenina*. And I'm not as garrulous as Tolstoy.

You're curious to know what subject matter I'm embroidering upon. But the subject matter doesn't count, my dear. One can write about anything, even about a non-existent novel. It is style and details that count—the linguistic and poetic web the reader gets entangled in. And you want me to disentangle the subject matter from this web!

Actually style and poetry are the only subject matter of any literary work. All masterpieces have the same subject matter, for all the variety of subject matters they're supposed to treat.

I've already put you in the picture about my novel. And it's my eye for detail that distinguishes whatever I write from contemporary prose. And every detail is of the utmost importance, for there's nothing unimportant, insignificant in the realm of art. Do you remember the joke about *The Pique Dame* by Tchaikovsky? In the original Lisa sings thus: 'Midnight is drawing nigh but Herman hasn't come yet.' And we used to say it the other way round, 'Herman is getting closer and closer, but where are the chimes of midnight?' In a play, in an opera, the minute hand of a clock is as important as love or hatred. In real life Lisa would have discarded Time and its emissaries at the sight of Herman's figure looming in the darkness. On stage Herman and midnight are inseparable.

Likewise the nuances I build into my novel cannot be treated *outside* it. The novel and the nuances cannot be dealt with separately. The Tower of Babel would have collapsed in a cloud of dust had a single stone been extracted from its ground floor.

What we are left with are the main lines, the outlines. Some writers prefer to do an outline first and then flesh out the plot and characters; I'm not of their number. In my works outlines blend into nuances and vice versa. And there are so many nuances in this novel of mine that I might get lost in their midst, were I intrepid enough to venture into its structure.

Long pause.

Where to start? Where to stop? I've no idea how to set about putting my ideas on paper.

Where to start? Where to stop? My novel will have neither beginning nor end. For the moment it has no beginning; and consequently no end.

Pause.

I'll put everything and everybody into my book: the dead and the quick. The latter cannot live without the former. And vice versa. If you speak of the former you have to touch upon the

latter. Sooner or later. Let us take one of my characters—Montaigne. I love his amiable lucidity and his placid indifference; they live in harmony with my nature.

Sometimes I'm under the impression that Montaigne lives in my room, sharing activities with the other occupants. Who are they, you may ask? Plato, Samuel Johnson, Proust...

In the chapter devoted to Montaigne, to his essays and journeys, I'll speak of Horace and Lucretius, of Epicurus and the Stoics, of Samuel Johnson and Pushkin. I'll also depict my own life. And while dealing with this personal subject—my private life—I'll speak of everybody, for I am everybody and everything, the dead and the quick, the world and the underworld. And heaven.

I am the history of the universe.

I'll speak of my afflictions that cast aspersions on the world order, on the history of the world; I'll sing the land where Samuel Johnson died, the land where I was born; I'll describe the countries I've never visited nor visualised; I'll describe the lives I've never lived.

The stars have an important influence on our smiles. And vice versa—our smiles affect their fates, the fates of the stars.

Pause. Click.

This cassette has an end. Unlike my novel.

Long pause.

END OF SIDE ONE

SIDE TWO

This cassette also has a beginning.

Long pause.

My work will conjure up broken mirrors and old hopes, the inconstancy and apathy of Space.

Hopes are always young. Incidentally, I've got very young-looking skin for someone of forty.

Long pause.

The density of art, its ambiguous opacity.

What am I talking about?

I wanted to say something about truth in art—not to be confused with much-vaunted simplicity! The manifold truth of art. The *Divina Commedia* is not elementary. Perish the thought! Is it, my dear Watson?

Sound of slippers shuffling to and fro.

'Not bad, his part.' A genuine apple for a fake monarch. His part is enviable indeed—I feel like an apple.

The forbidden fruit is more enticing

In the hands of others.

In the hands of angels.

I'm fascinated by the way children pass through the looking glass. To and fro, in both directions. Finally they adopt reality; they opt for reality at the expense of magical illusion. On this side, on *our* side, there are the flashy rags of a comedian, not the insignia of a monarch.

The process of materialisation might be accomplished overnight. My niece told me yesterday that her dolls were false. Fancy that! On New Year's Day, however, she quietly sat on the floor playing with her celluloid baby doll.

What an imprudent remark, what an inauspicious event had triggered off the irreversible process?

Only madness can lead her back to the realm of living objects, through the looking glass.

Pause.

The frontiers we cross in our life are incalculable and often blurred. We are eating today what seemed unpalatable last summer; a woman whose lips and hands we have relished for years is likely to become distant, one day—tomorrow or next week. Distant, unconcerned, aloof. In an hour perhaps.

Distant, distant, as if enveloped in some impermeable material.

Long pause. Telephone ringing.

Just a moment. Hello! Ah, my dear cousin. How are you?...Thank you, everything's all right...Yes, wonderful. Just like old times!...What voices, what freshness! Especially Aunt Emily...I'm of a sunny disposition. In an English mood. By the way, your written English is very good but you need to practise speaking it...Ah, these voices! At the age when most people don't leave their armchairs...Solid as a rock...The old generation. It must be the war, I presume...And Uncle Nicholas...Still alive. I thought he'd been dead for years...Yes, I thought so. And Aunt Helen!...Still beautiful, though. Time seems to have spared her profile. And her voice...She used to sing soprano when she was younger, but now she's an alto. Frankly, I don't mind...And she sings her grandchildren to sleep—every night... It's a terrible line, I can hardly hear you...Yes, still very young. No wonder she seduced Uncle Boris and Uncle Andrew...I wouldn't say so. 'Tubby' is an ugly word anyway...How old is she?...I can't believe it. I thought she was at least eighty-two... Yes, Uncle Sergey is eighty-three, that's right. In those days young girls were very much in vogue...Did you hear my Grandmother Natalya?...Mozart, she's keen on Mozart...No, Maria Alexandrovna sings Bellini. In Russian. But it's beautiful, I can assure you...Out of tune, I agree. Especially the high notes...seventy-three, my goodness! I wouldn't be able to speak, let alone...He's dead, isn't he?...Of course, at the Kremlin Hospital. Cancer?...Pneumonia? Well, I never heard him sing. What a party! Better than at the Vienna Opera. Aunt Emily is more touching than Schwartzkopf...What do you expect? We are always at the mercy of the forces of nature...I just can't bear *The Blue*

Scarf. It's so old-fashioned...No, I'm not comparing these songs with Wagner's operas...Yes, the old guard...He knocked down a champagne bottle...Nobody cried. Our relatives are thick-skinned...Tears are never superfluous. Remember *The Nutcracker* at the Bolshoi, last spring...They shouldn't let him go out in wintertime...He broke a leg? There you are! Aren't you confusing him with my mother?...He doesn't like carrying his stick. Well and good! He'll be on crutches for the rest of his life. He refuses to accept the force of logic, but he'll have to yield to the logic of force. Why doesn't he look out of the window? He can sit by the window all day long...His window overlooks the courtyard, doesn't it? How exciting! All those cars...Do you want him to break an arm?...I hope he carries his umbrella around...Let him sing with Sofia...He won't be able to sing at the hospital...In Kratovo of all places!...What a pity I didn't record their voices, their arias...*Une reconstitution historique...*

Click.

I didn't erase the telephone call that had interrupted our discussion. Or rather I erased three-quarters of it. I wanted you to hear at least the beginning which, in my opinion, illustrates a facet of my life, of my dawning senility.

Long pause.

Yes, my dear, I don't leap forward any more. I prefer going back. I don't seek to decipher the code of the future. I go back, paying homage to the past.

Long pause.

I'm in my second childhood. Or in my third childhood. How many childhoods does one spiral through during one's lifetime?

We were speaking about a family party, or rather about a concert to which my uncle's neighbours had contributed by stamping their feet and knocking with fists and crutches on the ceiling, on the floor and on the walls. A real concert, a Gala Night—in spite of the prohibition on vodka which my aunt had announced shortly before. Quavering, shaking, cracked and broken, the ancestral voices seemed infused with that crepuscular beauty which, leaving aesthetics aside, appeals directly to our sense of nothingness, of emptiness.

The crepuscular beauty harbours our destruction; its manifestations are thereby poignant and pathetic. When a woman is close to forty, her face can't help displaying all the efforts that have been made to save the remains of the glorious past.

Mutton dressed up as lamb, you know.

Racing against Time has exhausted her entirely; her glance fades out and does not invite us any longer into the mysterious depths of the feminine soul. Death seems to have folded and flattened her glance with a view to placing it on the pile of extinguished eyes, warning us against any meticulous inspection that might reveal our own fragility, our incurable lassitude. If we persist however, goaded by the memory of the woman's former conquests, we are likely to fall in love with her—compassion is an inexhaustible source of love.

I persist, my dear. I persist on account of my weakness for what I call 'borderline states'. Besides, I know that women never fade away; they only die like all living creatures.

Usually I'm loath to see women crying. But on the verge of tears they're irresistible, I must confess. Their eyelids quiver or come to a standstill as if to concentrate on pain, on anguish, on distress. I'm waiting in suspense to hear something—either sobs or a few words of explanation. And those women might keep me in suspense for quite a while. The nervous tension they skilfully build up engenders a sensual élan which is far more vivacious than the desire accumulated in the contemplation of a naked body.

Pause.

Do you know that some voyeurs give preference to the clothes thrown any old how on a chair, on a bidet?

Last night I looked a complete mess—hair sticking up on end and clothes dragged on just anyhow. Why do I look at myself in mirrors?

Long pause.

In my childhood I would ask my friends to stare at the sun. Their eyelids quivered and, though ignorant of the mechanics of eroticism, I *physically* felt the word 'breathtaking'. *A vous couper le souffle*. Those girls would take my breath away. They both could and could not stare at the sun. They seemed on the verge of—In my opinion, this ambivalence is the most important aspect of eroticism.

Long pause.

Twilight beauty. Frankly admitting its own shortcomings. '*Une rose d'automne est plus qu'une autre exquise.*'

Pause.

Pushkin also liked autumn, especially its last period overlapping winter.

Last spring I fell in love with a sixty-five-year old woman who had the knack of violating the laws of seasons. She took no notice of Time. As a reward for my romantic attachment to her persona, she would describe her childhood, her games, her dolls into whom she had inculcated the values of marriage and family life.

I might have married that woman had she not died a few months after our first meeting.

Thanks to her I understood the love of eternal femininity that Goethe hints at in the last pages of *Faust* somewhat in the manner of a student listing his sources at the end of his essay. Eternal femininity, primeval magnetism. I was drawn towards that woman by the cosmic force inducing celestial bodies to follow their trajectories. The Chinese represent it by the opposition of yin and yang.

Pause.

I don't think I've chosen the right moment for a twilight discussion—the shadows are not falling yet.

Early afternoon.

Pause.

3.24 p.m. to be exact. I've eaten nothing today except an egg, a boiled egg. I'm going out. I'm afraid I have to interrupt the recording.

Click.

I'm painfully aware that sadness is in the nature of things. That's the nature of the beast, I suppose. What beast? What kind of beast governs the universe?

*Non val cosa nessuna
I moti tuoi, nè di sospiri è degna
La terra.*

Pause.

Joy is just a facet of sadness—a hypocritical and hysterical display of sadness.

I'm tired of my own facetious remarks.

Long pause.

For all their many-sided beauty, my memories invariably lead to a meditation in which sadness struts like a Japanese courtesan whose part is performed by a male actor in a Kabuki play. Is it a trait of the Russian character, as Herzen assumed at the end of his English life? Or is it a common denominator of all those who are in the habit of fondling their memories, of talking to them as if they were alive and available? True, every agreeable memory needs to be smiled at, talked to, played with, fondled—gently and lovingly. However, while playing with our memories, now and then we stumble upon the sensation of death that retrospectively curtails the former delights.

Do I use the word 'delights' too often? I'm merely trying to talk myself into happiness.

*Trees are losing their leaves
When we think about winter.*

A trivial reflection, no doubt. But nothing is more trivial than death and sadness.

No one can escape from the eternal recurrence of the same lamentation. The doctrine of eternal recurrence is a prison, isn't it? But there's such a thing as pleasant prison, a joyful, voluntary incarceration. Nietzsche seems to hold this view, if I remember rightly. So do I, my dear. I used to speak at length about my pleasant everyday routine—sometimes in the course of our discussions. What remains of all that bliss and self-satisfaction? The incarceration.

Long pause.

Whenever my sadness begins to lord it over me, I remember the Chinese smile that Yeats is singing in *Lapis Lazuli*; and I smile, I smile, delivered from the gravity of Time.

Pause.

A relief, a moment of respite. I'm never one to make a decision when I can procrastinate, fudge and prevaricate. Why can't I make a decision? The decision? To end my ups and downs. Once and for all. End of story!

Long pause.

People looking at the statues of the Buddha benefit from an increased feeling of well-being and from a feeling of being more in control of their emotions.

I might get used to my misery.

I will not look at the Buddha again.

END OF SOUND LETTER ONE

SOUND LETTER TWO

FIRST CASSETTE

Another period of silence. A year and a half. Nothing. Have you sent me anything? A cassette, two cassettes? How many cassettes have got lost over Europe? I can't believe you've sent me nothing for a year and a half.

Are you angry with me? Did I offend you? I don't remember what I talked about. And I threw away the text. A long time ago.

I can't have insulted you. I'm not as nasty as all that. I'm not kind either, I'm afraid. But I'm definitely not nasty. I'm not dangerous to know.

Pause.

The messenger I had found in our forbidden city refused to take two cassettes. My confessions are too cumbersome.

I won't manage to pack all my thoughts and emotions into one cassette. Never mind. You need neither my thoughts nor my emotions.

Actually this cassette is thicker than the previous ones. It's more generous, more charitable.

I don't want charity. I can manage.

An hour and a half. Half-an-hour longer.

Long pause.

I'm not worn-out like those who get lost and return home later than usual. I'm worn-out like an old pair of trousers. Have I been locked in a wardrobe and eaten by moths? Has somebody worn me every day for two years at least?

Am I moth-eaten?

Pause.

I'll have to mothball my novel until next year at the earliest.

Long pause.

Eighteen-year-old girls are not available any more. Unless I resort to sleeping pills.

Their sex appeal is easy to sum up—*Paradise Lost*.

Long pause.

She is gone. I'm alone at the moment.

Pause.

Should I frequent the Intourist hotels in the hope of meeting an Englishwoman? Westward ho.

I'm not invited any more to the Foreign Ministry and the English Embassy couldn't care less about my discomfiture.

In our country where black markets are as widespread as red stars there must be a marriage bureau that specialises in bringing together Soviet citizens and representatives of capitalist countries.

Where could I find the address of such a bureau? In the yellow pages? There are no telephone directories in our country. No yellow pages; no black ones either. You're supposed to get information on black markets by word of mouth.

Only grey pages. Everywhere.

Long pause.

'Dreams, dreams, where's your sweetness?' With this quotation from Pushkin you used to interrupt my impracticable reveries. Now I interrupt myself. For want of anything better I have recourse to self-service.

Suicide is a rare form of self-service.

Pause.

The Russians are inveterate, chronic dreamers. *Chassez le naturel, il revient au galop.*

Pause.

London, English poets, English essayists, Boswell—that's my true nature. *Mon naturel*. Why doesn't it come back at a gallop?

At least no one can deprive me of English literature.

Pause.

Why swap this aura of centuries for a capricious woman, for the hysterics worthy of Nastasya Philipovna? I'm not an idiot, am I?

'Roots,' explains R. But my roots stretch as far as Pluto. I'm a citizen of the solar system.

Click.

I woke up only at 6.20 a.m. and immediately I went back to sleep again. What a surprise! It's the advent of sleep I celebrate today.

Pause.

I propose to describe the place where my daydreams and nightdreams unfold.

The building I live in is depicted by T'ao Hung-Ching as follows:

A forlorn and forgotten house

In a desolate cityscape.

Incidentally, some Western reports have described the houses in my area as unfit for human habitation.

In my flat there's a living room which also acts as a dining room, a bar and a guestroom. Screen-like, a pile of books protects the privacy of my visitors. And my own privacy.

The clatter of chariots

And the shouts of merchants

Do not reach it.

My windows overlook the courtyard. Buses and other traffic monsters jangle, clank and chug beyond the wall opposite.

Besides, double glazing mutes the noise of the traffic.

So there's a wall. But it's not as reliable as earplugs. Often I hear the shouts of my neighbours.

And the neighbours' shouts

Reach my armchair.

Pause.

There's a small tea table on which I usually deposit my tea set; there are many books between the floor and the ceiling, between the door and the walls; there's a drawing in Indian ink, a mock Chinese drawing; there's a record player, an old Philips flanked by two loudspeakers that look like skyscrapers for dolls; there are plants I water every night.

Mes soirées en famille.

Pause.

But there's no dog. I intended to buy my piano teacher's dog, a three-month-old spaniel. I relinquished the idea because, in my absence, he might have eaten my books. He would have howled and upset all my tables, slopping my porridge all over the floor; he would have opened the gas and blown the house to kingdom come; and he would have been buried alive or dead. In our country, there's no such thing as 'dog-sitting'.

Pause.

Two Turkmen carpets. Two chairs, imitation Régence, a sofa bed regularly burdened with the accomplishment of carnal desires. There's enough room for a threesome. Or a foursome. Lengthways—four people. Widthways—six people. Or just two people. Or one man.

Pause.

I'm ensconced in my armchair. I spend hours gazing at the side table which looks like a pyramid on account of the numerous letters I've piled on it. Three hours ago I spotted the letter of Count Vorontsov—the jewel of my autograph collection.

Your letter. A thick envelope fends off the curiosity of bad-mannered visitors. What a pity! Your spidery scrawl is more refined than the handwriting of the glorious Chancellor.

Pause.

Why should the thickness of the envelope deter the curious? Because it's too much for them to read? Wouldn't, on the contrary, the promise of plentiful information whet the appetite of the inquisitive?

Should I remove the envelope?

Pause.

Your letter is lying beside a Sabena lamp, a turning lamp: above a polychrome globe planes are flying in all directions to demonstrate the tentacular global reach of Belgian airy roads. When, inspired by the heat of light, the world begins to turn, parading the four continents covered with the network of Belgian itineraries, my visitors stiffen and lapse into silence.

This lamp casts a multitude of Chinese shadows which, for all the steadfast orthodoxy of my walls, will never become naturalised Soviet shadows.

The whole ritual reminds me of Marcel's lamp, of the magic lantern depicted in the opening pages of *A la recherche du temps perdu*.

The Proustian lamp is silhouetted against the Persian drapes, as the Americans would put it. 'Against the Persian drapes' sounds better than 'against the Persian curtains'. On the other hand, 'Persian curtains' sounds better than 'Persian drapes'.

Pause.

My Persian curtains. White birds on a blue background.

I'd rather have blue birds on a white background. Never mind, never mind.

And plants everywhere.

The window is veiled like a Muslim woman. No one can see me. Nothing can see me except light.

Pause.

Light isn't red, my dear. Light is neutral.

On the walls there are some exhibition posters: Calder, Max Ernst, de Chirico. And the painting of N. And my own watercolour.

The posters are illuminated by two spotlights giving birth to a few crenellated shadows. Mediaeval shadows. Elsinore or the Kremlin—no matter!

Pause.

This also reminds me of Proust, of his magic lantern. Everything reminds me of Proust.

Pause.

But I'm in search of the time I'll never find. Never.

Pause.

Opposite my bed there hangs a picture of Caernarvon—an edifice of stupendous majesty and strength. And also my drawing in Indian ink. On a pedestal table I put my African ashtray. This cigar pyramid is level with my hand.

A number of magazines and discs are also level with my hand. Matches and lumps of sugar are strewn all over the carpet. And a huge lighter in solid gold. On my thirtieth birthday I received it from S. And he had got it from his father. And his father had got it from Churchill.

You can't imagine how big it is. In solid gold!

Around my armchair there are some mock Japanese vases, bottles of perfume and cigar boxes.

To cut a long story short—my flat is full of antiques and curios.

Pause.

My story is too long, I'm afraid.

Yes, there's a lot of discomfort, but it's liveable for a while.

Long pause.

She is Russian. Charmingly and unexpectedly, she combines Natasha Rostova's naïveté with the sensual frankness of Tatiana whom Eugene Onegin, ignorant of Proust, did not find again. No *temps retrouvé* for him!

To my friends she is an icon of the Russian woman. Religious and infidel, despondent and full of beans, she holds my attention even when I think about other women.

Pause.

Sometimes she appeals to my senses. Sometimes I'm indifferent to her ways and looks. The occipital lobe of my brain finds her enticing and fascinating; the frontal lobe criticises her severely. And there's always a note of disapproval in my voice. My ears disagree with each other; so do my eyes. And when our breaking off seems inevitable, she charms me into doing what she wants.

This woman is manifold—mischievous, cruel, touching and presumptuous, she counterbalances my monolithic sloth.

She is as inconstant as the London sky, for all her Slavonic genes.

There's nothing beyond the clouds.

The stars are the dust of our dreams.

I haven't written a poem for a year or so.

British weather is perhaps at its most variable in the spring. So is my Eugenia.

Pause.

Whatever the topic of our discussions, I always talk about London.

She is as fickle as my mood.

And yet it's the same woman who comes to my place almost every day. And if I don't recognise her, she upbraids me for my betrayal.

Long pause.

I need earplugs, noseplugs, eyeplugs. All my senses are in need of being shielded and sheltered. How to soften reality? How to deaden my neighbours' voices? How to deaden the vibrations of my heart? There's a certain deadness in my eyes, but I'm still alive, my dear. Do I lie whenever I say I'm alive? The statement 'I'm a liar' is a paradox because if the statement is true, it must be false and if it is false, it must be true. But what about my death? Is it true or false? 'I'm dead.' Is it a true statement? Can a living man proclaim that he's dead?

How to soften reality? How to adjust it to the tender penumbra of my senses?

Pause.

As for earplugs, I've run out of my stock.

Click.

The earplugs manufactured in the Soviet Union do not suit me at all. To tell the truth, they have nothing in common with *authentic* earplugs. They're made of paper, my dear. My ears cannot stand them.

I don't reject them on the grounds of their citizenship.

I thrust my mother away whenever, out of patriotism, she attempts to stuff those abominable balls into my auditory canals.

They engender noise, believe it or not. They annihilate my inner silence. My ears begin to buzz at the touch of that anti-soporific paper. And my mother thinks that these are the best earplugs in the world. To prove it, she wears them like earrings: in the streets, in theatres and concert halls. She rummages in my things every other day, and if she lights on real earplugs, she hides them. She hides them, she throws them away.

Pause.

In addition to earplugs—authentic or false, as the case may be—I have to dose myself with valium. To calm my nerves. And I swallow myriads of other tablets. How could I live without tablets? I need them badly, whether I'm dead or not. The dead also dose themselves with valium, I suppose. Even in Paradise.

You eat oysters; I swallow pills. A subtle harmony reigns in the universe. I hear your champagne bottles; you hear the glass of water knocking against my teeth.

A chacun sa musique.

Long pause.

Il y a plus de distance de tel à tel homme qu'il n'y a de tel homme à telle bête. Some humans are further away from my soul than wild beasts.

I don't think the distance between us has reached such proportions. Our spirits dwell in the same house, in the same castle—in a room carpeted with old engravings and Persian miniatures.

A few Klee drawings would be in order.

Our thoughts intertwine to form a dark roof over the path along which we are walking forever.

Pause.

From your cassette I sense that our views have diverged in ways that would have been unthinkable in the old times, when we walked the Sparrow Mountains.

Pause.

Soon we shan't be on the same wavelength. You'll appropriate the short waves, I suppose.

Pause.

The good old times. What times they were! They were the only times. The good old times, the good old times. What do you call the period we are living in? The bad new times.

Click.

Corks are popping again. Is there a champagne war in England? Once more I listen to your cassette and I hear nothing but corks. Popping, popping, popping, popping. Sounds like the gate of Macbeth's castle. Knocking, knocking, knocking. Why do you open champagne

bottles so noisily? Are you forgetting your manners? You have no savoir-faire, my dear.
'*Piano, piano,*' as conspirators sing in Rossini's operas.

Pause.

A veil brings out the beauty of a face. A softened, subdued light favours the expansion of a metaphor.

The Japanese have a secret predilection for matt, dull surfaces.

Tanizaki thinks that a piece of lacquer ware is inseparable from penumbra.

Pause.

When performed in a distance, Puccini's operas sound like a Gesualdo madrigal.

And all pianists have a spark of genius, provided one listens to them through a door, through a thick wall.

Discretion dims lights and blurs contours.

Beauty is a privilege of the short-sighted.

At the peak of its achievements, a civilisation uses only half-words, half-tints and half-taints.
Why shout your truth from the rooftops?

There's more truth in the suspension points of a Chinese smile than in the exclamation marks of hysterical sobs.

Pause.

Rasputin keeps on breaking mirrors!

The Russian soul has always been painted in scarlet. The colour of our national flag is its purest expression.

The Russians are impatient. They rush along the shortest way without making detours.

Long pause.

It's the way that counts, the road, the path, the texture, the relief, the detours. Hou K'ieou-tseu says: 'What's the supreme goal of the traveller? The supreme goal of the traveller is to be unaware of where he goes.'

Pause.

There are no solutions either in a work of art or in life. But odours and rhymes help us surmount the socialist realism of everyday life.

Long pause.

Yesterday our friend R. decided not to read novels any more. They don't fit in with his eschatological preoccupations. Plots, characters, suspense. He has an abhorrence of 'all sorts of literary paraphernalia'.

And the day before yesterday he stopped going to the pictures.

He utters one word—a kingdom is destroyed, a tradition obliterated. And by means of two words he can erect a statue to a grain of sand.

Pause.

And he makes no attempt to contain his fury when he launches his verbal attacks. If converted into mechanical force, his fury might propel him as far as Saturn.

Long pause. Click.

I'm leafing through the notes I've taken for my novel. Cioran: '*Le sourire du Bouddha, ce sourire qui surplombe le monde, n'éclaire point nos visages[...]**Le virus chrétien nous travaille: légataires des flagellants, c'est en raffinant nos supplices que nous prenons conscience de nous-mêmes.*'

Pushkin and Tolstoy used to pepper their works with French sentences. And I'm prepared to perpetuate this tradition.

I became conscious of myself when reading haikus.

Pause.

I'm human and nothing human is unknown to me. The smile of the Buddha illumines my face.

I don't seek to enclose men within the bounds of their native lands and epochs.

Nor do I consult my watch all the time.

I leave my dwelling place now and then, although I'm not allowed to leave our country.

Pause.

And it's not my fault!

We are influenced and inspired by miscellaneous cultures and civilisations. The more we immerse ourselves in Space and Time, the higher and wider our Tree of Life grows.

I'll pontificate on any subject if you let me. And you don't seem to voice objections, do you?

The kaleidoscope of my personality is inlaid with the gems I've picked up in the course of numerous readings. But my kaleidoscope is always in motion.

Pause.

We listen to our parents; and we listen to Gracian and Lao-tseu. We wander around the Sparrow Mountains; a book on Japanese gardens awaits us at home. The photographs of those gardens are all the more present since we are prevented from enjoying them 'in the flesh'.

Japanese gardens are human bodies. Everything is a human body. Another trivial thought. What can you expect? Eternity is trivial; Infinity is trivial. Even God is trivial. Only triviality is omnipresent.

Only a mystical élan can convey us to those latitudes and longitudes.

It's a *spiritual* effort we need to appropriate landscapes.

Pause.

The Sparrow Mountains. Are they in my blood?

The cells of our body are constantly being replaced. '*Je respire*,' as Paul Valéry put it. I'm breathing. At school I was told to breathe in deeply and then breathe out slowly. That's what I'm doing right now. Can't you hear? I'm breathing and every puff of fresh air engenders new images, new landscapes and new poems.

And I feel closer to the Japanese than to our friend E. who pontificates on the spirituality of icons and condemns the 'blasphemous elegance' of old Italian painters.

And he is outraged by the abundance of sartorial details in Flemish portraits.

Pause.

There's no denying, however, that Christianity substituted the triumph of pain for the quietude of the Chinese smile.

The smiles they lavish upon us in commercials are not of the same kind.

Blood, sweat and tears.

But there are landscapes in Crucifixion triptychs. And those landscapes close in upon us, embrace us heartily as if to suggest an alternative, a way out; whereupon our pains lose their momentum and melt away into landscapes—the background of our existence.

Long pause.

We must be happy in the midst of our misfortunes.

Phoney happiness. Fool's paradise. Every paradise is a ship of fools, I suppose. Sailing in heaven, threading its way through the stars.

Many people are totally oblivious to death, to our ineluctable disappearance. Ineluctable modality of the invisible.

They seem unconcerned with anything except their own welfare. Their vulgarity makes me wince, my dear fellow.

Long pause.

The daily remembrance of death darkens the colours of our achievements and aspirations. *Un souvenir à rebours*. Every pleasure has a bitter aftertaste.

The wine of our existence is corked. Our smiles are crooked.

Pause.

I hope it's not corked.

Sound of slippers shuffling to and fro.

A friend of mine brought me a bottle from London. A bottle of Claret. A bottle of Medoc.

Sounds as if he brought me three bottles.

Click.

The wine isn't corked. I'll drink the bottle in your presence.

Long pause.

I'll let it breathe for a while.

Long pause.

It's so airless in here—I can hardly breathe.

END OF SIDE ONE

SIDE TWO

Our death-oriented regime offers me an opportunity to come to terms with my self or, to use Heidegger's terminology, to 'live in authenticity'. I remember my mortal self every night, every afternoon.

The loss of self is a fatal disease—I'm quite aware of that. And yet I'd rather forget my self in a luxurious London hotel. In a restaurant. In Hyde Park. In the Tate Gallery.

What do lovers write and say?

'Thee' or 'You'. Never 'I'.

Their selves are lost.

Her cold blue eyes—

Lost property office.

Long pause.

I am sad tonight.

My job is putting together the components of my sadness. What's the result? A chaotic jumble of sensations, an indistinguishable jumble of words—the bits and pieces of my sadness. How could I sort them out?

So I don't even know why I am sad. But I am sad—no doubt about it.

Mono-no aware. A widespread feeling among the Japanese. In the days of Murasaki Shikibu. Almost a custom.

Pause.

The death of a sentiment, the death of a movement, the death of a word.

In those days the people who could not experience the feeling of omnipresent fragility were frowned upon and often excluded from society.

Click.

Massenet: Pourquoi me réveiller ? Werther, Act 3.

I'm listening to a few French arias that fit in with my mood, with my *mono-no-aware*.

I despise the musicians who do not appreciate Massenet's *mono-no-aware*, engrossed as they're in Ockeghem or Dufay. *Pourquoi me réveiller?* This aria tastes like the *petite madeleine*.

End of aria. Sound of slippers shuffling to and fro.

Our pleasures are subjected to the whims of Time. If sung at the wrong moment, this aria makes me unhappy. At the right moment its twilight beauty pervades my spirit, perforates my heart.

The wine I'm drinking depends on the intensity of the sky, on the opacity of my windows.

Do we really need our watches and clocks to measure Time? I measure out half-an-hour and add it to my room—to Space, in other words. And what about my lifespan? How many hours did God measure out to add them to my body?

Let us drink a glass of Burgundy. Drink!—for, once dead, you never shall return.

And what about metempsychosis?

Let us sing an aria.

Pause.

I must tell you the story of her suicide.

Last week she called me in the afternoon to say she had swallowed twenty-five sleeping pills. Her voice was syncopated, almost translucent.

She was leaving the office. For good. She knew she wouldn't reach her flat. No time left, no strength left.

She nearly gave me heart failure.

She was even unable to describe the fatal sleepiness that had assaulted her mind. I mentioned the Sleeping Beauty and Brünnhilde. She didn't laugh. My mystical aloofness, the rarefied air of my light-heartedness, condensed into a slight apprehension. I recalled her laughter, the posture she would strike when laughing her head off.

You have no idea how charmingly she laughs! She looks up at me with her head tilted to one side and puts her left hand on her stomach.

At first I watched the event. I *listened* to the event. I listened to her dying voice. Then I decided to do something about it.

Pause.

She was just putting on an act. *Natürlich*. Do you remember all the fuss and palaver when F. thought his wife had poisoned herself?

She even let me convey her dying body to the nearest hospital.

Pause.

Last year she went to a sanatorium for her summer holiday. A fashionable sanatorium, not far from Moscow. A sophisticated and fashionable lifestyle. Our communist society benefits the wealthy and influential elite, not workers.

She rang me up. And she hung up immediately without so much as a by your leave. After a while she called me again.

'Sorry, I just had to hang up on you. He'd come into my room.'

'Who are you talking about?'

'Never mind—you don't know him.'

Pause.

I still don't know him, my dear.

Pause.

The other day I was sitting at my writing desk. Waiting for inspiration. Pushkin used to embellish his notebooks' margins with heads and hats, with cats and dogs. I draw geometrical figures that cut across each other, creating a sort of cityscape.

My visual meditation seems moreover to be influenced by Piranesi's *Prisons*—I admire so much their paranoiac perspectives.

Perspective is a remedy

Against claustrophobia.

However, perspective is liable to bring about a fatal illness—the terror of infinity. I've already encountered people who cannot sleep in hotel rooms because their windows are empty, devoid of landscapes and cityscapes. They prefer to have a wall in front of their windows. Their suffer from agoraphobia.

And what about the amateurs of naive art?

Pause.

I was sitting at my writing desk. Right in the middle of a promising idea I heard a noise at my feet. A burst of laughter followed. She had decided to grip me by the ankle. Had she succeeded in her undertaking I wouldn't have been moved and touched. It's her laughter that brought tears to my eyes.

She's got such a stock of explosive gaiety that her stock of patience had been exhausted long before she was close enough to my slippers. Her mischievous stratagem failed. She didn't accomplish anything except moving me to tears.

Pause.

She is enticing, marvellous, beautiful. Yet her Muscovite affectation irritates me. She has so many little affectations, you know.

Her manner reeks of falseness and affectation.

I detect in her all the shortcomings of our regime that masks pain and wretchedness with the make-up of the socialist realism.

Pause.

Beauty is enhanced or spoiled by environment—I can't think about it in isolation. The vulgarity of our crowd obliterates the elegance of our palaces. Soviet faces, Soviet glances. I cannot put them aside during my strolls in St Petersburg which, ever since the Revolution, has deserved the name of Leningrad. And our crowd continues to accustom the former capital of Russia to this three-syllable horror. Le-nin-grad. Our crowd continues to convert it to the proletarian religion. Proletarianity.

The harmony of St Petersburg, which haunted Russian writers of the nineteenth century, is not likely to survive the communist cacophony. Built by Italians, caressed by Pushkin's verses, the city looks like a wound now. A gaping wound. Blood is pouring from it.

Long pause.

Why increase the Soviet coefficient of my existence? Why meet her almost every day? Why listen to the sayings she's so keen on: 'Let all cows moo except yours', 'A husband stuffing himself with pears'? Whenever I say 'a husband' she adds automatically: 'stuffing himself with pears,' as if paying homage to the surrealists, to their *écriture automatique*.

I seldom eat pears. And I'm not her husband.

Pause.

I'll describe our first encounter.

I wasn't really struck by her beauty, but in the realm of the senses a gradual revelation is far more dangerous. The revelation in slow motion resembles those diseases which manifest themselves through an acute crisis, after having sapped your body for years.

'*Les beautés qu'on découvre le plus tôt sont aussi celles dont on se fatigue le plus vite,*' writes Proust in the paragraph devoted to Vinteuil's sonata.

Pause.

We listened to *Musique à la cour de Louis XIV* and to Stockhausen's *Stimmung*. We rounded off our background concert by *In the Court of the Crimson King*. We imposed our rhythm on the penultimate song of this superb recording: *Moonchild*. We didn't hear the last song.

How pleasant it is to discard

What you hear—

In favour of inner sounds.

Pause.

The pop stars of today can't hold a candle to the great singers of the sixties and the early seventies.

Long pause.

I can't throw her out, can I? 'Get out of here and never come back!' She would come back half an hour later to tell me I'm a real bastard.

And what if I don't open the door?

She would wait downstairs, in the entrance hall, in the middle of the entrance hall. And I'm not in the habit of clearing up misunderstandings before my neighbours and their visitors. That's what she counts on.

She would insinuate that I'm a notorious egotist and eccentric.

My neighbours. They already look at me disapprovingly. Even their friends' eyes sentence me to life imprisonment.

Long pause.

She left. When did it happen? Last Friday. She didn't come back half an hour later; nor did she phone on Saturday. I opened a bottle of champagne. I drank a toast to my deliverance. I drank a toast to her beauty. I drank a toast to her return, to the return of the Dragon.

She came back on Sunday.

Pause.

I attempted to write a farewell letter.

May the Prince be a Prince, the minister a minister, the father a father, the son a son.

May the farewell letter be a farewell letter.

No additional explanation, no plea for pardon could be envisaged. The full stop was to be a full stop.

I had to avoid commas.

However, I had no intention of insulting her or denigrating the pleasant aspects of our relationship.

And I would not resort to lies either. Besides, the purity of my style compelled me to dismiss sledgehammer arguments and gratuitous ornaments.

I proposed to create a conclusion, to form irreversible sentences.

There are irreversible sentences and irreversible sentences. 'It's better for both of us if we make a clean break of it' is an irreversible sentence. But I'm not boorish enough to write such a sentence.

'The farewell letter is not a thank-you note,' I told myself, picking up my epistolary pen. Even 'Dear Eugenia' sounds different when it introduces an invitation to breaking-off.

Once I had finished the letter I added a postscript where I strove to spell out what I really had in mind so as to get rid of the ambiguities that might have given rise to an erroneous interpretation.

Needless to say, a straightforward exegesis was undesirable, considering the discreet elegance of my style.

Once I had finished the postscript I added a second postscript to elucidate the first postscript and the main text.

Around 3 a.m. I decided to destroy everything except the second postscript that seemed more eloquent—more final, if you see what I mean.

I added, 'Dear Eugenia' and the ending, *la formule de politesse*.

I sealed the letter.

Then I opened the letter so as to re-read it once again—no error was permissible.

La formule de politesse was too polite, as it were. Eugenia might have mistaken it for a declaration of love.

I suppressed it, whereupon the letter became unworthy of a gentleman.

I hit upon another *formule de politesse*.

I copied the letter with a view to removing the deletions—the conspicuous signs of my hesitation.

As I proceeded I found my poetical arguments less logical. And since Eugenia is a fearsome logician—especially in these matters—once more I set about correcting my mistakes.

Her logic is utterly incontrovertible.

It dawned upon me that the name of Eugenia I had put at the head of the letter was the root cause of all my troubles. 'Dear Eugenia.' But to whom was the letter addressed after all?

I could not substitute another name for that of my beloved girl—she would have accused me of treason.

To suppress *la formule initiale*? It's not done either in farewell letters or in anonymous missives.

To write, 'My darling'? Out of the question—she wouldn't have read the remainder of the letter, having been convinced of my sexual and sentimental fidelity.

Her name seemed to impair my concentration and subdue the content of my epistle. Her name reverberated through it with such an insistence, with so much intensity that my arguments would lose their force and indulge in the precarious splendour of double entendre. Even if I had not written her name it would have wormed its way into my letter—I'm sure of that. Her name would have pierced through the clouds of my style.

I also realised that my handwriting was rebellious. My handwriting seemed to contradict the meaning of my words.

My handwriting is neither ugly nor beautiful and I don't think my hand was trembling that night. Yet my handwriting clashed with my intentions and there was nothing I could do about it. Had I altered my handwriting Eugenia would have thought my letter was a forgery.

As usual I was disinclined to look for occult interpretations of natural phenomena. So I attributed this incompatibility to the number of billets-doux I had written to her, exercising my hand and my mind in the art of reconciliation, not in the artifice of separation.

I wasn't tempted to type the letter out—that would have been indecent and discourteous. So I didn't send it.

For a while I toyed with the idea of giving her a farewell call. But the project seemed to present the same insuperable problems. Besides, I would have lost the chance of adding a postscript to the main text, of grafting a single bough on the stem of my Tree of Farewell. Eugenia might have hung up on me at the very outset of my elaborate speech, right after, 'Hello, how are you?'

My voice was bound to betray my malicious purpose.

And how about writing a telegram? 'Farewell. Full stop. Y. Full stop.'

She would have answered, 'Good-bye. Full stop. Eugenia. Full stop.'

At our next meeting she would have asked, 'Why did you send me such a telegram?'

'Just a quotation,' I would have answered. 'From Lord Byron. Pushkin used it in *Eugene Onegin*. I'm re-reading Pushkin, you know.'

Fare thee well, and if for ever

Still for ever fare thee well.

Pause.

I don't write to her; nor do I send her telegrams. And when I call her the music of my voice avoids minor keys. No farewell notes. Only south, summer, warmth. Only love, nothing but love.

I open the door; she floats in and begins to reign.

Long pause. Doorbell rings. Pause. Doorbell rings.

I will not answer the door.

Pause. Doorbell rings.

The postman would have left already.

Pause. Doorbell rings three times in quick succession.

It's not the postman.

Long pause.

It's not the postman.

Long pause. Doorbell rings. Pause.

What a love symphony! What a love poem!

Long pause. Doorbell rings. Pause.

It's not a haiku.

Long pause. Doorbell rings three times in quick succession. Long pause. Doorbell rings. Long pause. Doorbell rings. Long pause.

END OF SOUND LETTER

THIRD SOUND LETTER

FIRST CASSETTE

Thank you, my dear. Thank you very much!

First I received one cassette which, despite its anonymous appearance, looked familiar somehow.

I listened to it three times and, happy and reassured, I fell asleep. Everything was all right.

You're still enjoying good health, I hope.

The next morning I got another cassette. Ninety minutes. Ninety plus ninety—almost *Lohengrin* in size.

But your weakness for *Tristan und Isolde* got the upper hand.

Two days later, under the doormat, I found the end of our rendezvous *en différé*—another ninety minutes.

You're spoiling me. 'When I'm feeling miserable I go shopping and spoil myself—a couple of new dresses always make me feel better,' said the only daughter of the Soviet ambassador to France. Now I can spoil myself by listening to your cassettes. They'll always make me feel better, I'm sure. Much, much better.

Have you adopted the style of television serials? Why these instalments? Your monologue has been serialised in three instalments. Why? Is it less conspicuous and therefore less dangerous? Are the pockets of your messenger too small? Or do our go-betweens have no guts? I wept with joy three times instead of one. Joy in three instalments. Three joys are better than one. A long joy is better than a short one. Is that the idea?

Long pause.

I've got enough documents to build up your archives.

Pause.

Nobody will ever touch them.

Nobody.

Long pause.

It's high time I told you the story of your former archives.

You gave me a few letters that I was supposed to send to your friends and your beloved. Well, I did not send them. Why should I relinquish my claim to your archives? I would have forfeited the right of being your friend.

I couldn't bring myself to part with an irreplaceable heritage. So your farewell missives did not reach their addresses.

Pause.

You also bequeathed me your poems, some of your books. I hid them in the secret drawer of my desk. But I felt them as if they were lying on my lap or under my pillow. My pillow books, my pillow poems. They diffused their warmth through my flat and my everyday routine.

Warm-hearted archives.

Pause.

This afternoon my hands are cold.

My heart was hit by an icy blast of air.

A hot summer day.

My heart is not affected by seasons.

Your archives have disappeared. No more letters, no more books, no more poems. Not a single toothbrush.

You would forget some of your things when leaving my dacha in haste. My sanctuary of flowers.

Long pause.

Everything has disappeared.

You cannot lose something you never take out of your flat.

I thought that, in a moment of criminal inattention, I had transferred your archives to another hiding place without following the itinerary of my manoeuvres.

'I hid them with unprecedented ingenuity,' I told myself.

Pause.

I looked everywhere.

For ten hours at least I rummaged in the drawers of my desk, both accessible and inaccessible. And I also rummaged in the wardrobes and cupboards, in the lavatory, in the pockets of all my jackets, trousers and coats. I turned everything upside down.

I hunted high and low for your archives. I removed the carpet, I pried up a few hollow-sounding floorboards.

Nothing, nothing at all. I went on with my search.

It occurred to me that, during one of my rare outings, my flat might have been visited by a naïve robber. But nothing was missing except your archives.

I don't like to think about my mother. A severe headache, an upset stomach—such are the results of those pestiferous thoughts. They have a proven deleterious effect on my nervous system. So my mother didn't come under suspicion in the course of the week I devoted to the search for your archives.

I had a bout of flu over Christmas. And a severe bout of depression. The doctor put me on a special diet. In February I was still listless and lethargic; and I had no wish to think about my mother.

I would have found out the truth much earlier.

My sister learnt it from her distant cousin. And my distant cousin had overheard a conversation between her aunt and my mother. What a vicious circle!

At last the scales fell from my eyes.

To cut a long story short, my mother stole your archives. My mother is a thief.

Pause.

Like son, like mother.

She didn't content herself with stealing your archives—she took them to the KGB. At once, half an hour later.

My mother surpassed herself. She established a new world record in ignominy. And she finished the work in a record time.

It looks as though this is going to be a record-breaking year.

At first I could not believe it. 'My sister reads a lot of spy stories,' I told myself. 'And, ever since Stalin's mysterious demise, their authors have been fond of KGB agents.'

My sister was beaming with delight, but I was unable to detect any malicious curve in the configuration of her grin. She wasn't putting me on. I began to believe her.

Let us stage a reconstruction of the incident. My mother and her charwoman, Zoé, descend upon me to give my flat a spring-cleaning. My mother enjoins me to leave my dwelling place. Clouds of dust, lung cancer, blindness, premature death. For once I don't have to justify my absence.

Their second spring-cleaning of my flat. This time my mother found everything, making up for her previous lack of perseverance.

There's nothing in my flat now. My flat is empty.

Pause.

I rang her up.

'How dare you accuse your mother of robbery?'

'Did you take my friend's archives? Yes or no?'

'Yes, but it wasn't a robbery.'

'What was it then?'

'*Le retour aux sources.*' She said it in French. She went on in Russian, 'The letters of your former friend belong to the KGB.'

I realised I shouldn't use the telephone when talking to my mother about your archives. I hung up and went out.

Pause.

I'm always leaving my flat.

I'm always staying in it. I'm always standing in front of the same windows.

I paid a visit to my mother. She repeated that your letters belonged to the KGB where some experts had deciphered them already.

'Reading my friend's poems must have been an educational experience for those experts,' I said. 'Anyway the KGB is an establishment which places great importance on education.'

What kind of impression did your poems make on the aforementioned experts? I suppose they came to the conclusion that you had devised a sophisticated code.

Why not? Art is a code.

Pause.

'They've got spades,' as a friend of mine put it. No use burying your archives in the woods. My mother's got two spades. And she knows how to use them.

Pause.

And she accuses me of being a thief. My mother. The other way round. Everything is the other way round in this world of ours. And upside down, and inside out.

Our detective story began a fortnight ago. For some obscure reason my friend T. had asked me to introduce his fiancée to my mother. Incredible, isn't it? Unbelievable.

Our flat. A tea party.

My sister was there. *Une vierge sage de la Bible.*

All of a sudden my mother fixed her eyes on the wall opposite; my grandfather was staring back at her. Yes, my dear—the only object that could respond to my mother's inquisitive gaze was the picture of my grandfather, the austerity of *his* ever-lasting stare. Why didn't my mother scrutinise *her* face instead? The face of the fiancée, I mean? In search of a secret flaw?

In vain did I try to divert her attention from what she was staring at with such indecency. In vain did I strive to direct her straying mind towards the necklace under whose burden the fiancée's neck seemed to bend. My mother continued to stare at the wall.

'Where's the mask my husband gave me last year on his return from Central America?'

'You'd better ask the antique dealers.'

My sister's voice.

I was taken aback—in public we are accustomed to making a show of unity in spite of our notably discordant natures.

'We must have respect for tradition,' I told her in English.

'What antique dealers?' My mother was speaking Russian.

'I'd make the rounds of the Arbat shops, if I were you,' said my sister. In Russian.

'*Vipère!*' I rose to my feet.

Pause.

I didn't confess my 'crime'. *Je ne dévoile jamais ni les secrets d'alcôve ni les secrets des masques.*

Long pause.

My mother fell badly and broke her leg. She fell from the top of a ladder. What was she doing up there, right under the ceiling? Was she looking for the mask?

I feel sorry for my mother. She climbs ladders, she falls, she sheds tears, she picks up the receiver, she puts down the receiver, she speaks, she shouts, she takes a taxi, she tries to remember where I live—she always forgets her address book in *another* handbag—she remonstrates with her children and her charwoman, she defends her past and maps out her future.

*My mother fell badly and broke her leg,
She broke her leg and forgot her handbag.*

Next day she starts afresh; she starts all over again. The whole procedure, the same process. The same invalid's progress. A remarkable illustration of karma. An awesome illustration of vicious circle. Her vicious circle.

My vicious circle.

There are no other circles in our geometry and the world is inlaid with mirrors.

Even when the market reaches saturation the process doesn't stop.

Pause.

I am my mother and I am sad like her, even if she's not sad at the moment.

Long pause.

For all the divergences that defy the mirrors of our destinies, the terrestrial homogeneity incites us sometimes to court an inelegant, ill-favoured woman or to put our signature at the bottom of a suspicious-looking page. We say to ourselves that everything will fall into place, sooner or later; we hope that everything is bound to become intelligible and beautiful. And since Time exists only in our minds, which are incapable of apprehending the universe in its entirety, everything is *already* beautiful, explicit and marvellous.

Long pause.

Several times I spoke to you about the sentiments I nourished towards my late father. Should I enumerate them once more? Indifference, hatred, pity. Only once did my love for him surface in his lifetime—at the end of his fiftieth birthday party.

The moments after death are vital to the bond between parents and children.

I felt nothing at my father's funeral. A week later I had lunch with my friend K. whose penchant for supernatural phenomena makes me shudder now and then. My friend was talking about a party that had taken place on the day of my father's death at the Kremlin Hospital. I swallowed the hors-d'oeuvre as fast as I could in order not to inflict an unjust punishment on my taste buds. My friend was talking about the party. He described the dresses and repeated the jokes. The *tabaka* chicken and the sturgeon à la Suvoroff were still in the kitchen. My friend went on talking about the party. He said he had rung me up at 9.25 p.m.—seven minutes before my father's death.

I see him rather seldom. We don't seem to have a lot in common except our mutual adoration of Italian poetry. K. had never met my father either in the streets or in the Moscow *salons*, and the interest he manifested for him during that party speaks volumes for his suprasensorial talent. He had a premonition of my father's death. At a distance. A long-distance call.

I had no premonition of any kind. A long-distance wall. The doctors assured us with indulgent smiles that the disease my father suffered from was not cancer. On that day, at 9.25 p.m., I was reading *Der Untergang des Abendlandes*. As usual the telephone rang. As usual, as usual. The usurer of Time. Ten times, fifteen times. I thought it was Alexandra or Nadezhda.

My mother called me ten minutes after. I answered the phone. I thought it was not my mother.

She notified me of my father's death.

Pause.

My father and I. This story brought us together at last. In his lifetime nothing would ever have achieved such a result—neither his kindness nor my indulgence. I realised there existed between us a bond which induced my acquaintances to call me in the middle of an exciting party. And that bond was thicker than our blood and longer than any telepathic communication. The whole of humanity seemed to be aware of our love. Only I knew nothing about it.

Long pause.

You ask me to give you the latest news. What is there to be told except the disappearance of your archives and the ugliness I'm obliged to face whenever I venture outdoors?

S. lent me a record: Bernstein conducts the Israel Philharmonic Orchestra. The *Overture 1812*, the *Marche slave*. There's also *Hamlet* that I'd never heard before.

At the end of the piece, despite the enormous discrepancy between Tchaikovsky and Shakespeare, between their respective geniuses, I was moved to tears, my fingers trembled. The 'resigned codas' are poignant, my dear: the *Coriolan Overture* and the first movement of the *Unfinished Symphony*. At the end there remains of the theme but a tiny fragment which resignedly surrenders to the paternal pressure of the main tonality, of harmony. Schopenhauer discerns the same resignation in dramas and tragedies—their protagonists, having perceived the true nature of the world, lose interest in life where they encounter only deception, frustration, the veil of Maya. Schopenhauer speaks of Hamlet, of Goethe's Marguerite, of Calderon's Prince.

In Tchaikovsky's *Overture* the effect of resignation is enhanced by the utter banality of the theme that dies away amidst the sobs of violins, amidst the sobs of concert-goers and radio-listeners. Amidst my own sobs, I must admit. The rest is silence. I used to think that Hamlet's dying words lived up neither to his own monologues nor even to Polonius's ornate descriptions and recommendations. Upon listening to Tchaikovsky's *Overture* I realised that only a banal utterance, a banal tune, could make us feel the incredible banality of death.

Long pause.

The musicians I know often claim that music is far superior to other forms of art by reason of its abstractedness and inherent spirituality. Being spared the degrading contact with the world of appearances—the playground for Schopenhauer's *Wille*—music gives shape to Platonic ideas. And yet some pieces of music—Tchaikovsky's *Overture*, for instance—do not correspond to Plato's ideas on music.

'Music is the unifying language of humanity. It's also the unifying language of Time, for music blends the past, the present and the future into one harmonious substance. A novel contains only an infinitesimal particle of life, whatever its length and the intensity of its texture; music reflects human life in its entirety. Music reflects all human lives in one chord.'

'Platonism, mysticism—let us put them aside for a while,' I answer placidly. 'And outside these realms our body is not a busybody, if you see what I mean. Outside Platonism and mysticism our body doesn't perturb anything. It's just the other way round, you see. Our body is always instrumental in bringing us closer to the world. And to Platonic ideas, incidentally. And to music of course. In other words, the human body is a marvellous instrument—as important as intellect and *nous*. A three-dimensional world of art. Oh, I'm sorry—I forget the heart. A four-dimensional world of art.'

And I quote Benedetto Croce who enjoys quite a vogue in our *coterie*.

There's only one art—the fountainhead of irreplaceable delights, an adequate and fair compensation for our afflictions. No language, even that of the most accessible music, will ever unite humanity which is too diverse, too unequal to find itself in unison, one day. There will always be individuals insensitive to music; or just less sensitive than their neighbours. Worse still, those prosaic people might turn out to be assailed by diametrically opposite and, consequently, hostile emotions.

Literature and its chameleon-like shadows suit better the principle of individuation that governs our history. Literature speaks both known and unknown languages. Literature stirs our imagination that seeks to fill in the gaps produced by our ignorance or insensitivity. The language of music, being unconnected with the structure of everyday life, doesn't go beyond an emotion or mathematical analysis. Literature plays an infinite game with reality, which elicits our conscious and subconscious, sensual and rational commentaries. There's no denying that literature cannot unify Time—words and rhymes diversify and animate it. Words and rhymes inflame the feelings and passions of Time. They inflate Time so that it ends up by taking off, like a balloon. Every generation interprets the same book in a different fashion and this difference is more pronounced than the metamorphosis undergone by a piece of music

which, confined to its own abstraction and purity, seems to be sheltered from terrestrial influences. Once its novelty is accepted by music lovers it doesn't vary much. We listen to Beethoven's quartets as we listened to them fifty years ago in spite of Kagel and Shostakovich who contributed something to them, something ironical and harsh. This development, this make-up cannot be compared with the way a work of literature continues to grow, enriched as it is by scientific discoveries, by diplomatic conflicts—by appearances, by our unstable vision of the world.

The world is as unstable as the pools and shallows of the Asuka River.

Click.

Leonardo called poetry a 'blind painting'. As a matter of fact, it's painting that deprives us of our sight—of our visions, rather. Every picture forces a representation upon us, and that representation leaves no room for parallel worlds.

Representations impoverish the *Wille*; a film inspired by a literary work reduces the latter to the dimensions of a studio.

Pause.

Our commercial and facile century replaced composers by interpreters. And yet, in its infancy, our century witnessed the triumphs of Mahler, Schoenberg and Stravinsky. Nowadays music lovers collect Beethoven's symphonies and sonatas. And what about Ligeti, Terry Riley, Takemitsu, Arvo Pärt and Morton Feldman?

Pause.

Performing artists have a lot of champions. These affirm that music is a homogeneous mass of notes without meaning, without soul—the Sleeping Beauty prior to the arrival of the Prince.

The other day I met an illiterate who, when leafing through a music score, could tell whether the composer was a mediocrity or a genius. He was guided exclusively by the configuration of crotchets and quavers.

A musical illiterate.

Pause.

I know that Swann did not believe in the hierarchy of the arts. But we are dealing now with by-arts, as it were—the by-products of the human mind. Nobody would maintain that a prompter is equal to Shakespeare. Berma and Laurence Olivier are emancipated prompters after all—I don't believe in the hierarchy of by-arts. And yet I adore Laurence Olivier. I really adore him. I still remember the *Othello* he performed in Moscow. The National Theatre of Great Britain. In 1964, if I'm not mistaken. And I also remember John Gielgud. And Paul Scofield.

Are there actors like them in the West? Nowadays? I'm not sure. I doubt it.

Alec Guinness must be wonderful too. But he's old, isn't he? They're old or dead.

Supposing an inhabitant of a distant planet paid us a visit in a flying saucer. Supposing he asked us to show him a few examples of earthly culture. I might play for him a Furtwängler recording of Beethoven's *Fifth*. What would he listen to—Beethoven's symphony or Furtwängler's interpretation? To Beethoven's symphony performed by Furtwängler. Beethoven is part of our cultural heritage; Furtwängler is not.

Let there be no misunderstanding between us—I adore Furtwängler and Mengelberg. But their mission consists mainly in the propagation of sound waves. Only creative artists constitute the cultural heritage of humanity. And that's what counts, in fact—the cultural heritage of humanity. Do you remember the English poem where empires crumble to dust and kings disappear? But the dreams of children remain, survive, endure. Our dreams endure as well. And interpreters dream about other people's dreams. They revive them, in a way. Every concert hall is an intensive care unit.

And there are more things in heaven and earth than are dreamt of in their philosophy.

Pause.

Only creative artists can destroy their works, their worlds. Pianists often murder Beethoven's sonatas, but they cannot destroy them.

Pause.

In our gregarious epoch, arts and by-arts—

END OF SIDE ONE

SIDE TWO

Where was I? Ah, yes. The Soviet authorities convinced the West that Russian culture had survived owing to prize-winners of international competitions. Piano, violin, cello. And Western glitterati would acclaim the superiority of Soviet culture after listening to Liszt's rhapsodies and Mendelssohn's concertos. Joyce, who lived in Paris at the time, counted less than a winner of the Chopin Competition.

Pause.

You're getting bored, I suppose. You must be bored stiff by my lecture.

If you were sitting on my divan, in the flesh, large as life, I wouldn't talk to you about instrumentalists. We might have a talk about Buddhism or striptease; or about a crepuscular reflection in a glass of Armagnac.

You're not sitting on my divan.

How to explain the blooming of by-arts in our country? By their independence with regard to censorship. You cannot censor an interpretation—the party line doesn't extend so far. There's no such thing as anti-Soviet interpretation. The dogmas of socialist realism cannot be applied to Beethoven's sonatas.

Pause.

I remember the recital Emil Gilels gave in the Big Conservatoire Hall. A Mozart programme. *Salve tu, Domine. Unser dummer Pöbel meint.* He played these *Variations* divinely, my dear. The mere remembrance of this musical event sends shivers up and down my spine. Especially up.

Pause.

How did Hölderlin put it? The aim of art is '*die Vergegenwärtigung des Unendlichen*'. The presence of the unbounded—in the present. And interpreters deal with the *bounded*, I'm afraid, placing it in Space and Time. *Die Vergegenwärtigung des Endlichen*.

Science, too, belongs in the realm of the *Endlichen*. The number of positive numbers is finite.

Bringing forth the beautiful in art and poetry. Creating objects that make the beautiful known. Kant limits the concept of genius to those who create such objects: poems, pictures, madrigals.

Pause.

The trend at the moment is towards so-called secondary texts—towards secondary works of art in general.

And towards second-*rate* works.

It's a downward trend, my dear. Critics and linguists write comments on books and often the former are considered equal if not superior to the latter. 'Eggs give lessons to hens'—a Russian comment on the current situation. Between ourselves, I consider this comment far superior to the current situation for the simple reason that anything—even the wisecrack of a drunken sailor—is superior to the times we are doomed to live in. Recently an academic leader of the new semantics quipped in a Parisian café: 'It is more interesting to read Derrida on Rousseau than to read Rousseau.' I'm not very fond of those contemporary thinkers who tinker about with the dead, dissecting and dismembering them. Anyway Rousseau is the hen in the present instance. And Derrida the egg.

There are too many eggs around. As a result, we are left with egg on our face.

Long pause.

You ask me about our friends.

Long pause.

Sometimes, at a late hour when nothing seems to herald an exceptional encounter, I come across someone on the boulevards—someone who, under different circumstances, might become my friend. He doesn't stop, his sixth sense being blunted, benumbed by somnolence or fatigue. Neither do I freeze in my tracks. I continue to walk as if premonitions had been forever banished from my consciousness. And I lose a friend. I lose an intimate friend.

Likewise I lose a great many friends when looking out of my window.

And my television set is nothing less than a cemetery, which might appear odd, considering the poor quality of our programmes.

Pause.

The cemetery is rather huge because I also buried my love there.

Yes, my dear, I had fallen in love with a television actress. Her antipathy for cinema screens circumscribes our relationship to the intimacy of my room. Her fury is associated in my mind—and in my room – with the mild reflection of cognac in a glass; and her triumphs with the decadent softness of Swiss chocolate. Nothing is more perverse and enchanting in the realm of voyeurism than the joy experienced in front of a television set where a woman of your dreams submits her face and her body to the requirements of a plot. It is better to know the plot, incidentally, in order to imagine *beforehand* a grimace of abhorrence or the torments of an unrequited love. No peep-show, no cohabitation, no matrimonial consensus will ever allow you to see a woman traverse a spectrum of psychological states, wearing now a ceremonial dress, now a miniskirt. No wardrobe is large enough to contain all those costumes!

It goes without saying that, during my frivolous rendezvous, I endeavour to elicit some gestures and grimaces; but more often than not my thirst for dramatic variety remains unquenched. The décor undergoes no metamorphoses and the restrained number of participants impedes my visual élan, breaking the train of lascivious events.

And I'd better pass over the complications that crop up as soon as my home-made actress understands what part I assigned to her and where my time machine stopped for a while. Often my concubines declare indignantly that they are not guinea pigs. I'm forced to embark on a number of tedious and trivial explanations that definitively ruin the quality of the *mise en scène*.

Television gives rise to a sort of *impersonal* relationship which is beneficial to both my concentration and the quality of the show. Everything goes smoothly and my gaze, assisted in its quest by a hot cup of tea, seems to enjoy its own immobility.

Watching television, an immobile quest.

This actress, who mostly impersonates historical characters such as Cleopatra and Helen of Troy, exhibits none of our society's shortcomings; nor does she mirror its ugliness and awkwardness. My allergy to our lifestyle lies dormant, therefore, whenever she makes her appearance on my screen.

I've never sought to meet her. In the flesh. In everyday life she must be compelled to play the part of a Soviet actress.

Click.

Where man is not, nature is barren.

Do you remember what Boswell answered to Johnson in Greenwich Park? 'Yes, Sir; but not equal to Fleet-street.' Boswell preferred 'the busy hum of men' to the beauties of Nature. So did Johnson, apparently.

I like Boswell's book. The reading of it boosts my morale to such an extent that my happiness overflows the present. I distribute then the surplus of happiness to those moments of the past when I was disconsolate, heartbroken. And I become happy in retrospect.

The busy hum of men. '*L'éloquence de l'homme*,' as Senancour put it. The eloquence of things is but the eloquence of men. This eloquence looms out of the darkest corners of my solitude and I find myself inextricably bound to my fellow citizens—the only representatives of humankind within my field of vision, within earshot.

The contacts between human beings are ambiguous; in spite of myself I seem to have affinities with some obnoxious criminal who deserves the unreserved condemnation of my reason.

Pause.

My patriotic friends feel honour bound to share the sufferings of the Russian nation.

They forget that, alongside magnanimous mystics and generous peasants, there are in the Soviet Union a number of repugnant individuals. After spending ten years in the Gulag a taxi driver told me on the way to Arkhangelskoe, 'The Bolshevik Terror was useful and inevitable. History was being broken.' Is it necessary to share the sufferings of that taxi driver?

The Russian nation is an abstract entity which, within the bounds of our minds, takes on the colours of icons and the humanist dignity of cathedrals.

Nevertheless, '*L'éloquence de l'homme*' is also revealed by those drunkards, by those drivers and other yes men. '*Da men*'. Amen.

They also breathe and eat. They also take lifts and open doors and windows. In the distant mirror of Creation they become my own face and body that I cannot destroy. Not yet.

Pause.

Among my sedentary friends—I also call them 'stay-at-homes' to avoid the disagreeable term 'Slavophile'—there are some who justify their opinions with elegance and wit. In the course of a recent discussion, L. quoted Yoshida no Kaneyoshi: 'It is unattractive when people mingle in a society which is not their habitual one, whether it is an Easterner among people from the capital, a man from the capital who has gone to the East to make his fortune, or a priest of either an exoteric or esoteric sect who has left his original faith.'

'I was born in London,' I said. 'And I'll die in London.'

My friend's response was a nicely judged combination of gentlemanly modesty and boyish pride:

'An inner journey is preferable to an outer journey. I'm eager to change my caprices and my moods, but I'll never cross the street if it's not strictly necessary. Any modification of address that presupposes the crossing of a border seems to me tiresome and vain. It's more difficult to get accustomed to new surroundings than to put up with old misfortunes. The pattern of your mind presents far more problems than the regime of the country you're obliged to live in. On the other hand, it's the process of life that counts, the life-procession. It doesn't matter where you've lived and what you've accomplished. You've lived and enough is as good as a feast. You've survived to tell the tale. It doesn't matter if your tale is boring or entertaining, meaningless or meaningful. You've told your tale and enough is as good as a feast. I can touch a piece of material. Isn't that wonderful? I don't care about the quality of the material. So I won't visit English tailors.'

And he continued in the same vein:

'Soviet gregariousness is a culture in its own right. And this culture deserves a place among the world's leading cultures. Our country is full of awful kitsch—but kitsch is coming back into fashion, isn't it? Our parades and our slogans reveal the red side of the human psyche and no artist, no psychiatrist, can relegate them to the margins of the world. Even our official painting—the permanent target of our mockery—should be exhibited in the universal museum of art. The Moscow Metro, however ludicrous, is a "cultural phenomenon", as much as Frost's poetry and the Sydney Opera House. "Art is the totality of its known styles," said Croce, and I wouldn't be surprised if, at the beginning of the next century, someone wrote a dissertation on our metro at Columbia University—on the mouldings in our metro. Zhdanov's speeches were as paradoxical as Borges, his works and interviews.'

I heard a sort of chuckle that discreetly foretold a guffaw, a booming laugh. I might have joined my friend in his effort to add a few sound effects to our discussion, but for a feeling of uneasiness I experienced at that very moment. Some people become sick after

eating too much chocolate. I become sick whenever a friend of mine talks about Soviet life in Lord Henry's fashion. I have an allergic reaction to it, a *physical* reaction. I cannot bear the masterpieces of my friends. I cannot laugh any more.

Pause.

You can put your dog on a lead. You can even learn to control your temper. But what about your body, my body—the bodies of all those who never spend their summers doing yoga in India?

How to bring the body under control? The body rules our lives with an iron fist. And we are not permitted to forget it—not even in the case of amnesia.

Pause.

The end of our discussion was stained, besmeared by my physiological revolt. My friend left around 11 p.m. He was offended.

Pause.

The style of the friendly chit-chat I described a few minutes ago does not differ from what you had grown accustomed to before your departure. But the absurdity of affirmations and the eccentricity of language have been accentuated so much that we seem now to parody ourselves. Take, for instance, this statement, 'I won't visit English tailors.' As if he could really go to England! And he is dying to go there, I can assure you. He has been dreaming about it for almost thirty years.

Do you remember the stories we used to tell?

'I dreamt last night I'd gone to Montreux to buy some chocolate.'

'And I dreamt that the most beautiful women were dancing in my flat. Stark naked. Naked film stars. In turn they would come and dance for me, dance for me. And then we would drink a bottle of champagne. And so on and so forth. Rita Hayworth rang the doorbell around 5 a.m. Alas, I was too tired to receive her with full orgiastic honours.'

'Why didn't you call me then?'

'I did call you. But you were in Montreux.'

'Alack the day.'

'Alack the night.'

Pause.

We used to travel more discreetly; we were more refined in days of yore. Once upon a time M. said I was the personification of culture and refinement.

He wouldn't say so now. He isn't the personification of politeness and delicacy.

I know a man who buys old cars and restores them to their original condition. But how to restore the past?

Only the past can overcome the inadequacies of the present. Communists and Christians think otherwise, it seems. They believe in the goodness of Time's nature.

In the future we trust.

Put your trust in the future, and keep your eyes dry.

We are trying to restore the past. We remember our poetical soirées in which you participated with great panache. Of course you're not in my room. You no longer read us your poems. No longer does your witty repartee enthrall and enchant us. Somebody has taken your place—a young man. He is as young as you were in those days. And he recites your poems. And he tells us your stories. And his witty repartee enthralls us.

We are trying to remember every tiny detail. And then we rehearse our poetical soirées. Everyone plays his own part except the young man. He plays *your* part, my dear. He is taller than you. Actually he is slightly built but his recent illness has made him look much thinner. Never mind—he wears your jacket and your trousers. And enough is as good as a feast. Better than a feast.

And he is a feast for the eyes.

Pause.

One of Dostoevsky's characters said that it was indecent to live beyond thirty.

We ought to have died at the age of twenty-six.

Pause.

I'm caught in the dilemma of obeying or disobeying the rules they have imposed on the game of life. But life is no game, my dear; and if it is, you're bound to lose it, no matter how you play and what trump cards you've got at your disposal.

We thought that life was a game. In our adolescence. A game or a play, a theatrical play. A comedy featuring Khrushchev and other clowns.

We thought that life was a poem lying on our writing desks. I read our poems almost every day. They have nothing in common with reality except that they are real—as real as reality itself.

Pause.

La règle du jeu. Have you seen Renoir's film? Of course you have. I'd like to obey the rules of this film—of many films, as a matter of fact. I'd like to obey the rules of English poems.

But we are playing a different game in our country.

How can I disobey its rules? *Go West.* My cosmic odyssey, my interstellar journey.

Our souls fly to the Moon, don't they? After our deaths? And our souls stay on the Moon for a while. A few eternal days.

Pause.

How to obey the rules of Soviet games?

I can't, my dear. I can't.

'While to propose to be a better man is a piece of unscientific cant, to have become a deeper man is the privilege of those who have suffered,' says Oscar Wilde. Well, I am a deep man, a very deep man. My soul is so deep you cannot see the bottom. My heart is deep too.

Pause.

My stomach will never treat our indigestible regime with indulgence.

Our officials are minimalists, judging from the set they built for the ballet of our life—four white walls and a chair.

Even when the brain has attained its maximum size and structure, signals from the body and the environment are still constantly changing it. Apparently, presumably. I think my brain has already attained its maximum size and structure. But nothing changes it now, nothing at

all. There are no signals either in my environment or in my body. Or they're the same, the signals I hear and feel. Slogans and nausea. And sloth. They don't change anything.

Suffering is not meritorious. Bernard Shaw said something to this effect, if I'm not mistaken. At least that is what *I* say to the people who strive to meet the very highest standards of masochism.

The arts need neither staunch sufferers nor their outpourings.

Suffering is neither an aesthetic nor a moral obligation.

Pause.

I respect and pity those who suffer *unwittingly*.

A form of self-respect, I suppose.

Pause.

You don't suffer unwittingly, do you?

I'm under the impression that you have completely misunderstood my diatribe against mock sufferings. It's a form of exorcism, you know. I exorcise my pains by means of maxims. And I don't care whether my maxims are true or false, artistic or moralistic, ridiculous or pathetic. I don't care about anything as long as I'm free from pain and angst.

'You have misunderstood me.' I ought not to have written such a thing, *n'est-ce pas*? But I'm so accustomed to being misunderstood that I habitually launch into an interminable commentary right after my speech. I make up for the lack of friendly intuition by long and superfluous commentaries.

Since your departure I haven't been granted anything similar to what Hermes Trismegist experienced during his stay in Egypt. A vision, a revelation. By a prodigious act of recollection he recognised himself and thus recovered his real name. I don't recognise myself and I seldom recognise my friends. And even the permanent members of our club, of our *coterie*, have grown deficient in intellect and affection.

And Vitamin C is of no help at all.

My friend takes a whole handful

Of vitamin pills at breakfast.

Why is he always staring into the distance?

I also suffer from a deficiency disease. More than others perhaps. I've lost my name. And I've lost my reflection—you, your thoughts, your understanding, your solicitude. Without a mirror one cannot recognise oneself.

My friends are unable to follow the detours of my moods; I spend my time probing into the enigma of their words. They feel offended; I am disappointed. We drive each other to the verge of despair and separate right before an irrevocable quarrel. I call it a 'quarrel-saving egoism'.

There's another kind of friendship which is not directly related either to our childhood or to our club. In a way I prefer those intermittent, glimmering, gleaming, flashing friendships. They're akin to dotted lines, to the drizzle one listens to on the terrace of one's dacha. They're akin to suspension points. Those people appear and disappear, leaving behind a luminous streak—*un gage tangible de futures retrouvailles*. I think about them with a happy smile—*un sourire de connivence*—which is a perennial symbol of friendship. And when we meet again at a cocktail party or on the boulevards we resume our interrupted conversations.

How pleasant it is to carry on the same conversation for years and years.

How pleasant it is to offset the tenacity of Time.

Now and then we limit our discussion to one sentence only. And we are not tempted to enrich it through postscripts and commentaries. However, that solitary sentence might beget an unforgettable friendship.

A piano recital I attended last winter is engraved on my memory forever by virtue of the remark I heard in the intermission. A cellist saluted me, a friend of my friend. 'So you still go to concerts,' he said. I don't remember what I answered. Perhaps 'no,' for I seldom go to concerts. I don't remember what followed. Did we embroider upon this remark?

'So you still go to concerts.' What a sentence, my dear!

The potency of this sentence lies in its apparent self-restraint, in its neutral and almost conventional character associated with an exchange of niceties, with a conversation centred on weather or horse races.

The sentence was introduced by an 'oh' of astonishment that lasted a few seconds as if to express the magnitude of this astonishment, of this wonderment.

END OF FIRST CASSETTE

SECOND CASSETTE

I finished the first cassette of my third set by the 'oh' of astonishment I heard in a concert hall—a sublime interpretation of the lassitude I feel before leaving my bed, before making a business call, before leaving my flat. 'So you still go to concerts? So you still wake up every morning?'

This lassitude is inherent in life. In-built lassitude. It is pleasant to know that the people capable of uttering such a sentence salute you in your box.

Pause.

With the passing of the years I tend to appreciate small things: glances, commas, a head tilted to one side. Last autumn I was queuing in the hall of a theatre. Suddenly I felt a few fingers on my shoulder—the fingers of an actor I hadn't seen for ten years. 'Why are you queuing? I've got a ticket for you!' Ten years after.

Everything has changed around us; wars and storms have devastated the world. He still invites me to the plays in which he performs. And to other plays as well, as if paying no attention to life. Borges might have spared himself the trouble of writing essays on how to obliterate Time—a simple invitation is enough to refute it once and for all.

Or a happy smile. *Un sourire de connivence.*

Long pause.

Our friend V., who betrayed my trust several times, said the other day, slightly disconcerted, 'Many people respect you'—whereupon I forgave him everything, even his unforgivable insults. What an observation!

Pause.

Forgive and forget. Why don't they teach the science of forgiveness at schools, at the University of Oxford?

Someone is introduced to us: a man, a woman. Without a lot of preamble that person begins to read—

Telephone rings.

—our thoughts. Better still, the drafts of our thoughts. And the world becomes small again; the world grows dwarfish.

I won't answer the phone.

Or somebody says that his friend knows me. And I don't remember either the person by my side or his friend. And even the name of the Siberian town where the latter is living strikes no chord in my consciousness.

'But I've never been to Siberia and as your friend has no wish to come to Moscow—'

'He knows you, really.'

These singularities have the same psychological impact as a beautiful gift. Let it ring till Doomsday! Do they need an additional trumpet?

Friendship is as precious and fragile as China. Who is it, for God's sake? Sorry.

Click.

Telephone rings no more.

Three days ago, for five hours, I had to put up with a hullabaloo that was euphemistically called a 'birthday party'. Yes, my dear, for five hours I witnessed a striptease of souls. Everyone would undress with hysterical casualness. Some guests writhed and screamed in agony. They were writhing around in pain on the floor. The other guests were doubled up with laughter. I squirmed in my chair with embarrassment. I wriggled and wriggled in my seat, unable to hide my boredom. I listened to them, listened to them. I beat my breast, yet I could not choose but hear. I would console them and lend them my handkerchief. And I would pick up the splinters of broken glasses and bottles.

'A charming evening,' as the song has it. A lot of confessions, myriads of confessions. But I'm not a confessor, am I? Confessions, confessions, confessions. The common feature of Russian parties, the commonplace of the Russian soul. The Russians confess their crimes—a Raskolnikov complex. They whisper them into your ears, they shout for help. They demonstrate their crimes. A physical demonstration, a psychical demonstration, an acrobatic demonstration. In the course of those demonstrations men lose their glasses, women their make-up.

At some point I was invited to participate in a suicide ritual. I declined the invitation, politely but firmly. Another guest accepted the invitation. I saw an open window, a body bent forward. A knife glittered brilliantly under the chandelier.

Everybody danced with nonchalance and insouciance as if to prove to the world their independence, their happiness, their freedom. An incontrovertible piece of evidence.

Pause.

Why did I go to the party? In search of an adventure? To kill time? To kill space, my space—my room, in other words? I have no social obligations. And whenever I go somewhere I use alcohol as a sort of social prop. Even in the streets I need it, my dear; even in a deserted street.

Why did I go there? The hostess is a notorious mediocrity.

But she's always dressed to kill.

And I prefer a sweet disorder in the dress.

Pause.

I'm very generous with my time—always ready to help other people.

Pause.

Human beings often surprise me and thereby question my judgements, my deep-rooted notions. The women, whose minds and manners seem to hold no promise whatsoever, suddenly make a gesture I'm not likely to forget.

I remember a scorching summer day. The brutal realism of the sun was at odds with the landscape's sentimental disposition. My travelling companions—two ladies and a curly-haired man—were talking nonsense. And they seemed nonplussed by their own feeble-mindedness. 'I'm so stupid today. Why? Why?' said one of the ladies. 'Because you're always stupid,' I thought.

Nothing seemed to augur an irrational caress that, upon his return home, a traveller hastens to note down in his diary.

At first I did not feel her hand on my shoulder. 'I'm so stupid today.' She repeated it over and over again. 'Why? Why?' The man continued to crack jokes. He told a joke about death

that I thought was in rather poor taste, considering that my father had just died. Two months before. He was unaware of this perhaps. The other lady burst into laughter.

The hand was lying on my shoulder. Why? Why?

There was no bond between us, needless to say. No bond of any kind, I can assure you. We were neither friends nor lovers. And, as far as I can remember, she was not in the habit of putting her hand on other people's shoulders. I met her three months afterwards. She took no notice of me; no casual remarks, no languorous glances. Her gesture was out of context, with no space-time around it. No strings attached, as they say. No strings, no ribbons, no wedding dresses, no nappies, no diapers, no bow ties.

Pause.

So I went to the party. Waiting for a surprise, waiting for a hand. One finger would have been enough.

In my eagerness to protect myself against the matrimonial onslaughts of the hostess I telephoned Eugenia who, in expectation of piquant rivalry, agreed to keep me company.

I glanced around the living room. There was a writer whose name I had heard somewhere; there was a fashion designer. Once the introductory part was over the writer gripped my elbow with drunken familiarity, 'This calls for celebration, this calls for celebration!'

Some people are bent on cutting corners, if you see what I mean. 'If you want to get ahead, get a hat.' Do you remember this advertisement? Well, they get ahead without hats. And they're always ahead of Time. They remind me of the earthquake which happened a year ahead of scientific predictions.

Those people give you an answer without being asked any question; they fall in love before meeting the object of their love.

The writer declared he was my friend at the very outset of our encounter, perhaps even before we had caught sight of each other. And he took no trouble to explain what he had in mind, assured as he was of my moral, physical and alcoholic support. 'I'm happy to have made your acquaintance.' He was patting me on the shoulder blades. 'This calls for celebration, this calls for celebration.'

Eugenia raised her glass but remained seated. Her radiant smile and the mischievous sparkle in her blue eyes spoke volumes for her intentions. Even the glass she was holding

seemed to reflect her forthcoming toast. 'It's my turn to wish you happy birthday, my dear Z. Unlike my distinguished predecessor, however—'

Distinguished predecessor—that's Eugenia for you. The note of naïve solemnity she introduces into her speech, into everything she does—let us observe the way she handles a fork—must correspond to her notion of refinement. She *strives* to be dignified, overlooking the fact that real dignity is always unaffected, unconstrained. She becomes dignified all of a sudden—on the spur of the moment, as it were. I wish I could describe Eugenia thus, 'She has a quiet dignity about her.'

Would I still love her if she was like that? If she had a quiet dignity about her? I wonder.

The duration of her dignity varies in accordance with her whims. Sometimes she loosens up her muscles at once; sometimes the imprint of eternity remains on her face for a few hours. On her face, on her body. Indeed her body adjusts itself to her face, to her voice. Her 'refined figure'—*un véritable morceau d'anthologie*. One gets the feeling she will never move, never—a statue erected in the middle of a royal square. And yet she isn't motionless; she moves about. The statue walks, the statue leans forward.

'I wish you would fall in love,' she said to the hostess. And she struck up ironically, '*L'amour est enfant de Bohème*.'

The party was a sort of competition in which everyone, except for two self-righteous prigs, was sinking into the Slough of Despond. The hostess and her guests seemed to be carried away by their own passionate speeches. And by the music, and by their misfortunes. The writer grabbed Eugenia's arm and danced her around the room. The Russians tend to get a bit carried away when they're dancing; they often start spinning and leaping all over the place. After a while the writer abandoned Eugenia and executed a dance I had never seen before. Others followed his example. They all seemed to know the dance and its numerous variations. They kept treading on my toes as if I were dancing with them. I was sitting near the piano. A young lady asked me to take a salad bowl to the kitchen. The hostess was waiting for me there. She grasped my hand and dragged me into a narrow corridor from where no gentleman could have escaped. Not under the circumstances. It was her birthday after all. 'How nice of you to come!' She pulled me towards her breasts; they barred my way like the Iron Curtain. 'How nice of you to come!' She kissed me so strongly that my gums began to bleed. Instinctively I recoiled, increasing the distance between our mouths. 'How shy you are! Why are you so shy?' She kissed me again and again. Did she feel the taste of my blood, that masseuse? She was massaging my lips, gums and tongue. And of course my bones and my

joints. We stayed in the corridor for half an hour at least. A veritable massage parlour. 'I forbid you to marry this stuck-up nobody! Can you hear me?'

Again I found myself in the bosom of a Dostoevskian novel. I had no alternative—I was standing in the corridor that seemed to converge on the breasts of the hostess. She was kissing me; she was looking for Eugenia. Later on the writer grabbed the collar of my shirt. For fifty minutes he endeavoured to persuade me he was Homer or Shakespeare. Or both. 'But I need a quill pen for my *Odyssey* and for my *Hamlet*. I need a quill pen. And I have an ordinary pen, got it? And what do I do with this ordinary pen? I sign those letters, you know. And I exclude those writers from the Writer's Union, Solzhenitsyn and others. Shall we dance? I've something to tell you. I love your wife. I've no right to, I know. Homer has no rights. I love you too. Great expectations. Don't lose her. She's the aurora borealis.'

Long pause.

They talk and talk and talk. When will they stop talking? Never, never, never, never, never. Everybody talks. And they all say the same thing: Eugenia, Z., writers, drivers, painters. They all belong to the same society.

Pause.

Could you please find me an Englishwoman? Why should I count on the Hereafter? Why should I think exclusively in terms of the Hereafter? Origen, Jerome, Athanase and Basil maintain that women will be resurrected without their sex. What am I supposed to do with sexless women?

How am I supposed to live without England?

Pause.

'Hope is the dream of a wide-awake man,' says Aristotle.

*Hope is a thing with feathers
That perches in the soul,
And sings the tune without the words
And never stops at all.*

My hope is different from what Emily Dickinson describes in her poem. My hope does not sing—for fear of singing out of tune, no doubt. My hope speaks, whispers and screams. My hope prattles on instead of singing psalms and oratorios. And it stops now and then. I mean my hope runs out of words. My hope cringes back in terror.

What is the vocabulary of my hope? Just a few words: West, Englishwoman, departure, natural death.

Pause.

One must rely neither on Time nor on Paradise. History, history, history. Has it recognised the men and women of genius? All of them?

Will Paradise recompense all whipping boys? And what about whipping girls?

Lucretius's masterpiece was glorified fifteenth centuries after its birth. How did the manuscript escape the fury of bigots, the artistic asceticism of sanctimonious churchgoers?

My cassettes will not escape the hatred that our customs officers nurture towards means of communication, towards journeys and voyages. Like an old, fragile, precious wine, my monologues travel badly. And there are no cassette recorders in Paradise.

Even in Paradise I shall not have a cassette recorder.

Click.

I don't know what to tell you. I haven't told you everything but I'm not inspired. 'Our inspirations are very manageable and tame,' says Emerson. Mine is not, I can assure you. My inspiration is like a woman. My inspiration is a shrew I'll never succeed in taming and subduing to my will, for all my love of Shakespeare.

Pause.

The cassette reels turn round and round. For nothing, like the Earth. Going round and round. Going East, going West, staying at home. A vicious circle, as usual.

But the Earth moves round all the same. For nothing, for something. For everything perhaps. So does the cassette. It records my disjointed, desultory speeches. My thoughts are

out of joint. Never mind, never mind. Let it record my thoughts. Let it be. Do you remember how we loved the Beatles?

The cassette records my monologues for the sake of future generations. A testimony of the greatest importance. My monologues. To be or not to be. One monologue, one sentence. No answer.

Going round and round. The waltz of human history.

The circular movement of the cassette spurs me on and I fill up its watchful space. The cassette is spying on my thoughts; my flat is packed with microphones. I betray myself. I confess the crimes I'm about to commit. Going West, going West.

Pause.

The cassette reels turn round. It is so full of life! And it frantically endeavours to discover some sign of life in my brain. In vain.

Pause.

What can I tell you? Nothing. I haven't yet created the dream of the night to come. And I've no idea what I'll dream about next week.

Eugenia hasn't come since last Sunday.

Have I become more intelligent? No. I am very knowledgeable about literature. But have I read anything since last summer? No. Yu said once, 'As long as what I've learnt is not materialised in some way or other I fear to learn anything new.' And what can I put into practice? Nothing. I'm out of practice, if you see what I mean.

Pause.

They also serve who only stand and waite.

Pause.

I don't read any novels or poems. I don't think about anything. My thoughts seem to have withdrawn into themselves. They're inclined to introversion; they turn their backs on society

and seek to develop their own interests. But I don't think they're doing it now. They don't seem to develop their own interests. Are they interested in anything? In what, may I ask?

Pause.

I let it record its own noise. The noise of its own thoughts. Philips, Philips. An introvert.

I used to be very sociable, but I've been an introvert since your departure.

Click.

'If somebody said something and claims to have uttered several words, he ought not to have spoken. If somebody said something but claims not to have opened his mouth, he can continue to talk.' Rabbi Hiyya.

'He has nothing to say.' A widespread accusation. Fiddlesticks! Bad writers are bad because they say badly what they have got to say. Everyone has something to say, even if what he says boils down to the affirmation, 'There's nothing to say.'

There's nothing to write and nothing to write with. There are only ordinary pens around. No quill pens.

Pause.

'Get off my back, will you?' is as relevant and expressive as *War and Peace*.

'I'm aching all over' is as excruciating as *The Book of Job*.

Click.

I don't have very much to feel joyful about at the moment. And yet I do feel joyful—*mestre de gay saber*. A gayer and a wiser man I woke up this morning.

And I feel duty bound to convey my gaiety to the world. I'm not sad. Can you hear me?

I have a gay, lovely personality that attracts a lot of people to my room.

Pause.

Somebody told Emerson that the world would come to an end very soon. He answered, 'Well, I think I can get along without it.'

If the world is reduced to ruins I'll continue to radiate my gaiety, my boundless joy. My joy will resound through the future. I'll walk amidst the ruins of the world, the cassette recorder in my hands. I'll sing, I'll dance, recording the rhythm of my heavenly mood. For whom? For myself, for the inhabitants of Venus. Eugenia's whims will be a thing of the past. No more scenes, no more hammer and sickle, no more sicknesses, no more white walls. My ceiling will no longer come down on my bed. At night. I'll travel all over the world. I'll cross our borders every day, twice a day. I'll speak about anything. I'll speak about everything. No more informers, no more in-built microphones, no more telephones.

Pause.

I'm pretty sure my telephone is tapped.

Pause.

I'll find my eternal happiness at last.

Pause.

Tolstoy used to say, 'I'll do this tomorrow if I am still alive.' And next day he would note down in his diary, 'Still alive.' Was he certain about that?

Supposing the Hereafter were the exact copy of this world. You wake up, you write down in a notebook, 'Alive, still alive.' And you are dead. Dead and buried.

Click.

END OF SIDE ONE

SIDE TWO

The Hereafter. The next world. I've moved my things lock, stock and barrel to the other side of the world. To the other side of Time.

My diary, my bedside cabinet, my dinner table—everything is there, the chairs are all in place. Eugenia is ringing the doorbell. Shall I open the door?

The Hereafter. The next world. The world, the flesh and the devil.

My television set is on. Our presenters speak about the famine in the West; red flags enshroud the horizon. London is far away, as usual.

Im dead perhaps. Nothing has changed, nothing at all. You're conspicuous by your absence in this Hereafter, in this outdated, antiquated world. You've been replaced by this indefatigable cassette recorder.

What's the point in dying? Nothing will ever change in the universe. World without end.

Pause.

And before my birth? Had there been anything else, anything different? History seems to prove it. But should I accept its proofs? The proof of the pudding.

Supposing the history of mankind was a complete fabrication.

Could I have your attention, please? It's no joking matter, you know. The history of humankind was concocted by Soviet newspapers, by Soviet history books, by Soviet radio, by Soviet television. Ever since the Creation there has been nothing but the Soviet Union. Do you catch my drift? Our writers and journalists invented Mesopotamia and Egypt to enliven our own history, our drab surroundings. They also created Greece and Japan. To demonstrate that life is many-sided—many-countried, as it were. To prevent our citizens from committing suicide. To offer a glimmer of hope. Go West, go East. Do you catch my drift?

And we blame our errors on those who preceded the communists on earth: on capitalists, on feudal lords, on slave traders, on emperors. Legacy of the past.

Thus capitalism, feudalism and slave ships progressively came into existence. Our sense of superiority has its source in their shortcomings.

Pause.

Comyns Beaumont also noticed the pithiness of history. Have you heard about his hypothesis? He thought that Egypt was located in Western Scotland, that Mount Olympus was really Ben Nevis, that the first site of Athens was the town of Dumbarton, that the battle of Thermopylae was fought at Glencoe, that Ur of the Chaldees flourished near the Stones of Stenness in the Orkney Islands, and so on and so forth. He transferred everything to Britain—everything except Russia. The entire ancient world: myths, culture, sacred sites, sacred rites. According to his theory, Glastonbury was Bethel, the fortress of Abraham, the birthplace of Christianity and the original site of the Garden of Eden.

It's a small world!

Pause.

There was nothing but the USSR; there will be nothing but the USSR. There's nothing beyond the Soviet borders. Is there anything beyond? Nothing at all. Our borders are the bounds of the globe. That's why they don't allow us to cross them. There's nothing to cross. That's why I'm so cross. They make us think the Earth is immense and beautiful. Otherwise the entire population of the Soviet Union would have committed suicide a long time ago. Before the Russian Revolution, before the French Revolution. We believe in the terrestrial Hereafter of our existence. And we find solace in this faith of ours.

And we also find solace in the bottle, I'm afraid.

And what about London? In the Soviet Union there's a region called England. In the West of the Soviet Union. The capital of England is London. I was born in that cardboard city, in that Potemkin village par excellence. They had built it within a few days to back up the texts in our history books—our history books are said to tell the truth and nothing but the truth. What's more, London enables them to create new jobs: pilots, diplomats.

Embassies, diplomatic bags, lengthy diplomatic negotiations. There's no such thing as unemployment in our country.

Besides, thanks to the existence of foreign countries some people do not pay their speeding fines—they plead diplomatic immunity.

Pause.

Our authorities could have easily done away with diplomacy by deleting the word in our newspapers and dictionaries.

A few months ago I had a passionate discussion on the subject. I was engrossed in *Moscow* by Andrey Bely. Nothing is more appropriate for this geographical reading than the décor of our boulevards. I therefore left my room and went out. Half an hour later I was sitting on a bench surrounded by pigeons. On all sides. My bench was a fortress, a besieged town. I had chosen Gogol Boulevard to stress the stylistic link between the two writers.

Habitué of our boulevards are generally middle-aged, old, grey-haired and overweight. Some of them play chess. *Natürlich*. They don't leave me in peace whenever I set foot on their pitch. They challenge me to chess combats, they implore me to listen to their tales of woe, to their thousand and one nights. They're always seeking to engage the services of a professional listener. And I am a professional listener, I can assure you. After all these years.

A tramp was staring at me as if I were a statue of Gogol. I don't like the eyes of tramps—they have seen too many useless things. Purposeless, profitless, fruitless. The eyes of *my* tramp were saturated with superfluous sights, with volatile *bagatelles*. His glance would unconsciously apply that obscene futility to my face and figure, to the book I was holding. I was already part and parcel of his itinerant museum. I was intensely irritated by the way he scrutinised my body and soul. But I didn't chase him away—other vagabonds would have intervened on his behalf, sitting down on my bench, surrounding me on all sides. Like pigeons, like pigeon droppings. And my bench was my castle!

Those individuals have a team spirit. They're class-conscious, to use our official terminology.

I could not go and sit on another bench—he would have followed me like a dog, like an underdog, like an undertaker. Apparently, in the States, undertakers or morticians shadow their prospective clients.

His eyes would have acquired a doleful expression. He might even have demanded a full apology. His demand might have led to another offence, to a half-audible excuse, to another offence.

So I didn't budge; neither did the tramp.

He cleared his throat. I had no option but to accept the inevitable. I didn't look at him lest he mistook me for an accomplice of his thoughts.

'There's something I don't understand,' he said.

'There are lots of things *I* don't understand,' I answered.

'There's only one thing *I* don't understand. Only one thing.' He put his fist beside my thigh. 'I don't understand why foreign countries are tolerated.'

I didn't answer, waiting for a monist revelation.

'Yes, I don't understand, I don't understand at all why foreign countries are tolerated. Those countries are *foreign*, you see. And my blood doesn't tolerate foreign bodies.'

'And I can't tolerate the noise of any sort when I'm trying to read,' I said. He took no notice of my offensive remark.

'My blood expels them. My blood gets rid of them. My body orders the expulsion of all foreign bodies and my blood carries the order out.' He kicked a pebble. 'I don't understand our authorities. Why don't they understand that foreign countries are intolerable?'

I'm not always word-perfect, my dear fellow. I've heard a lot in recent years about dyslexia which is sometimes described as word-blindness. Well, I don't suffer from dyslexia. I'm not word-blind; I'm not word-deaf. I'm certainly not word-mute. But I'm not word-perfect either. The bum expressed his ideas inadequately. And he peppered his speech with three-letter, four-letter and five-letter words. The wording was different and woefully inadequate. I'm just trying to convey his ideas.

'*Ca saute aux yeux*,' he said. Of course he didn't say it in French, but he said *something* to this effect. A five-letter word, a six-letter word. 'I don't understand—'

'You don't understand, they don't understand. Anyway the world is unintelligible.'

'But I don't understand why *they* don't understand—that's easier to straighten out. As soon as they realise what is at stake I won't have to understand anything.'

'In other words, you'll come to an understanding.'

'Right.'

'How do you want them to get rid of foreign countries?'

'They should get rid of them.'

'But how? How?'

'It's advisable to get rid of the details that cloud the issue. Details always cloud the issue. They tarnish ideas and ideals. They discolour our Red Flag.'

I nodded in agreement as he expounded his theory. 'Ideals tarnish easily and turn black if not polished regularly,' I said.

'And our ideals should shine in a naughty world.' Of course he didn't quote Shakespeare, but *I* have no reason to restrain myself. 'A sculptor cuts the stone in such a way as to remove whatever doesn't belong in the statue. And it's the statue we need so badly—the statue, not the rest. Not dust, not household waste.'

'Substantial energy savings are made by recycling waste materials,' I pointed out.

'And our statue should tower over the world.'

'There'll be no world to speak of, I'm afraid.'

'There'll be a world, the world, our world—the only world worthy of human beings.'

'How could we know what is worthy of us?'

'We must be worthy of ourselves. If we're not worthy of ourselves, history will punish us. As soon as we hit upon an idea we must put it into practice. Otherwise our ideas will evaporate, vanish into thin air. And we must prevent our ideas from fading out. Everything will evaporate if we don't hurry up.'

'I wouldn't mind, actually. A sort of evaporated milk.'

"Foreign countries have been wiped off the face of the earth." That's my dream. I open the Pravda and read, "Foreign countries have been wiped off the face of the earth." Wonderful, isn't it?'

At this point I quoted Shakespeare:

*'This royal throne of kings, this sceptered isle,
This earth of majesty, this sea of Mars,
This other Eden, demi-paradise—'*

The bum had no English.

'The Russian idea might perish forever. It's our duty to give a lesson to humanity. We've already given them a lesson and we should repeat our lesson several times. And woe betides those who are unable to learn our lessons. We must act now.'

'The wheels of bureaucracy creaked into action,' I cut in.

'We mustn't be afraid of consequences. The consequences of our actions are our consequences, so there's nothing to fear. We mustn't be afraid of ourselves.'

He was staring at the sand, at the spot where a child had drawn his self-portrait. He stamped on the eyes, several times. Upon these eyes of thine I'll set my foot.

'Are you never afraid of yourself?' I asked. 'Shadows are awesome.'

He heard me at last.

'Sometimes, around six in the morning.'

'Not before?'

'And before. But less than around six. It's different, at six. I don't know what would become of me if my wife didn't hold me back. She wakes me at half past five, every day.'

Pause.

He was scared of his own shadow, as the expression goes. This expression must have been coined by someone who *was* frightened of his own shadow. To protect himself from shadowy intrusions he must have dodged the sun and other sources of light, other sources of shadows.

My grotesque doppelgänger. Grovelling on all fours. Grovelling, grovelling, grovelling. An obsequious servant. Ready to betray me for thirty kopecks.

Pause.

The other day I noticed that my shadow violated optical laws. I was under the impression the thing did not belong to my body—it imitated my movements nonchalantly.

My shadow seems to have a very offhand approach to my identity problem. Or does it suffer from an identity crisis?

That imprint of an unfamiliar life perturbs my spirits as it lies down on the walls and sprawls on my chairs.

The other day I noticed that my shadow was too small, as if the book of my life had been censored.

Our government cracks down even on shadows, for they've got the contours of the originals. But why do they shrivel my shadow inside my flat, I wonder? Their zeal would be justified in public places where I might cast my pernicious shadow on right-thinking, law-abiding citizens.

My shrinking shadow. I'm told that, to encourage regressive growth, our workmen build miniature doors, normally associated with a doll's house; in modern houses there's an enormous discrepancy between the height of offices and the doors by which one enters them. As for old buildings, our authorities have their doors walled up. They leave only a chink, a sort of cat-flap through which one is supposed to crawl on all fours.

And we flatten ourselves against façades to allow black governmental cars to pass us on the narrow streets. Yes, my dear, even the streets are shrinking nowadays: the streets of Moscow, the streets of St Petersburg.

One day the universe may shrink as well. I'm sure that its expansion phase will be counterbalanced in the long run. **Anaximander?**

Galaxies that are now receding from one another will start to approach instead, gathering speed all the time.

Paul Davies describes this contraction thus:

When the universe has shrunk to one-hundredth its present size, the compression effect will have elevated the temperature to the boiling point of water, and the Earth (if it has survived the sun's death throes) will become uninhabitable. An observer would no longer be able to discern individual galaxies, for these would by now have begun to merge with each other as the intergalactic spaces close up. The time scale of events now becomes frenetic. The universe is shrinking appreciably in seconds, then microseconds, as the accumulating gravity turns the cosmic contraction into an uncontrolled implosion. This is the 'big crunch'.

Pause.

I don't understand why some readers and critics judge Kafka's works in accordance with natural laws, endowing them with a prophetic aura. They materialise his shadows; they glue Stalin's moustache on anonymous faces; they fix Hitler's right hand on incorporeal bodies.

'Aime une ombre comme ombre—'

Kafka did not predict anything because castles, metamorphoses, trials and burrows have been scattered over the earth from time immemorial.

And they will never disappear. They will never evaporate.

Artists are not fortune tellers. Kafka's greatness owes nothing to dictatorial regimes, to the Gulag. He predicted nothing and had no desire to predict anything. Casting shadows on the world was his main occupation, his only vocation.

Pause.

Judge my shadow as a shadow. Love my shadow! *Aime mon ombre!* Don't forget that I live *outside* this recording.

Long pause.

On the boulevards there are intellectuals who talk about metaphysics till dawn, foregoing the physics of sleep and psychophysics of dreams. There are civil servants and ladies with lapdogs; and lapdogs without ladies.

Now and then I play chess with local champions. Strollers follow our games with unflagging interest; their gesticulation conjures up the image of Napoleon at the Battle of Austerlitz.

Pause.

A few months ago our friend M. rang me up to say I should immediately go to the Rossiya Hotel where the famous Poselkin choir was staying for a few days or rather for a few nights.

I took a taxi. Silently we drove along the quay, past the *Krutitskoe podvor'ye*, past one of our skyscrapers. The smokestacks of the power station still tower above *Balchug*.

A few minutes afterwards the hotel corridors welcomed my advancing figure, their ears cocked up in expectation. At last their sickly narrowness opened into a spacious hall where the peasant choir conversed with the most venerable members of our élite. A dozen bottles of vodka were strewn around the floor. Rhythmically the glasses would rise and tilt and float down again. Rhythmically, harmoniously, in unison—as if the choir and their audience could not abstain from musical delights, not for an instant.

'Look how white he is. He's really white.'

The peasants pondered over my paleness and the turmoil of city life. They would show me their bruises. Indeed their arms and legs were covered in bumps and bruises. When walking around Moscow they kept colliding with passers-by and lampposts.

Pause.

I've grown allergic to the Russian nation. The King—the King's to blame. The Kings, rather: Lenin, Stalin, Khrushchev, Brezhnev.

Pause.

M. collects Russian songs. He goes to the Belgorod region to record what I call a 'peasant polyphony'. His guinea pigs drink and sing. He drinks and switches his tape recorder on. Sometimes he forgets to switch it off. The recordings feature a lot of irrelevant sounds. Even the *cavatinas* of birds can be heard in a distance.

Pause.

Nowadays patriots look and sound like chauvinists. Some of them, most of them. Not only in Russia, I'm afraid. And they don't even have to search for a scapegoat. 'I'm still the same,' as a Russian song has it.

Even if there are no more Jews within the frontiers of our undeveloped superpower, our fake patriots will go on accusing them of imaginary crimes. What fertile imaginations they must have!

They'll always accuse the Jews. Out of habit, out of sloth. After all, they don't have much imagination.

Pause.

The accents and scents of one's native land. Brogues and brawls. And all those rogues one comes across in villages and cities. They're not more important than the book on Leonardo da Vinci I read in my childhood, at the age of seven. 'I've always been influenced by Leonardo and this influence is more pronounced, I suppose, than the way your neighbour's gait is mirrored in your own gait,' I said to a Frenchman who had spoken at length about his native village, glorifying its inhabitants' moustaches and accordions. In French my diatribe sounded thus: *'L'influence que, grâce à ce livre, Léonard a exercée sur ma jeunesse n'est pas moins spectaculaire que la façon dont la démarche de votre voisin Gérard Dupont s'est imprimée dans votre démarche. Les partisans du retour aux sources s'attendrissent trop sur les fautes de français de leurs grands-mères.'*

I'm really fed up with the back-to-basics partisans who would give anything to hear their grandmothers' bad grammar again. And their grandfathers' silly jokes.

And of course they prefer folk wisdom to Hume and Heidegger. *Natürlich.*

Tolstoy also preferred folk wisdom. He derived more pleasure from drunken songs than from Beethoven's sonatas.

I read Leonardo's biography at the age when one bursts into songs of innocence every afternoon. And 'Every Morn'. His shadow has been hovering over my life ever since. The implacable fragility of his undertakings destroys my works before I have an opportunity to embark upon them. I say to myself it's useless and ruinous. Indeed every masterpiece sows the seeds of its own destruction. So I choose to destroy it myself in order to spare my nerves a literary trauma. I destroy it by putting off its execution. I postpone it until autumn. I postpone it until winter.

I was born to misery—no doubt about it. Endless Night, sleepless Night.

Pause.

But I'm always in the process of collecting material for my novel; and I load my writing desk with drafts.

Click.

The cassette you're listening to is defective, I'm sorry to say. What's wrong with it? A defective design, a defective gene. I wonder if you'll be able to listen to it at all. The cassette recorder has almost swallowed it. *Le mal de vivre*, I suppose. A sort of suicide.

Some old people are loath to die at home. They go away; they roam in the woods; they wander in the steppes, exposing their bodies to the ferocity of serpents and Shakespearean tempests.

Click.

The cassette reels continue to turn as if nothing had happened. Why do they turn, I wonder? Just another turn of the screw.

The reels will turn to the bitter end.

END OF SECOND CASSETTE

THIRD CASSETTE

I take my raincoat off the hook and go out. The streets are endless; they guide me in the opposite direction. I'm cold, I'm soaked through. Rain alternates with snow. And I'm in a state of alternate panic and bravado.

Taxis do not stop.

Click.

In my dreams I die very often. In my dreams I die three times a day. I suffer from no illness; no one takes the trouble to murder my body. I don't fall from cliffs and skyscrapers. I die on a sun-drenched beach. No knife is pointed at my heart, no waves engulf my body and my mind. I die nonetheless, in spite of everything. I die in the prime of life.

In my dreams I am younger, you know; much, much younger.

I don't die of old age; I die of youth, for I cannot live. Sadness, anguish, shame, loneliness. I don't die of loneliness and shame has nothing to do with my death. Still I die. My dreams refute my existence.

This reminds me of a trick some oenologists played on a renowned wine taster. They planted a few vines *outside* an appellation. Four years afterwards they made him taste their 'stateless' product. He rinsed his mouth, spat out, clicked his tongue and said, 'This wine doesn't exist.'

Logically I must not exist. But I do exist. Why?

I am recording cassettes, therefore I am.

Click.

'If no symptoms appear about the stomach, nor the blood be misaffected, and fear and sorrow continue, it is to be thought the brain itself is troubled, by reason of a melancholy juice bred in it.' I drink this juice day and night because everything breeds it: my walls pregnant with my neighbours' voices, my windows. And my stomach of course. Last night's meal has given me an upset stomach.

Anyway I shall be kept alive by a feeding tube through my nose. Pumping food into my stomach day and night; pumping the melancholy juice.

But I don't yet howl like a wolf; nor do I rave like Ajax and Orestes. So I haven't reached the last stage of melancholy, for all the freshly squeezed juice I've drunk. I am at the second stage, I suppose. The first is a thing of the past, I'm afraid—the times when I would 'lie in bed whole days, dreaming awake as it were, and frame a thousand phantastical imaginations unto myself.' *Mentis gratissimus error*.

Pause.

Don't you think that, in the West, neurotics succumb to their disease rather often, more often than in your motherland? Their nerves work themselves loose at the slightest provocation.

The citizens of our country cannot afford nervous breakdowns—it would be a luxury to spend a few months in another dimension.

Nervous breakdowns are a luxury and I cannot go on a luxury cruise. Anyway no doctor would take my nervous disposition seriously; and I don't like the people who laugh in my face.

And no hospital would accept to house my bundle of nerves.

Our literary critics think that Flaubert's sentence, '*On les voyait étaler un luxe insolent*' refers to those who suffer from so-called nervous breakdowns.

There's no other dimension in our country. We've got only one dimension—the dimension of nervous breakdowns.

Please specify the dimensions of my breakdown, Doctor!

Everybody suffers from a nervous breakdown in our country—even party officials, even KGB generals. So nobody suffers from it. This is a perfectly normal state of affairs.

And if somebody does *not* suffer from it they put him in asylum. 'Things are back to normal now,' they say, turning the key in the lock. Just another turn of the screw.

You can't fall ill—

Telephone rings.

—if you're ill already.

You can't fall from a ladder if you're lying on the floor. If you're crawling on all fours.

I'm sure it's Eugenia.

All that crawl.

Why is she calling me?

All that love.

Click.

Supersonic marriage. What usually takes a month is done within three hours.

Will you join me in wishing the bride and groom every happiness?

She's lying.

The wheels of our bureaucracy don't turn so quickly despite nepotism and despotism.

She's lying.

She lies and dies and marries somebody. Almost every day.

Pause.

She's watering the flowers of my hatred.

Les fleurs du mal, les fleurs de la haine.

Sei Shonagon puts hatred and love among the things that cannot be compared.

Long pause.

She hopes I'll come to her office to slap her face in front of her colleagues.

Long pause.

She reads and re-reads *Les Trois Mousquetaires*. Charming, touching, moving, poignant, pathetic.

Once I met a woman who had read *Sein und Zeit*. In the original! Her soul was wearing glasses.

The intelligence of Eugenia is inferior to her beauty. To put it mildly.

Pause.

I don't blame her. She was born in the Soviet Union.

She had no hand in it and she saw what she couldn't help seeing. She heard everything over twenty-four years. Even our silence is pernicious. Mirrors where nothing is reflected are alive, my dear. Don't you agree?

Even our fog is fiendish because it has nothing in common with Dickensian fog.

She's going to ring me up.

Long pause.

I remember what Yoshida no Kaneyoshi said about an individual who, after a long separation, 'insists on relating at interminable length everything that has happened to him in the meantime. Even if the man is an intimate, somebody you know extremely well, how can you but feel a certain reserve on meeting him again after a time?'

Will you listen to my future cassettes?

She must call me once more.

Pause.

I describe my existence with Proustian meticulousness. I am both Boswell and Johnson.

And I broadcast my *scènes de ménage*. Domestic violence.

Pause.

I broadcast my torments.

Long pause.

My life is the worst film I've ever had the misfortune to see. An action-packed film, thanks to Eugenia.

My life is the worst symphony you've ever had the misfortune to hear.

It's no joking matter. I've suffered a good deal of misfortune over the years.

My words don't sound right. My sentences, rather. The words are right: misfortune, suffering.

'Leave me in peace' is far more eloquent, don't you think? As a sentence, I mean. 'Peace' is more eloquent, as a word. And 'peace' is a synonym of 'death', if I'm not mistaken.

My life is no longer a void I'm supposed to fill up with my walks, my words, my thoughts, my moods, my woods. My life is already full to overflowing. Why doesn't it overflow into the Hereafter?

It's suffocating.

My flat is a furniture depository where I can neither move nor sleep.

And our city is a crowd—the crowd I saw from my window at Stalin's funeral.

This crowd won't let me through. This crowd is always beyond my windows. And in my flat, and in my bed.

And these faces don't change with the passing of the years because Time stands in my room. Time is standing to attention, in my room, beyond my windows.

Long pause.

Ridiculous, ludicrous, laughable, farcical.

Foolish.

Shall we listen to Schubert's last quartet?

Recently I wrote an essay about it. Do you want me to read it?

Let us wait for a while.

Let us listen to the quartet.

Click.

Schubert, Quartet in G Major, D. 887, first movement.

The music does not echo our moods and the emotion one experiences in a concert hall should in no way be regarded as an appendix to one's anxiety. It is an altogether different phenomenon that originates in music itself, in its autonomous development.

The emotion grows and eventually outgrows our petty worries so that we understand to what extent a piece of music, organised in accordance with the objective laws of art, is superior to our sufferings which chaotically follow the incidents of our life.

In comparison with the august tragedy that encompasses history and eternity, these incidents appear insignificant, of no importance whatever.

What causes this emotion is precisely the insignificance of personal sufferings; if deprived of art, our lives would be worthless.

Click. Schubert's quartet is no longer heard.

All balls, as Beckett put it! All balls! *De la foutaise!*

Click.

How it is.

That's how it is. That's *what* it is.

A live broadcast of my suicide.

I'll swallow some pills, a dozen pills, a score of pills.

My life is predictable. Full of banalities and tediously dull.

Banal, banal.

How is it? Banal.

A few pills lying on a pillow.

Banal, banal. This canal provides a crucial link between this world and the Hereafter.

I'm to blame, the King. Not the Queen.

You're to blame.

They're to blame.

Click.

Schubert, Quartet in G-major, D. 887, second movement.

One, two...

A glass of water.

I've forgotten...

Click.

Schubert, Quartet in G-major, D. 887, second movement.

Don't you think we should compare a music score to a mantra? Once I spent a whole afternoon browsing through the books on Hinduism, Buddhism and Tantra in order to find affinities between music making and the utterance of the mantric sound. Mantra is primarily a concentrated 'thought form' composed of nuclear syllables based on the esoteric properties

believed to be inherent in sound vibrations. The very sound of a mantra or a combination of them has the capacity to arouse the divine forms or their energies. A single syllable—the *bija*- (“seed”) *mantra* is said to represent the essence of an entire philosophy that can be mystically assimilated through repetition of the mantra. Can the Hereafter be mystically assimilated through repetition of this quartet? No one expects an immigrant to assimilate into an alien culture immediately. I'll have plenty of time. For what? Coming to terms with the Hereafter. Now I should come to terms with death. How to assimilate it? Through this quartet? Through another mantra?

Click. Schubert's quartet is no longer heard.

One, two...

If you don't do as I tell you by the time I've counted to three, there'll be trouble—one, two, three.

There'll be trouble anyway. Toil and trouble, as usual.

Long pause.

Three, four...

Long pause. Telephone rings.

It's Eugenia...

I won't attend the ceremony. Their marriage. A marriage of convenience, I suppose. A marriage of vengeance. An arranged marriage anyway. I've arranged it.

Long pause. Telephone does not ring any more.

Amaro e noia

La vita, altro mai nulla; e fango è il mondo.

Mud, mud, mud. The world is nothing but mud. And I've nothing to lose but my chains.

Pause.

Mud! Mud! Glorious mud!
Nothing quite like it for cooling the blood.

My blood is already cold.

Long pause.

Five, six...

Long pause. Telephone rings.

T'acqueta omai. Dispera
L'ultima volta.

Not too fast.

Chi va piano va sano.

Al gener nostro il fato
Non dono che il morire.

Telephone does not ring any more.

Amici, è giunta l'ora
di praticare in fatti
quella virtù che tanto celebrai.

My last poem...

Monteverdi...
 Today I prefer *Il Ritorno d'Ulisse in Patria*.

Long pause.

I don't feel anything.

Do *you* feel anything?

My voice...

How is it?

How it is...

So and so...

Couci-couça...

Così così...

Arriverderci...

Grazie mille...

Thank you very much indeed.

Omai disprezza

Te, la natura, il brutto

Poter che, ascoso, a comun danno impera,

E l'infinita vanità del tutto.

Long pause.

Ten, eleven, thirteen, fourteen...

Chekhov...his last words...

Do you remember them?

Ich sterbe...

A routine medical check-up.

Long pause.

And what about *my* last words?

Will you remember *them*?

What can I say?

A few numbers...

Eighteen, nineteen, twenty...

My number's up.

I've had it.

I'm for it.

Long pause.

The dead are well. Really?

The sure physician, Death. I'm not sure.

Dead as a doornail. Not yet, I'm not a nail. And I still have some fingernails.

Pause.

Switch it off, will you? Your cassette recorder.

Long pause.

Can you hear me?

Pause.

You *must* switch it off.

Long pause.

END OF SIDE ONE

SIDE TWO

I botched it, my dear. The whole thing was a real botch-up. Losers mess up everything, even their suicides.

Eugenia has a key. So she opened the door, at the wrong moment.

She dialled 999. Or 911.

Why didn't she dial 666?

She awoke the dead.

Pause.

Let sleeping men die.

Click.

Her marriage. Just another love test, my dear. Last summer she did it more elegantly. How? By cracking one of my dishes. The most beautiful dish I've ever owned. She cracked it against a door in order to test my love. I caught her in the act. Looking around to make sure I was in the bathroom or somewhere else, she struck the door with the dish. As if the door was to blame; as if the door had been unfaithful to her in some way or other. But I saw her from behind another door, through another crack. 'The dish or I,' she said. Our relationship was in the balance. 'Do you place more value on the dish?'

The whole *mise en scène* had an unmistakable Japanese flavour. As you know, M. specialises in Kabuki. So I called him to ask if Eugenia's play was a Soviet remake of a legend known to every Japanese teenager. 'Many Kabuki plays tell a similar story,' he said. 'A lady-in-waiting was killed by the lord for having broken a priceless dish. As a result, the lady's ghost later came out to haunt her killer. But Okamoto Kido dispenses with the ghost, adopting a modern approach to the legend.'

'I would also dispense with the ghost if I were a Kabuki writer,' I said. 'And I might kill the heroine in the very first scene.'

I killed myself instead; at least such was my intention. 'You're full of good intentions but you never do anything about them,' says my mother. Well, I did *something* about them, didn't I?

Pause.

Who told her this legend? A Japanese diplomat?

How do they fight duels in Japan? What weapons do they use nowadays? Swords, revolvers, computers?

Click.

Non-existence is very pleasant—full of parks and pretty streets. And fountains, and mountains.

Ever since my excursion into the whiteness of non-existence I've no dread of death.

Click.

I'm not forsaken. My friends might have forsaken me, a long time ago. They did not; you will hear their voices.

They're not my friends, not all of them; but they come and listen to my soliloquies. Questions, a lot of questions. They ask me to recite some English or Italian poems, to say something in English, in Italian, in French. They come from distant areas of the city to hear a few foreign words; some of them come from other cities.

They bring me soup or mushrooms or both—mushroom soup. And I talk to them; I meditate out loud. Ancient Greece, my dear. You live in England; we live in Ancient Greece.

Pause.

I'm reminded of I., of his salutation. 'Who takes care of you?' he asks. Instead of, 'How are you? How's life treating you? How's death treating you?'

Well, a lot of people take care of me. Why? Do they think I am as old as the hills, as the Sparrow Mountains?

No, my dear. No. It's something else. A second youth perhaps.

Click.

This dish seems to lack a certain *je ne sais quoi*—perhaps it needs a bit more spice.

Click.

My armchair stands in front of an onion. Growing in a bowl, an onion, on the windowsill. My guests touch it, toy with it, ill-treat it; the onion continues to grow. The destroyers of flora molest it viciously. The onion is coming into leaf. Such is life—when nothing remains it starts afresh.

For years and years I'd been looking for someone...for a caretaker. Let me call them caretakers, all these people. For the sake of compactness. Caretaker—a person employed to take care of people. I don't like the word 'carer'.

For years and years I'd been looking for such a person. And when I abandoned the search...*en désespoir de cause...*

I'm even invited to Kislovodsk—the only place in Russia where I can spend my holidays.

My disciple invites me to his house situated on the outskirts of the city, near the mineral springs. *Cette année à Marienbad!* He showed me a photograph of the house: the façade, the interior and the garden.

And women! Women, my dear! *Le Sacre du printemps*. Or *Le Sacre de l'été*, if you will. Why this is very midsummer madness.

Pause.

It's high time I wrote my *Symphonie des psaumes*. Why do I exchange my serenity for springtime pleasures?

I get a number of invitations. I accept them and forget them. So they come over here, my caretakers. It's not always pleasant; it's pleasant but not always. I call it 'gaiety at home'. I sit in my armchair; I don't understand anything. As the old poem has it, 'The gaiety of strangers is esoteric.'

Click.

They have a lot of fun in my flat. At least they sound as if they're having a lot of fun. And they don't even ask me what *I* think about all that. The younger generation are insolent.

Click.

They're insolent, but I find them compassionate and good-hearted.

Last month three young people—two boys and a girl—brought me some flowers at 2 a.m. Even later—at 2.25. They had walked eight miles; taxi drivers were sleepy that night.

They rang my doorbell at 2.25 a.m. Safe and sound—fancy that! Our teddy-boys hadn't wasted them at the turn of a playing card.

Ever since their impromptu visit the furniture and floorboards have been carpeted with petals. A Cambodian cult, no less!

And my vases are crammed full of cherries.

Pause.

I look at these dahlias which take care of themselves, being deprived of water and fertilisers, and I say to myself I'm happy.

I say it to myself; I say it to others. But I don't always *feel* it. It's as if my sense of happiness—the eighth sense, I suppose—was benumbed with cold.

Click.

I don't like the sound of that cough much—I should see a doctor.

Click.

My love of Russia is free. I don't say to myself I *have* to love her. I love her, full stop! I love her because I love Pushkin, the Hellenistic harmony of his verse, his Grecian urns; his autumn, his odes to melancholy. I love her because I love Gogol's zigzags and the Kafkaesque austerity of Chekhov's late stories. I love the night of Tyutchev and the day of Pushkin. I love her because St Petersburg is the most beautiful city in the world. I love her because Rozanov used to write this sort of *chinoiserie*: 'A flash of lightning: a plank lit up, a dog shivered, a man grew thoughtful. Three aspects of existence; in vain would we endeavour to blend them.'

I love her because I love Scriabin, his dream of absolute art; and the woman I loved twenty-seven years ago was half-Russian, half-Polish; and I wrote my first poems in

Russian—during a lesson our teacher gave us in Russian. Her Muscovite accent was unbearable.

I love her because I love the Petersburg accent which is as beautiful as Marble Arch.

There was a hint of smug self-satisfaction in your voice when you said, 'Do you find Marble Arch beautiful? I've always found it drab.' Always! How long have you been in London, may I ask? Always! Well, I've *always* loved Marble Arch.

Pause.

I love Russia because, twice a week, we used to wander around the Sparrow Mountains. I love her because, in your recordings and in my dreams, you speak with the Muscovite accent. I love her because I love my armchair. I love her because, the day before yesterday, I cried as I listened to the first movement of Tchaikovsky's trio *A la mémoire d'un grand artiste*.

Pause.

I was crying as I listened to this trio. There's something so ineffectual, so naïve in the way Tchaikovsky develops his themes that my paternal instinct stirs up and plays havoc with my heart, with my sentimental Russian heart. And my Russian soul drowns in her own tears. It's a real tear-jerker, you know.

And the fatal beauty of those themes—who could resist it?

The trio begins with an indescribable theme—I refuse to depict its inexpressible melancholy. After all, I am a staunch, a long-standing admirer of Dante. I also read him in my childhood, at the age of twelve.

The violin sobs; so does the cello. The piano joins the club. The theme is reluctant to stop as if its beauty was inexhaustible, inevitable, fatal. And when it does stop at last, it starts anew and pours out its tiny little soul until the other themes, being goaded by a sort of structural jealousy, muffle and eventually stifle it. There ensues a development where Tchaikovsky demonstrates his utter inability to weave the carpet of musical texture—the shortcoming shared by many Russian artists. What is lacking in our works is continuity, a smooth, logical succession of themes and nuances. Even abruptness should be logical, don't you think? Even 'illogic' should be logical. We build foundations and roofs without bothering about windows and balconies.

As you put it in your poem *Up and Down*:

*The ballerina leapt, took wing
And, after a slight hesitation,
Crashed to the ground.*

That's right, my dear—up and down. We do not master horizontality and its attributes. Do you know the French name for roller coaster? *Les montagnes russes*, Russian mountains.

Nabokov and Stravinsky are notorious exceptions.

Pause.

The internal logic of my novel makes the different parts work well together.

Pause.

Let us stage a reconstruction of my musical bliss. I'm impatient to hear Tchaikovsky's trio entitled *A la mémoire d'un grand artiste*. Is it a title or subtitle? Never mind. I dig it out of a dusty pile of books relegated to the darkest corner of my room. The dust covering the sleeve of the record speaks volumes for my attitude towards Tchaikovsky's music.

The first theme moves me deeply. What follows seems rather boring and also pathetic by virtue of its own impotence. I *am* bored however and a book lying on my lap proves a welcome distraction from the monotony of sequences. Up and down, up and down, up and down.

Suddenly I sit up in my armchair; I almost drop the book. I hear something that is far superior to the sickly beauty of the first theme. The new song emerges out of those Tchaikovskian sequences that are heartrending only in small doses.

The new song, the new theme. It doesn't reveal its beauty at once. Tchaikovsky seems to have chanced upon a winning combination of notes without knowing it. At least he pretends to know nothing about his victory. The theme deviates from its sublime trajectory; it shuns the musical nirvana, out of timidity or out of fear.

As a matter of fact, a prophet in his own right, Tchaikovsky apprehends a brutal revelation. He prepares his audience, gently, gently, anxious to spare them the shock of the discovery.

Click.

There are people who constantly probe into the meaning of life, thereby endowing life with a meaning. They're both touching and picturesque, those buggers. I don't maintain that life has no meaning—I am neither a sceptical lounge lizard nor a demagogic pessimist—but its meaning, if any, follows the itinerary of our caprices. So it has no fixed abode, being enclosed now in a glass of old burgundy, now in the book waiting for us on our bedside cabinet.

I remember Bernard Shaw's remark, 'God is in the making.'

The taste of smoked salmon is as eternal and *indispensable* as *King Lear*. The pleasure I anticipate when plunging my hand into the lukewarm water that noisily fills the bath is as precious as the *satori* of a Japanese Buddhist.

The meaning of life is embodied by a caress that a parsimonious hand lavishes upon us, all of a sudden; it is embedded in Buster Keaton's films.

My stroll, has it a meaning?

It has the meaning of a stroll.

Click.

What a disappointment! I saw her in the streets, my favourite actress, our Greta Garbo. Reality can't hold a candle to television.

Click.

All this is as old as the Sparrow Mountains. Nothing new under the Soviet sun. Even the *Beaujolais nouveau* is old in our land.

Click.

Thirty days later. Nothing new under my chandelier. Luckily for me, the friend of my friend doesn't reclaim his cassette recorder. He must have left the country for good. He must be in London by now.

Pause.

You listen to my cassettes during your walks in Hyde Park. You've got a Walkman, I suppose.

My voice in Hyde Park.

I listen to your voice in my room. At home.

Pause.

I own a picture the authenticity of which is questioned by some Soviet citizens. They say the picture must have been taken in the suburbs of Moscow, in Kratovo. They confuse Monster Island with the suburbs of Moscow!

Of course there are many monsters in the suburbs of Moscow, but they're different. Chalk and cheese!

I *am* on Monster Island. And it is *not* a collage. I like collages, as you must know; but sometimes I prefer the simplicity of a historical fact.

I am young—scarcely recognisable, in fact. B. says that the boy in the picture is somebody else. I like Hume's theories but sometimes I opt for common sense.

Long pause.

Yesterday I encountered an ill-assorted couple. The husband asked disturbing questions, his discreet spouse was tugging at his sleeve. Among other things, he asked me if I continued to paint.

What a question to ask!

No need to state the obvious!

It's written all over my face.

His better half was tugging at his sleeve. He repeated his superfluous question.

I said, 'No.' And I pointed out that I had lost all my paintings.

Click.

The population of the globe is divided into two unequal parts: interested people—they are legion—and disinterested people. The former ring you up because, all of a sudden, you become a wheel in their gigantic machinery; the latter ring you up just for the sake of talking to you on the phone. The former bombard you with questions about the health of your dog

and laugh like a drain even if you haven't told a joke; the latter laugh at the right moment and talk about this and that. Effortlessly, nonchalantly.

I like the people who chat nonchalantly, chaotically—à *baton rompu*. They're true friends.

There are people who do not know how to *chat*. They *speak*, my dear.

Whenever I look out of the window I always see two women chatting away. The same women. How nice!

Those people *talk* to you. Interested people. They talk to you about *that*—about business; often in a roundabout way. Their words are burdened with ulterior motives.

Click.

My mother called me a few minutes ago. My mother neither speaks nor chats. She pontificates, she sermonises, she grumbles, she moans.

She told me she would fall from a ladder or a staircase; in the near future. She told me she would never go to the theatre again. 'In every theatre there's at least one staircase.'

One need not climb a ladder to crash to the ground.

All you have to do is get up. All you have to do is look out of the window.

Click.

I'm speaking from another flat. My girlfriend is not in. I'll stay here until her return.

I'm looking out of the window. A new window, a new life.

I see the office of the Patriarch. Just opposite—the former lodgings of Khrushchev. The blue Chevrolet is gone. The black Zils slide along the façades and melt away into the twilight. They look like coffins.

When I was little I used to like sliding on the polished floor in my socks.

The government officials cherish these buildings.

The cityscape reminds me of London, of its private streets.

Click.

How odd! Somebody called me from London. Who could it be?

I said, 'No. I know no one in London and I've no intention of calling anyone.'

Pause.

Somebody called me from London.

Long pause.

We shouldn't call each other. That would be unbearable. And absurd.

Long pause.

I'm tired, my dear. I'm exhausted. I won't be able to hold out much longer under this pressure, under this silent bombardment. Nothing happens. Nobody touches my body; nobody asks me questions. Yet I have the impression I'm bombarded with questions. And I can't find any answer to these questions because I don't know them.

Kislovodsk seems to be an ideal place for my nerves and my body in general. V. promised to make all the arrangements for my speedy departure. But nothing happens, nothing at all.

'And the house?' I asked him. 'What about that house on the outskirts of Kislovodsk?' He said the house was still available, but his voice didn't carry much conviction.

Don't be such a dawdler, Volodya. Just get on with it!

Click.

And winter is drawing nigh. I already have a 'February face. So full of frost, of storm and cloudiness.'

A January mind, a December body.

Click.

I heard on the BBC World Service that a man wearing the uniform of a Soviet lieutenant had escaped from East Berlin in a car. Three dummies disguised as Red Army officers had accompanied him. Charming, very charming!

Let us set the scene—it was a dark, wet night with a gale blowing in from the sea. No, the sea is too far away. In London the sea is nearer. And the sea is never too far away in Dickens's novels.

Pause.

He found a car made in the USSR; he crossed the border without saluting the guards who might have saluted him, however, being mesmerised by the authenticity of the *mise en scène*.

The situation *was* authentic, as a matter of fact. Soviet officers *are* dummies. And Soviet citizens. Even Soviet dogs are dummies.

I am also a dummy. And I have quite a few ventriloquists at my disposal.

Click.

My fellow countrymen speak pidgin Russian; and their accents are unbearable. I don't listen to people any longer. Perish the thought! But I went to the theatre recently.

Soviet citizens do not care about their mother tongue; nor about any other tongue, for that matter. Theirs souls take up too much room in their lives.

Language *is* our soul, our life. Language is the mirror of our destiny. The nations which neglect their languages die out.

The Prince of Wei returns to his native land after spending long months in captivity. Out of habit he imitates the language of his conquerors, the people of Wu. His entourage do not tolerate his new way of speaking: 'The prince of Wei will not elude the Fate. After all, he *has* been murdered by the Barbarians. He delights in imitating their languages. He is definitively bound to them.'

My fellow countrymen speak a barbarous language. Their children imitate them. I need earplugs. Can you hear me? I need earplugs!

Click.

My youth seems so far away, so estranged from my consciousness and my body that I'm surprised I can hold out without being consumed, obliterated, pulverised.

An old man measures his life in yards, in inches. 'As if it were yesterday,' he repeats as his body swings to and fro in a rocking chair. Many, many years are stretching behind him.

But he sees only a door, a few yards away. He opens it and finds himself in the wardrobe where he used to go when playing hide-and-seek with his cousins. His memory is so short that he remembers only his first kiss, and since there's nothing between the first kiss and the rocking chair where he is ensconced now, he thinks everything took place last night, at twilight. Last night he met the woman of his most lascivious dreams; last night he kissed her in a park, in the shadow of a birch tree; last night she eloped with a White Army officer, and he cried under the same birch tree. Last night. His mother was dying somewhere, not far from Taganrog. One grief was succeeded by another. His youthful memory: the first kiss and a succession of pains. His last memory: a succession of pains. But no kisses, no kisses of any kind. Who would kiss him now? Everything happened last night. He did not slap her in the face. And the dusty revolver remained in his desk. Forever. Last night, last night. His mother was dying, last night. Actually she died three years afterwards, in the autumn. For him she is still alive, still smiling, I'm feeling well today, my son, I'm much better today. Yesterday, not today. The uniform of an officer. So he fought somewhere. Where? In what country? In what army? White, red, yellow, blue, verdigris? For what Emperor? For what dictator? Last night. Everything happened last night. And today there's nothing but yesterday, which was yesterday, alas.

I remember a great many things which have intervened between my cradle and the armchair I'm sprawling in now. They're like those landscapes one contemplates from the window of the Orient Express. In my memory the first kiss lurks beside a lot of small talk that I ought to have forgotten in order to shorten my life, reducing the unbearable weight of the past. I cannot forget them. Time is permanently smuggled into my consciousness. I remember, for instance, what I said near a fireplace the shape of which I've forgotten. 'The operation on my mother's broken leg proved a complete success.' Four superfluous seconds. Why did I add them to my life?

Long pause.

And the duration of the first kiss...

The streets are silent except for the crunch of our feet in the snow. A prelude to our kiss. Debussy's prelude *Les pas sur la neige*. We are looking for a staircase that will keep the secret of our love.

A number of grey buildings flank our path. They are as impassive as sarcophagi. But there are living individuals inside these sarcophagi, instead of mummies. I open the front

doors, one by one, hoping to find a hospitable niche. I glance inside and shake my head, for I know that alien interiors will never fit in with the taste of her lips. Interminable streets, dark staircases. One entrance hall is lit up with the splendour of a Viennese ball. I shake my head. We climb a *dark* staircase. Outside a door is banging in the wind. Or does that happen *inside*? Or is somebody merely banging his fist on a table? Overhead people are pacing up and down. In the cellar there prowl fantastical, prehistoric monsters. She is pulling my sleeve. 'We'll never kiss,' she says. She is pulling my leg. We go out onto the boulevard that stretches as far as the Great Bear. We speak neither about love nor about poetry. Our silence is even longer than the boulevard flanked by doors and indiscreet, garrulous staircases. She stops now and then, fatigued and disenchanted. My despair is attenuated by the frost-born indolence of lampposts and stars. I look at her. She detects in my glance an optimistic nuance and we resume our walk. I open some doors; the echo of our footfalls resounds under the vaults. As if we were in a cathedral. We freeze in our tracks; our footfalls resound still; the echoes seem to have found a common language and speak now unrestrainedly, intoxicated by their freedom. And they will speak for hours and hours, even after our departure. The closer I move to her lips the more inconsiderate the echoes grow. The staircases shift around as if the buildings were on the point of collapsing and burying us beneath their debris. Exhausted, we dare neither go out nor preserve our caresses from the perseverance of voyeurs. People ascend and descend, brushing against our coats. Some of them laugh up their sleeves, others threaten to call the police.

We do not budge. Her lips are mushy.

Click.

Upon re-reading this short story the subject matter of which is my first 'tangible' rendezvous, my shyness and the winter-tale slowness of our streets, I realised that my literary work had pushed the snow-covered episode even further away from my present, from my armchair, from our chit-chat. Falling victim to stylistic mutation, my beloved and my former self had become my distant cousins. My past is reaching the circumference of both my destiny and this cassette.

I don't like the word 'date'. Do you?

'They're on a date' sounds like 'they're on a diet', which means just the opposite. Doesn't it?

Anyway such words date faster than beautiful words.

Long pause.

END OF THIRD CASSETTE

FOURTH CASSETTE

That stroll took place one and a half centuries ago. Pushkin had just finished *Eugene Onegin* and *Boris Godunov*. After my Muscovite rendezvous I left for St Petersburg, hoping to meet him, to show him my poems, short and long. Judging from a story of his duel I had chanced upon in a drawer of my desk, I knew him rather intimately: 'The shadows of death criss-cross the glade where the King of literature, attacked by a pawn, falls in slow motion on a black square. An evil-eyed night bird contemplates the scene from a half-broken branch.'

I do not doubt the authenticity of the document—it is *my* handwriting, slightly altered by one and a half centuries. My handwriting, my style. Who was I in those times? Did I attend the duel? Or did I describe it in accordance with the testimony of witnesses?

Pause.

I'll drink some chocolate to refresh my memory.

Click.

I shall recount to you another kiss, the one Eugenia bestowed on me a few months ago upon leaving the International Library.

She rang me up to say that, contrary to her promise, she could not pay me a visit. She was overworked and overwrought. 'I'm afraid I'll have to relinquish the pleasures of our intimacy,' she said. I was vexed and disappointed. And I hung up on her to attend to my affairs as quickly as possible—the only way to forget her uncharitable nonchalance.

A few minutes afterwards the doorbell rang. As soon as she crossed the threshold she took me in her arms and pressed her lips against my lips with the fervour of a conscientious novice who aspires to learn how to kiss 'correctly'.

We stood in the hall. In front of me there was a bookcase crammed pell-mell with scientific and historical works. I fixed my eyes on *L'Histoire de Charles XII* and *Frederick von Hohenstaufen*. I recalled a series of battles that ended in 1709 with the victory of Peter the Great in Poltava. I mentally recited a few lines from *Poltava*, a minor poem by Pushkin. 'I'll marry when the war is over,' Charles XII used to say whenever his courtiers suggested a useful or an agreeable alliance. I recalled the wives of Frederick von Hohenstaufen: Constance of Aragon, Yolande of Brienne...

I shifted my gaze to other books, to G.J. Whitrow's *What is Time* that my friend had brought me from Cambridge. What is Time? Under the circumstances Time was composed of Eugenia's kiss, of my gaze, of my love for Voltaire and Frederick von Hohenstaufen, of the European Russia founded by Peter the Great and Catherine II. Time was also a collection of various times: biological, relativist, circular. Incidentally, the latter variety is analysed at length in G.J. Whitrow's book. And last but not least, Time was the recording intended for a distant friend with whom I strove to share my torments and delights.

And Time was also the day when you will listen to the recording.

Pause.

Time was likewise your remembrance of the hall where we used to stand, talking about this and that after a dinner washed down with three or four bottles of champagne. 'There should be nothing left unsaid between us,' you would tell me as if to justify our endless discussions.

At the break of dawn

All the loose ends

Are neatly tied up.

Pause.

We were faithful to the ancient Russian custom which allows guests to linger before the front door in order to add a sort of *da capo* to a soirée, to a party; any soirée, however long, ends too early—well before all problems have been duly considered and tackled, whence the saying 'Don't be afraid of a sitting guest—fear the one standing up.'

We would look at the bookcase, at the bindings, at the titles. A new discussion would be broached. We felt obliged to return to the living room and drink another bottle of champagne.

Click.

I slept badly last night, but hopefully fatigue will come to my rescue in nights to come.

I told myself this afternoon: 'Insomniacs spend their lives hoping they'll sleep better. They talk themselves into sleep and they talk themselves out of sleep. In a way they don't mind being wide-awake, for they think they'll sleep better in the near future.'

Click.

Schumann. Trio in D-minor, op. 63.

You're listening to my television set. I decided to spend New Year's Eve in your company. This morning I drank a bottle of champagne. At least it said 'champagne' on the label. The contents were more like shampoo. Until 1 p.m. I was under the influence of that disgraceful beverage. Don't ask me what I was doing—I'd rather not remember it.

I drank a cup of tea to tone down its aftertaste and now I'm listening to a concert. It is 2.15 p.m. The New Year is already under way, as the popular song has it.

Time is indefatigable.

During this dying, agonising year, I've grown wiser and nicer. Now I am less sensitive to the iniquity of judgements and laws. I know I'm in no position to combat stupidity and the coarseness of tastes. I permit myself, however, to deplore this state of affairs in a circle of friends—in low tones. Try as I may, most people will continue to adore elementary, assimilable art.

'Contraceptive advice should be given in a way that can be easily assimilated by the public,' I read in the Times. But art is not contraceptive advice, is it?

Try as I may, money and ideologies will continue to exert their power over the world.

And yet I'm duty bound to speak of it, if only before a group of friends, before the people who have no power, no influence, no access to the BBC or CNN. We must think about it so that justice might triumph. We must correct human errors, for our secret harmony will become an overt harmony sooner or later.

I'm mistaken perhaps. The seventies brought to light our decadence. The seventies brought us to the edge of darkness. The Dark Ages, the Renaissance of the Dark Ages.

The cosmologist Edward Harrison describes the slow degeneration of the universe in the following terms:

The stars begin to fade like guttering candles and are snuffed out one by one. Out in the depths of space the great celestial cities, the galaxies, cluttered with the memorabilia of ages, are gradually dying. Tens of billions of years pass in the growing darkness. Occasional flickers of light pierce the fall of cosmic night, and spurts of activity delay the sentence of a universe condemned to become a galactic graveyard.

Occasional flickers of light; our cassettes.

Modesty was never our strong point.

The spirit of invention that marked the sixties no longer steers us away from conventional, dull, childish pleasures. Childishness is an absolute criteria nowadays: in cinema, in literature, in rock music.

Rudimentary methods and techniques. Some fish have rudimentary legs. Contemporary artists have rudimentary brains, most of them. But Beckett and Borges are still alive. And Robert Wilson. And Maurice Béjart. And Pina Bausch.

Click.

We are afraid of wars. The world would be marvellous if the threat of nuclear winter wasn't hanging over us. There's something more frightful than the atomic bomb. There's something more irremediable, another end.

The world is a cassette after all. So it is bound to end.

Another end. A happy ending, in a way. An ending with no excuse, no justification. The atomic bomb is a facile excuse, too comfortable, too elementary.

There will be no bombs, no tyranny of robots. Books will not be burnt in public squares. And we shall not be confined to glass prisons. And there will be no New Speak. But there will be no Old Speak either. There will be no Think, either new or old. There will be children playing on the grass.

And there will be McDonald's.

There will be McDonald's everywhere. Books will be McDonald's. And nobody will burn them. Nobody. They will be read. They will be devoured. And painting galleries will be McDonald's. And our brains will look like hamburgers.

Mass culture, my dear. A massive culture. Bombs are innocuous.

Capitalist realism, selling figures. Literary agents and publishers will say to journalists, 'It's really not a very interesting work, just a lot of number-crunching.'

Story-writing by numbers, painting by numbers.

I'm not a number—I'm a free man!

Numbers will never go out of fashion.

Our brains will be tarnished by numbers; our voices will be drowned by numbers. *Drowning by Numbers*. There will only be parallel lines. And one colour—the candy-pink of stupidity.

We shouldn't fear dictatorships—they engender pity. And pity engenders life. Tyrannies are self-destructive.

McDonald's is immortal. We are doomed to stupidity.

And I am doomed to dereliction and despair.

Long pause.

Those who have no ear for the harmony of arts cannot even be compared to animals. They are plants, defective plants. They are the putrid jungle where artists get lost and die.

Plants that fulfil their floral vocation are far superior to the human plant.

Click.

'They speak of the degenerate, final phase of the world, yet how splendid is the ancient atmosphere, uncontaminated by the world that still prevails within the palace walls.'

Click.

The world is a video cassette. And what about 'freeze-frame'? What is it? Meditation, death, happiness, *satori*, nirvana? *Verweile doch, du bist so schön!*

Click.

Another year. My God, yet another year! Am I immortal?

Click.

Creaking of door punctuated by silences.

Can you hear the door? The music of my life. It's my life that creaks.

And my knees always creak when I attempt to stand up.

Click.

This champagne burns my palate and my throat. *C'est de la vodka champagnisée.*

Do you mind my giving you a piece of advice? Don't eat caviar. The Russian caviar is as chemical as the Danish caviar.

Do you know how the waiters in Soviet restaurants expand and 'boost' caviar? They put it in a mug of beer. The grains puff out and begin to glisten. They look more appetising than genuine caviar; they become twice as big and four times heavier.

Long pause.

I'm alone. The Christmas tree keeps me company. It swings to and fro as if the memory of the wind were supplanting the peaceful reality of my flat.

I haven't yet finished the bottle but I already confuse spaces.

Click.

Woman's voice, in Russian:

—crossing the date line. People standing on the prow celebrate the New Year; those who remain at the stern are making the last preparations. It's noteworthy that a part of the ship will be in the Southern Hemisphere, whereas the other will lag behind in the Northern Hemisphere. On the Taveuni Island, in the Fiji Archipelago, one can celebrate the New Year twice. The date line divides the Island into two—

Click.

I'm not a happy inhabitant of the Taveuni Island where a 'split personality' has become a byword. I will not run back and forth on that legendary ship—from the stern to the prow and back again. I'll never become a legal passenger of that ship. But I'll celebrate the New Year three times: at Moscow time, at Paris time, and at Greenwich Mean Time.

Click.

Shall we listen to Berlioz's *Requiem*?

Click.

My neighbour's wife paid me a visit an hour ago. She forbade me to play this record which had set her teeth on edge. Her ears, rather. Or her heart, her soul.

Her soul must have sharp, blade-like edges. Anyway there's a definite edge in her voice when she talks to her husband and to her neighbours.

'Don't harass me with your surrealistic music!' In her opinion a requiem is not appropriate for New Year's Eve.

'I'm burying the old year,' I answered.

A requiem is a piece of music written for a Mass at which people honour dead years.

Pause.

In a way, my neighbour is right. Berlioz's *Requiem* reminds me of Yves Tanguy, of his extra-terrestrial paintings.

Click.

7.15 p.m. They're dancing on television. Dancing in the street, dancing on the screen. Love is an immobile dance. No point in leaving my armchair. The immobile dance of the senses.

Why am I happy today?

Is it an aberrant feeling?

Do I use too many formal, outdated words? Aberrant. What do you expect? I am old-fashioned; and I like formal dinners and formal flowerbeds.

Why should I use the words of our epoch? I hate our epoch and I hate its words.

Click.

Dichter und Bauer *by Zuppié.*

It is already the New Year. Despite the clock. Listen to the music. Isn't it the New Year? A new happiness, according to the Russian saying.

On December 31 I always listen to this Toscanini recording.

What would I become without my record player, without its worn-out needle?

Click.

A violinist I met at the Conservatoire told me he was afraid of dying during a performance of Wieniawsky's *Polonaise*. Should one sing Obrecht instead?

Should I keep silent, all my life? Should I interrupt this pious silence by the recitation of a sacred text, now and then? Wieniawsky's *Polonaise* is also a sacred text, for it exists and often reverberates inside concert halls. And outside.

No one can know the value of visible and audible things.

Pause.

What if I die when thinking about *Moulin à Vent* or *Moulin Rouge*?

Click.

I've just finished the bottle. There comes a moment when the quality of champagne no longer counts.

The clock continues to slow down the expansion of happiness.

In London it's 8.25 p.m.

Long pause.

I need only recall the last year to encompass human history and take in the universe at a glance. All infinite worlds, all parallel worlds.

Click.

One hour, just one hour. Another fifty-eight minutes. This year is ghastly. This year doesn't merit a Strauss waltz. Perhaps a polka by Joseph Labitzky.

Long pause.

Youth, beauty, culture.

Little ballerinas. *Petits rats*. Have you already seen them dance *An der schönen, blauen Donau*? At the Vienna Opera?

Beauty has its rhythm, its melody.

Click.

Another twelve minutes. And the champagne isn't cold enough.

Long pause.

This year is horrible.

Long pause.

I don't regret it.

Long pause.

Our Number One is presenting his best wishes to his subjects. The TV sets of my neighbours speak so loud that I understand almost everything.

Click.

Küss Waltzer *by Johann Strauss.*

This year we'll meet again.

Click.

Küss Waltzer *by Johann Strauss.*

I can feel it.

Click.

Küss Waltzer *by Johann Strauss.*

I feel too many things at this moment.

There's no such thing as a surplus of happiness.

I've forgotten to call Eugenia. How could I forget to call her? You see how happy I am!

We'll see each other—Strauss is never wrong.

END OF SIDE ONE

SIDE TWO

Back to barracks.

My head is heavy; everything is heavy this morning. Why should I enumerate the items of my heaviness? It's a heavy world!

Long pause.

I was happy. I listened to Strauss. I imitated Fred Astaire.

The memory of my celebration is a heavy burden to bear.

When shall I hear his waltzes again?

Click.

I can bear the sound of my voice; I'm accustomed to it.

My recordings are endless. No one will ever switch the cassette recorder off.

This cassette recorder will outlive me.

Long pause.

Je continue à me retourner quand passe un jupon. Yes, my dear—I still look at young and middle-aged women. 'Stop ogling!' shouts my mother. 'For goodness sake show a little restraint!'

I turn back, I follow them, I shadow them. And all my shadows shadow them. The sentiment of love does not evanesce as fast as other sentiments and feelings. But it evaporates nonetheless. Halfway through life reality evaporates and we enter a world of pure fantasy.

Anyway, today I am physically and psychologically weakened by a stomach disorder that will not abate, for all the tablets I've swallowed.

Some day I shall not return to the boulevards. I'll be alone in the world.

You must have seen *La città delle donne*. Some day I'll walk alone in that city—the capital of my indifference.

Click.

I've just called my mother. She told me, 'This is my last year.'

I said, 'Happy New Year, mother.'

'You're waiting for my death!'

'No, I'm waiting for my life.'

Half an hour later she had only two weeks to live. '*C'est ma dernière quinzaine.*' She said it in French.

When she gets better she declares it is a bad omen. 'One always feels better on the brink of death.' When she feels out of sorts she tears off the leaves from her calendar. As soon as she finds the day of her death she stops, throws the last leaves of her life in the rubbish chute and hangs the calendar over her bed. She contemplates it all day long and meditates on her funeral. A freeze-frame of her funeral. She makes a guest list and picks up the receiver. She telephones the guests of her corpse—fancy that!

Long pause.

And they call it a New Year!

What's so new, may I ask? A figure? Is that enough to change one's life? The modification of a number can destroy the universe, but the life of Man is more complex than the mass of galaxies. Other numbers should be used, I suppose; other equations. But what's the probability of happiness in the universe?

To solve my problems, I've adopted George Polya's method.

'If you cannot solve the proposed problem, look around for an appropriate related problem.' I looked around and found many problems similar to mine, but that didn't help me to solve *my* problems.

'Work backwards.' I'm always working backwards. Walking backwards—into the past.

'Work forwards.' I'm also working forwards, but I see nothing in the future except the present.

'Narrow the condition.' It is too narrow already! I have a cramped room.

'Widen the condition.' How? How? Well, I go outside now and then, but my outings do not widen the condition. I see my room everywhere. In a way I keep walking around my room.

'Seek a counter-example.' I've found it already. My counter-example is your life, my dear friend. London, Paris, Kyoto. And so on and so forth.

'Guess and test.' Well, I must put this idea to the test. I'll test the cassette recorder first. I'll test it for accuracy.

Click.

The sound leaves much to be desired. Shall I test my flat? How? By walking up and down, backward and forward.

Sound of slippers shuffling to and fro.

Am I testing my flat or the space of my flat? Never mind. Shall I test my mind? Actually I test it whenever I talk to you. Am I in a position to pass judgement on my own brain? You'll tell me what you think about it. About my brain, about my mind, about my life.

Click.

I re-record this side as often as I can. So I talk twice as long, three times longer. I erase everything except the 1st of January—a promise of Eternal Recurrence.

The cassettes I use don't come from shops. Our shops are silent. 'Void does not speak,' as the Mongol proverb has it. I can't have a hundred cassettes at my disposal. I can't talk for hours on end.

My friends bring me recorded cassettes. 'Would you care to express an opinion on our songs, on our poems, on our voices?' They crave my judgement.

Why should I listen to them?

On this cassette there was a poetry recital.

People buy cognac, invite a poet and give him money. The life of the intelligentsia in the Soviet Union.

Pause.

Over the last five years I've erased five poets, seven musicians, a declaration of love, two erotic soirées.

I seem to lie dying in a room crammed with people; they talk, sing, play the guitar and the saxophone. As soon as I clear my throat they interrupt their discussions, their arias. They look at me with respect and leave my flat by the back door.

Click.

It's already the 1st of June. I broached this cassette last autumn. I continue to record it in the summer. Four seasons, my dear. Tchaikovsky!

What's the news? I've bought a refrigerator.

Pause.

I am happy because I am unhappy. It is a paradox which, on closer inspection, loses its paradoxical flavour. I would be happy if—Thanks to the 'if' which is a euphemism for 'never' I believe in happiness. And this belief of mine makes me half-happy or two-third happy—it depends on days and on my moods.

There are people whose vital vocabularies feature no 'ifs'. To all outward appearances they've got everything one needs to be happy. They are not happy; their natures are incapable of happiness. Their Rolls Royces never break down and their wives are still beautiful despite the number of years they have spent on earth; still faithful despite the ever-increasing number of suitors. Their faces enliven television screens. Their names blacken the pages of textbooks and history books. And yet they are unhappy. No mitigating reasons can explain their despondency. They are just allergic to felicity. Eventually they remember that happiness is unattainable.

I've got no memories of this kind. Not yet.

Are there any mitigating circumstances that might help explain my appalling condition? Of course there are—*natürlich*. They are legion. Too many mitigating circumstances; too many plausible excuses. There are still a score of 'ifs' in my vocabulary. So I am only half-unhappy. Or three-quarters unhappy.

Long pause.

You'll understand everything. You're the only person who can understand what I'm talking about from dawn to dusk, from dusk to dawn.

Pause.

Can you hear the dawn chorus?

Pause.

A load of nonsense. I'm talking drivel, as usual.

Pause.

Do you have to understand anything? *Can* you understand anything? Supposing you understood my disjointed account. Would I be happier? Let me put it this way—would I be less unhappy? Supposing you sent me a cassette in which you would assure me of your moral support. So what? Should I leap for joy and forget my misery? And what if you were prepared to fly to my rescue? What if you were sitting by my side, within arm's reach? Within thoughts' reach? Within heart's reach?

Pause.

I thought that you, of all people, would understand me.

Pause.

Be that as it may, make an effort, my dear—try to understand me!

Click.

The cassette recorder might reproduce my chatter in a fragmentary fashion as if ashamed of my dullness and suicides. Perhaps my cassettes are akin to the ancient maps of the globe where a number of unpretentious white spots seemed to enshroud the ignorance of geographers and the weariness of travellers.

Pause.

You're listening to the murmur of my soul, to the song of my heart.

The younger generation, fearing to lay themselves open to ridicule, utter the word 'heart' only in connection with heart attacks and coronary thromboses.

Unabashed we talk about our toes and shoulder blades. Why should we pass it over in silence, this marvellous instrument of compassion and grief?

Long pause.

I'm wrenching my heart from the shackles of words. I'll tell you *everything* about my life.

Days come and go, nights vanish into thin air. Daylight is thin, darkness thick.

Days stop and stay. And stare.

But I'll give you no gut-wrenching descriptions of my everyday routine.

The years of solitude have opened up wounds in my heart. It's been a Hard Day's Night.

Long pause.

I'm forced to invent everything: excitements mixed with pleasures, pleasures mixed with excitements.

Every day I devise a new game, another torture. I pretend to live. I'm going through the motions.

Long pause.

To wait and to hope. The Count of Monte-Cristo, his motto. *Dum spiro, spero.*

I recall a Latin-American adolescent who lived in Moscow some while ago. He had been dragged into an argument and got involved in a trial. And our trials have nothing in common with the one depicted in Kafka's famous novel—they last only a few days and never take place in the open air, in cathedrals, in lawyers' apartments. And the accused men are given no opportunity to flirt with young damsels. In Kafka's novel it took a long time for the authorities to creak into action.

I helped him as best I could. We would go for a walk along the river and to Sokolniki park that I tenderly call 'my woods'. We would go to museums and cinemas. He would say, half-jokingly, '*Dum spiro, spero.*'

Si fortuna me tormenta, spero contenta.

Pause.

This story reminds me of Chekhov's uncles and sisters: 'The sky is full of stars. We'll rest, Uncle Vanya. Let's go to Moscow!'

I am in Moscow. So what? Have I got enough rest?

Le ciel n'est ni bleu ni calme.

Long pause.

Migrating birds that fly over the Soviet Union are shot in large numbers. So rooks have decided not to migrate any more. They're freezing to death. It's cold enough to freeze the balls off a brass rook.

But men are not rooks. Even crooks are not rooks. One letter makes all the difference.

Pause.

Even nature hopes—as long as it can breathe. The overabundance of peaches, this year! Despite our atmospheric and agricultural conditions. Unimaginable!

Click.

It's the 17th of January, if I'm not mistaken. My best wishes for the year that is already 'under way'.

New Year's Eve. I celebrated it elsewhere. To tell the truth, this 'elsewhere' was not really elsewhere.

I tried a new course of treatment. No need to explain what it means.

Pause.

The New Year is raging through China, Vietnam and Japan. My flat looks familiar. Yet I can't find my old sensations. Hospitals accustom us to an artificial life.

I can't manage to integrate myself either into the Soviet society or even into myself. I withdraw from myself. Not *into* myself—*from* myself.

Click.

Our wishes and answers travel in slow motion. They go through the motions, as it were.

My monologues must sound different on the day they finally reach your room.

Click.

I'm staying in the kitchen, for I can't go anywhere else. My 'living room' is so cluttered with books and letters that I don't venture into its labyrinth any more—I wouldn't get out alive. I would get stuck between three piles of books.

*On the parquet floor,
Amid mounds of books—
Two small cassettes.*

No one wants to give me a hand. No one takes care of me. No one. Nobody. '*Seulette suis.*'

Pause.

M. called me this morning. 'I hope you'll find some way out of the vicious circle,' he said.

'What vicious circle, pray?'

'That of your thoughts. I hope something will wake you up and take you out of your room which is in fact a projection of your own entrapment in personality, trammelled with ideas. You're looking for redemption within—the wrong place. Only other people—real other people—have the power to intervene and redeem.'

'Only God has such a power,' I answered. 'But I'm not on intimate terms with God. Incidentally, one is supposed to look for God *within* oneself. The right place, you know. All deities reside in the human breast.'

Pause.

Fuge multitudines, fuge paucitatem, fuge unum.

Click.

What a mess! My room is a total shambles. And I am a strange, shambling figure who walks around the kitchen trying to find a place for the cassette recorder.

I can still walk in the kitchen, but I can no longer walk in my room. And no one wants to give me a hand.

Am I forbidden to walk in my own room?

Click.

Cleaning my room.

Click.

Cleaning my room.

Click.

I'm tired of asking myself to tidy up my writing desk. Anyway my spring-cleaning only aggravates the problem of traffic congestion.

There are flats that shouldn't be cleaned.

Click.

I crashed to the ground because of this disorder. But I didn't follow my mother's example—I had concussion. Jack fell down and broke his crown.

There was something wrong with my left cerebral hemisphere, for I couldn't control the right-hand side of my body.

But my legs were safe and sound!

As usual they drove me to the Kremlin Hospital where I spent a fortnight, motionless, almost paralysed. Any mental process, however inconsequential and trivial, would result in a splitting headache. What was there to be split, I wonder? Everything had been split already.

Click.

I had a dream last night.

I was in London. My dreams obey my commands.

After a long search I found a few quiet, submissive dreams.

Not quite, not quite.

I opened a bottle of Krug. I was walking near Trafalgar Square, a glass in my hand. I know this area like the back of my hand. Even better, much better. I can't visualise the back of my hand; and I don't dream about it.

The champagne was getting warmer and warmer in the barbarous air of July. So I went to Harrods to buy an ice bucket.

Inside, people were queueing. Your queues looked like ours, in my dream. The faces were all too familiar. The shop assistants talked to each other, paying no attention to their clients. Back in the USSR. My tears were trickling down the mirror opposite. All of a sudden I recalled my suitcase.

I spoke to a shop assistant, in English:

'I left my suitcase in London. I've come to fetch it. My friends must have sent it back.'
He had no English. I switched to French.

'Your friends? What friends?' he said in Russian.

'My friends from the Soviet Embassy. They work at our Embassy.'

'Your suitcase is in Montreux,' he said in French. He was sporting a Gallic moustache.

'How so?'

'Your Swiss friends have already filled it with chocolate. And they'll send it to Moscow. Tomorrow, at the latest.'

Pause.

In sleep a king, but waking no such matter.

Pause.

Do you remember *la belle époque* when everybody would recount his dreams?

Dreams have gone out of fashion. Now everybody talks about reality, about facts, about walks. Snobs are said to describe the most ordinary walks deprived of suspense and impressionistic touches.

The banality of everyday life becomes a work of art.

There's nothing more ridiculous than happenings.

Pause.

I'm sleepy.

A mirage vibrating on the horizon. Sleep, most gentle sleep.

Click.

A sleepless night, as usual.

Sound of slippers shuffling to and fro. Music.

How ugly this girl is! And her legs, my goodness! Her legs! On television girls ought to move with elegance. *Ce serait la moindre des choses.*

Pause.

Oh dear! What a figure! Where does she come from? She's too matronly. After such programmes I'm tempted to become homosexual.

The men they show on television are no better, in point of fact. I think that in our country one is tempted to become neither homosexual nor bisexual; nor heterosexual.

And if you have a sexual orientation you forget all about it—you forget what you are.

Body builders are terrifying and sexless. Everywhere.

They are not master builders. Ibsen wouldn't have written a play about them.

Click.

Woman's voice, in Russian:

Stand up! Make lateral movements, leaning on the gymnastic baton! Raise your legs! Right leg, left leg. Jump! Thirty times at least. Jump and walk! And run! Last exercise. Hold the baton vertically! As long as you can. And if you can't hold the baton vertically, hold it horizontally. As long as you can. And if you can't hold the baton horizontally, drop it and start walking again! And jumping! And running! Run until the end of music! Our lesson varies in accordance with your physical condition, but you should on no account stop in the middle of music. If you stop before the end you might suffer a relapse. So you should go on as long as possible! And if you feel sick—never mind. You'll feel better in an hour or so. Meanwhile, take a shower! And if you have no shower, wash your hands, your face and your chest! To stimulate your body's own defences. Wash your shoulders. If you have some respiratory problems, wash your feet instead of your chest and keep the upper part of your body warm! This precaution will spare you a lot of coughing fits. Don't you worry! In two or three hours everything will be all right. And if, tonight, you're unwell—

Click.

I'm unwell. This morning.

The programme isn't over yet. I've turned the TV off. That's how a new day begins. That's how it goes on. Hold the baton horizontally!

When, in the spirit of philanthropy, she allows Soviet citizens to drop their batons I hear a triple bang.

Our society is too permissive towards drug-taking and baton-dropping.

Pause.

Body-building is enjoying an upsurge of popularity. Do you remember J.? He is building his body. A living construction set. Unlike my neighbours, however, he never drops the baton. Soon he'll carry it above his head during his walks in the city. And he jumps all the time. Instead of frowning he jumps. Instead of answering a question he jumps. And he jumps higher and higher so I don't invite him any longer. My ceiling is very fragile.

Pause.

Last year, in Kiev, I saw a stadium packed with human bodies. They really looked like sardines, fresh sardines. They did not look like sardines preserved in oil or tomato sauce; yet the stadium was rather akin to a tin. A colossal tin.

Those sardines wore underpants, undershirts, bathing suits and gaiters. On the stands a hundred professional gymnasts would twist themselves into knots—literally, not figuratively. So did their disciples. Somehow they understood each other perfectly. There were batons everywhere. Those muscle-bound individuals seemed on the point of flogging the inhabitants of the city. A dozen loudspeakers propagated the voice of some president or other. He counted till fifty, paused to get his breath back and started again from square one. This time he counted till hundred. And he didn't pause to get his breath back. His voice drowned the music out.

A number of ambulances stood on the lawn. The nurses were smoking cigarettes, their eyes riveted on their future patients. Now and then they nodded their heads.

I attended the show twice. At 7 a.m., before the training of footballers; at 10 p.m., after the soccer match. The body-building illuminated by a spotlight. A haunting memory! Kiev by night.

Pause.

There are people who watch this programme solely for the sake of half-naked female bodies. They say to their wives, 'I must lose weight,' and they switch their televisions on.

At any rate my former boss didn't lose a pound of flesh despite his quasi-professional knowledge of gestures and batons.

Pause.

My body-building is limited to the natural exercises of Man. I lie down, I get up, I hold my razor—a substitute for the proverbial baton; I hold my napkin vertically, horizontally; I walk and gesticulate. But I don't jump.

There are voices everywhere. And they count, count, count: one, two, three, four, five, six, seven. My music drowns them out. My melodies, my harmonies, my modulations.

There are no ambulances under my windows. And if I happen to spot one in the neighbourhood—an ambulance illuminated by a spotlight—I don't pack my bags. As usual nurses enjoy their cigarettes, but they take no notice of my windows.

I've never tried to keep myself in shape. I'm always out of shape, so there's no shape to keep up.

Nor have I tried to get into shape. It is out of the question!

Pause.

I played a game of tennis, last year. That may seem odd. True, it wasn't *real* tennis. It wasn't fake tennis either. I think they call it 'soft tennis'. I'm not sure. Perhaps I'm just going soft. Never mind. This physiological exploit took place only once. My nose and my broken ribs do not allow me to indulge in soft tennis more often.

Pause.

Before the match I wasn't in good shape. After the match I was exhausted.

So it happened only once, in the Crimea. The weather wasn't in good shape either. Or it was exhausted.

Un vin fatigué, des souliers fatigués. A wine may be weary. Why not the weather?

The rain stayed mainly on the plain. And we played on the plain. The weather seemed to impersonate my mood and physical condition. The 'soft' balls were lighter than 'hard' ones. The wind carried them away from our rackets. Far, far away. We never saw them again. As if they had become a myriad of stars.

At some point I realised we were playing without balls—a nice homage to Antonioni's *Blow Up*.

We were *not* playing. I held my racket vertically. And horizontally.

Pause.

An amusing game, a moderate game. You can run or walk. You can even remain motionless—near the net, far from the net, far from the court. You don't really have to play within the bounds of the court. You can play elsewhere. There's a court elsewhere.

Next day I didn't resume the game. Partly because of the weather. Besides, I had no tennis shoes.

Pause.

The sea was cold, very cold. I didn't touch it. Actually I did touch it—I dipped my toe into the sea to check the temperature of the water. I checked it. I wasn't satisfied. I dipped into a box of chocolates instead. And into a large bowl of strawberries that Natasha had put on the table.

Now and then I walked on the beach.

I hurt my feet walking across the pebbles on the beach.

Long pause.

END OF FOURTH CASSETTE

FIFTH CASSETTE

I must have told you the story of my present, of my gift, of my *cadeau*. Our friend celebrated his jubilee, his thirtieth anniversary. The composer, you know.

I wasn't on the guest list.

When you're All Dressed Up and Nowhere to Go.

Pause.

The news.

Our mutual friends.

Long pause.

The incident took place a few years ago but my pain doesn't grow old; I am still sad and upset. It's a piece of news in spite of its venerable age.

There are things that do not grow old. They get rejuvenated in the inexhaustible Fountain of Youth—our sufferings.

The news. Regularly I listen to the BBC World Service. The news I hear seems outdated, antiquated, outmoded—as if I had already heard it in another language, in another country.

Sounds like its own echo.

Pause.

Poetry gives rise to the same sensation. It is both new and old. A mixture of pain and ecstasy.

A beautiful poem is a blend of the past and the future. *Beowulf* was composed this morning.

Pause.

The fall of the dollar. A piece of news!

Click.

So I listen to the World Service. The sound quality is excellent—either they don't jam the World Service in the hope that Soviet citizens have no English, or my radio set is more powerful than their obstreperous devices.

It's an old custom-built Nortmende Blauepunkt that my parents brought from Munich. A very powerful machine—it picks up even the North Pole. And the sound quality is excellent. They seem to recite their texts in my room, sitting on my divan.

And King Arthur is ensconced in my armchair.

Somebody wished to buy it. I didn't sell my old Blauepunkt. I'll never sell it, even if I'm offered a VCR and a hundred video cassettes. It's a sort of Rolls Royce. And a Louis XV chest of drawers.

Pause.

By dint of listening to the World Service I live by Greenwich Mean Time. Your ambassadors can call me late into the night. At 4 a.m., if necessary.

Click.

If I had two cassette recorders, our cassettes might talk to each other.

Click.

I can't keep silent, as Tolstoy put it.

I scoured all the shops without exception. I went to the flea market. And to the black market.

I'm freezing. And it's only September.

According to my friends, I shan't hold out until Christmas. Perhaps not. You're acquainted with our drafts. And with our blizzards. And I must venture outdoors from time to time.

Long pause.

Will you be in London during the January sales? I'll give you my measurements shortly. But I'm not sure they'll be the same in January. I'm losing weight, my dear.

'There's a slight decrease in your weight after three weeks of dieting,' said my doctor. When did he say that? In March or in April I spent three weeks at the Kremlin Hospital. As usual.

'After three *years* of dieting,' I corrected him. 'And I'm not on a diet, Doctor,' I added.

Could you please buy me something?

Something cheap? Well, not very expensive.

If it's too expensive—forget it! I'll stay at home. My heating bills are rather low.

Pause.

Sounds like a remake of Gogol's *The Overcoat*.

The London winter is warmer than our spring. You don't need an overcoat to cross the Thames by Westminster Bridge, do you? A raincoat would fill the bill nicely. But even a padded raincoat wouldn't allow you to reach the opposite end of Red Square. In wintertime, in late autumn.

Pause.

After the world première of *Oedipus Rex*, Stravinsky availed himself of his admirers' flattering remarks. At some point Paul Dukas entered his box.

I think it was Dukas. Or perhaps Ravel. Dukas or Ravel—no matter.

Stravinsky took a glance at Dukas. Or Ravel. Ravel or Dukas took a glance at Stravinsky. They looked at one another. They stared at one another, comparing their ties.

Debussy. No, Debussy was dead in those days.

Jacques Duclos or Ivan Petrov—no matter.

Couldn't be Schoenberg either.

Pause.

My tie collection. Do you remember it? My friends and colleagues used to call me '*Londonsky dandy*'. They had borrowed it from *Eugene Onegin*, I presume: '*Kak dandy londonsky odet.*'

What do they call me now, I wonder?

They also compare their ties and bow ties. And their jackets, and their shirts. After a while they begin their enquiries. 'Where did you find it?' And they note the telephone number of the obliging shop assistant.

They meet somewhere, stare at each other. A few minutes elapse in silence.

They might offer me their condolences.

They undress and show their underwear.

Pause.

No one halts before me to look at my coat. On the contrary—they take to their heels in order *not* to see my coat. I'm talking about my friends and about the friends of my friends.

Only the proverbial 'man in the street' looks at me—he looks at whatever happens to be within his field of vision.

And the 'woman in the street' doesn't look at me.

Click.

The story of my fall. I broke everything. My body was lying near the chest of drawers. Like a broken Chinese vase.

Could you please consult a chemist? Tell him that my nose hurts me. And my jaws, and my ears. Ask him what kind of treatment—

The point is my disease doesn't generally respond to treatment. At least I've tried every treatment my doctor suggested.

'You need extra vitamins and protein,' he says. 'Do you know that one tiny berry contains more vitamin C than an orange?'

'But where's this berry, Doctor? Where's this tiny little berry that can save me from death?'

He doesn't answer. He never brings me anything.

How long can I last out without vitamins?

Long pause.

This morning I put an empty vial in between the ashtray and the tea pot.

Sound of slippers shuffling to and fro.

This vial is my *aide-mémoire*. *Ginseng*. Apparently there are *Ginseng* capsules in England. I don't know the brand. Somebody saw them in England. Small capsules. They're prescribed to neurasthenics, to those who suffer from hypertension. Hy-per-tension. Asthenics also stuff themselves with these capsules. Don't confuse with asthma! If I suffered from asthma I would have respiratory problems. I suffocate, but in a figurative sense. Don't confuse senses! You know what can happen if one confuses capsules and illnesses. Or medicines, or doctors.

Sleeping pills. The pills that are sold in our *apteki* keep me wide-awake. A caffeine-based product, I bet. Dordon, dolador, manerax. Buy *anything*! But make sure I'll get some sleep. Consult your chemist—he must know a magic pill. Don't buy the pills that bring about a splitting headache. I've already got a splitting headache. Everything has been split already. Everything down to my head.

Whoops! I've spilt my tea. No matter—there's enough tea left in the tea pot.

Words *are* dangerous. Everything has been split and spilt.

Earplugs. They can't replace sleeping pills but I need them badly. They're my silent friends. They can't replace sleeping pills. Nothing can replace sleeping pills. Earplugs are just a postscript to a peaceful sleep, a note in its margin.

Our customs officers think that all medicines, however indispensable, contain drugs. They persistently throw away the capsules they find in the suitcases of foreign tourists. Or they keep them perhaps, hoping they *might* be drugs. And they confiscate eye drops. And nose drops. As if they were diamonds or icons.

So you'd better send a triple portion: nine boxes instead of three, fifteen vials instead of five. They won't dare throw so many vials of foreign medicine into the flames.

Even if they do burn the sleeping pills I'll have earplugs which ensure a half-sleep, a sort of day-dreaming at night. Not a refreshing sleep but a half-refreshing sleep—a lazy sleep. A sluggish sleep, an indolent sleep, a languorous sleep. Everything is better than a translucent sleep through which I contemplate my dismal room and my life. All my faults and sins.

So don't forget earplugs.

Earplugs don't look like drugs. And if our customs officers split some of them open to see what is inside—no matter. Let them frisk to their heart's content, providing they don't demolish *all* earplugs.

If they do—no matter. I can put the bits together. It's their consistency that counts. If they destroy their form they'll spare their texture, their sound veil, their half-sleep.

Please don't forget to give instructions to your new ambassador.

Long pause.

I'm weary of my shame.

I'm sleepy, for once. Is weariness the only remedy against insomnia? My shame—the shopping list I'm sending you. Do I have to ask you for a VCR? And for a music system? After that I'll sleep for a month.

Pause.

I am sad. My sadness is my sleeping pill tonight.

Click.

I am still awake. After all, I haven't asked you for a VCR.

Click.

At last I have a few photographs of your house. First I heard the background music; now I see the film for which that background music has been composed. A silent film, a still film. A still life. A life nonetheless. Better than a vivacious death.

So I have to fill this décor up with your occupations, your whims, your thoughts.

Pause.

The present photograph can't have been taken after a party—the glasses are arrayed by a sober hand. And they're not dirty.

Pause.

A bookcase, a Louis XV armchair, a divan and, on the left-hand side, an engraving which represents the château de Versailles before Hardouin-Mansart's additions.

On the floor there lies a sheet of paper where a few lines can be distinguished—an unfinished poem, I suppose. An unfinished poem that didn't reach the wastepaper basket.

Your wastepaper basket must be crammed with your dissatisfaction.

A disorder of cushions on the divan suggests some saucy digressions, some amorous parentheses.

Long pause.

New Year's Eve—*Saint-Sylvestre* 1983. Dressed in a dinner jacket, you're holding a champagne flute. It's almost empty. On the next photograph the flute is full to overflowing but your plate is almost empty. You're speaking to an invisible man or to an invisible woman. Judging from the expression on your face, your listener must be a middle-aged man. No, you can't be sitting next to a man.

You're speaking about the past; and about the days to come. Please don't ask me to make any predictions about tomorrow.

Men are always wrong—only fate is right. Just another cliché.

Every time I ask my mother for some money she comes out with the old cliché: 'It doesn't grow on trees, you know.' Money must grow on flowers. Money must grow in English gardens. Or in Japanese gardens.

Hopes and incertitude. Why didn't they photograph the woman you're speaking to? Did the colour of her dress jar with that of the tablecloth?

The melancholy of eternal recurrence did not mark your features. Another year. Yet another year.

You're bolt upright—the grandfather clock strikes twelve. You're very happy as if the New Year could enhance the prestige of old joys. Of old toys. As if it could rehabilitate our memory.

Click.

The twentieth anniversary of our first poetical soirée. The day I've been waiting for. Congratulations, my dear friend.

Pause.

Your friends declined my invitations. Never mind, never mind. I hope you don't care.

The number of cowards must exceed the overall population of the globe.

Pause.

My sister refused to give me a hand. There'll be no cake tonight.

I have a nostalgic longing for our 'poetical cakes'. I adored their decorations: a chocolate dacha, a marzipan lake. My sister is good at cake decoration.

She can be a real bitch sometimes.

Like a wrathful deity I used to destroy those landscapes during my visits to the kitchen.

Click.

I spent three hours in the shops. I was looking for a cake or rather for a pastry base I would have decorated afterwards.

No cakes, no pastry bases, no dark chocolate.

And my sister refused to come.

Long pause.

I've prepared a speech in your honour. I can't bring myself to read it.

Pause.

I'll recite your poems in my translation.

Your shortest poem. You used to call it 'the shortest poem in the world'.

The grandfather clock strikes thirteen.

Pause.

Another poem of yours. In my translation.

What a delightful feeling one must experience

*Upon meeting an intimate friend
 After a long separation.
 But how could I experience it?
 I'd hate to part with my friends.*

Pause.

Lord, Lord, how this world is given to lying.

Pause.

I know the people who part and suffer for the sake of that 'delightful feeling' you touch upon in your poem. With the exception of criminals who are forced to share the same prison cell people can part every day—several times a day, if need be. But there's no guarantee they'll ever meet again.

Long pause.

I can no longer recite your poems. I'm sorry.
 I knew our poetical soirée wouldn't last long.

Pause.

The longest poem in the world—my silence.

Long pause.

You won't hear the poem I've composed for this anniversary.

Long pause.

Our twentieth anniversary, the last one. No more jubilees. What is finished can't go on. What is undone can't be done, in other words.

Click.

How fragile our world is! As if made of crystal, it cracks whenever we graze its surface or ponder over its enigmas. Our feelings rest on images, smells and sounds.

The palaces of Venice rest on a marsh.

Images, smells and sounds. In addition to their own frailty they are incessantly altered by commercial perfumes, microphones and cameras.

Incidentally, Eugenia always wears a crystal round her neck because she believes it increases her sense of well-being.

I told you I was in love with a television actress. I saw her a few years ago. In the flesh.

In a tailor-made space her body looks magnificent, but on Pushkin Square she was ugly—a little girl whose growth had been stunted by an unknown virus. Deprived of the make-up artists' unconditional support, her skin seemed to perform an uncalled-for striptease. Retrospectively she destroyed the pleasure I had derived from her appearances on my TV screen, thereby obliterating a number of queens and unfaithful wives.

Indeed I no longer remember the parts she performed in various films. But I do remember that puny, shrivelled woman whose skin I was loath to touch.

Pause.

Horace says that the past is invulnerable. Is it really? What can protect the past from the influence of the future? The abysm of time? The dust of hours?

Our memory is wounded or nursed by our present impressions and reflections.

Television mirages seldom withstand the test of space.

And what about my own mirages?

Pause.

The past is sad.

Long pause.

*quid brevi fortes iaculamur oevo
multa? quid terras alio calentes*

*sole mutamus? patrioe quis exsul
se quoque fugit?*

Long pause.

END OF SIDE ONE

SIDE TWO

Eugenia came last night. Can you visualise two Englishmen reading the same page of The Times as they wait for their train at some country station? You probably see them every day—at Victoria Station.

They live in the same town and work in the same office. They turn the pages of their newspapers and have a short discussion about the news.

That's how we spent last night. That's how we spend our weekends, our family life, our Soviet eternity. And if we don't quarrel for two days Eugenia gives me a lecture on our lifelong happiness. She lives in the same city, under the same unlucky stars. She endures whatever *I* have to endure. Recently she took a decision *I* might have taken had I been more naïve, less cynical. She's not leaving Moscow. She's not flying to London tomorrow afternoon. Neither am I. Actually she doesn't trust air travel—she says it's unnatural. She works at the International Library. So do I. She doesn't eat oysters. I listen to how other people eat oysters and drink champagne. She can't wreck a car. I can't wreck a car either—neither of us owns a car. That's what they call happiness, I suppose. Yes, let us call it happiness.

Pause.

We spent a pleasant evening. Very pleasant indeed.

We have the same scale of values. Don't forget the theory of relativity—we are happy in that part of the globe where others might feel unhappy. We sit on the same divan, drinking the same undrinkable tea. Happiness, the best of all possible worlds.

And everything in it is a necessary evil.

'By the samovar I and my Masha,' as the song has it.

Pause.

You're sitting on another divan.

Pause.

How pleasant it is to sit on the same divan.

Click.

Unfortunately I can't listen to your cassettes today. I must postpone this pleasure until tomorrow. I've invited your ambassador—your ambassadress, rather. And I don't want her to get stuck in the corridor. She must be given an opportunity to reach the divan. I'll dig a tunnel in the piles of books that surround my body on all sides, towering over the divan and the writing desk.

Click.

I've committed a double error. Your ambassadress is a foreigner, and our concierge sits in the hall. She is knitting day in day out, but she looks up at the right moment. And, in spite of her age, she isn't deaf. Our concierges are neither deaf nor mute.

Click.

I can't invite anybody to my flat. Even my neighbour who *hears* my mess—the Mass of my mess—would make me blush if she opened my door. By mistake. And my neighbour is not used to the order of French gardens.

Click.

I broke two glasses and got rid of a pile of books. Unfortunately my rubbish chute has got stuck. I mean my books have got stuck in the rubbish chute. Why didn't I fling them out of the window?

Click.

What's the point?

Pause.

Why not take her to a restaurant? I'll ring up the Métropole.

Click.

How gullible I am! They asked me to come and order the meal on the spot. But I've no idea what she fancies in the realm of culinary delights. And even she couldn't have told me, two days ago, what she would like to eat *tonight*.

You're supposed to order the meal two days in advance.

Click.

Il n'est d'histoire que de l'âme. Only the soul has its history. My translation. Only the soul is worthy of history. Your trips to Burgundy lose their importance beside my distress.

That's my history, my trips to Burgundy—distress, disgust.

I look out of the window—the history of last month, of last year.

That's the history of my soul.

Click.

The same nature used to caress you.

Nature does not change; and she forgets nothing. Victor Hugo was wrong—nature forgets nothing, neither our footfalls nor our words.

Pause.

The pine tree does not forget Prince Arima. Its branches remain knotted.

Click.

'Are we to look at the moon and the cherry blossoms with our eyes alone? How much more evocative and pleasing it is to think about the spring without stirring from the house, to dream of the moonlit night though we remain in our room!'

Click.

There are pauses between the calls my neighbour makes in her flat. I hear every word she utters as if she was using *my* telephone. She hangs up and I no longer hear anything. I hear the receiver fall on the cradle. And after that—nothing. Silence. She seems to be rooted to the spot, near the telephone. She doesn't go to the kitchen to make a cup of coffee; nor does she head for the bathroom. She is motionless.

What are my neighbours up to when I can't hear them? They listen to what *I* cook up.

Click.

She listens to my life. My flat is a concert hall where I improvise my symphony in four movements: afternoon, evening, night, morning. Her ear glides along the wall, searching for an invisible yet audible hole.

The wall is but a masked hole. The acoustics are excellent.

Pause.

I don't like to whisper except when making a false declaration of love.

Pause.

In January she announced with confidence, 'You're nasty.'

Who told on me? My walls of course. It's my walls that put her in the picture about my moods.

The concert hall of my moods.

I'm rather kind, I think. My walls must warp my words.

In February she declared solemnly, 'You're revolting—you ogle every woman who walks past you.'

Her window is also an informer; she watches me through her binoculars.

Click.

Human beings are also frail. Not only women, not only Hamlet's mother. Hamlet's father is also frail. And Hamlet's uncle.

Every word leaves a trace in their souls. Sometimes you cast a glance at them, a neutral glance, a non-committal glance, and their souls commence to bleed. Their souls receive the stigmata.

You're full of good intentions but they give you agonised looks; for some obscure reason. And you hear their agonised shrieks. So you decide not to do anything for them. Soon you realise they're deeply wounded by your silence and immobility. And they reproach you for your callousness.

Pause.

Eugenia is like that. Everybody is like that. Human beings mirror each other like Leibniz's monads.

Pause.

All hours mirror each other. Everywhere. A cosmic mirror, a gallery of mirrors. You're living my life, whatever you might drink or eat. My life, my days, my hours, my sorrows.

Pause.

My joys.

Leonardo's smile enlivens my life.

His research directed him towards a mirror in which he recognised his own smile. No more sufferings, no more insoluble mysteries. A scientific truth—a smile that accepts everything and depends on nothing. All of a sudden he found himself outside history. He had forsaken Time within the bounds of which Socrates is sentenced to death and Pompey the Great retreats into Thessaly. He was looking at those shadows with benevolent indifference. He saw his own death, his open tomb, his closed tomb, his tomb desecrated during the Revolution. He saw the disintegration of the *Last Supper* and *Mona Lisa's* journey to Tokyo and the United States. Calmly he joined his shadow; he lost himself in his shadow.

Click.

How to get rid of imagination? Should I meditate upon visible objects only? Upon visible and tangible objects? Should I conjure up in my memory only something I know by heart, thereby leaving nothing to the imagination? Every word of a poem, every colour of a landscape. No gaps to be filled with the aid of imagination.

As the unknown author of *The Cloud of Unknowing* put it, 'Unless you suppress your imagination, it will suppress you!'

Long pause.

Living without memory, without imagination. I wouldn't remember London; nor would I continually visualise my life in England. Reality. My books, my blanket, nothing else. No other books, no other blankets. Our country would become my final reality, my inalterable present.

The world of a man without imagination. The intensity of the real!

Long pause.

Ye winds, that have made me your sport,

Convey to this desolate shore

Some cordial endearing report

Of a land I shall visit no more.

Click.

Chomsky maintains that the Western system is even more catastrophic than ours. He compares Brazil and the Soviet Union, Guatemala and Bulgaria.

Should one compare catastrophes, I wonder? The dead don't care whether they died of cancer or of a heart attack, in their sleep.

He says that eighty-five per cent of Brazilians regard the conditions of Eastern Europe as an attainable dream. Have they ever been to Eastern Europe? How would I regard the conditions of my country if I was a Brazilian?

Pause.

At least we have a Writers' Union and this institution is better than stock markets because it creates a literary atmosphere—at the expense of money. And we must read and talk about literature, no expense spared. Notwithstanding the quality and the underlying ideology of their own works, our writers steer us away from materialism.

Pause.

Let me quote Borges and Joyce at this point. 'Censorship is the mother of metaphor.' 'We artists are olives. Squeeze us!' Until we are stoned.

Western writers don't refer to their Soviet counterparts as colleagues, I suppose. Do they use the word 'counterpart'?

And how do they use the verb 'to squeeze'? 'The publishing house is using all sorts of marketing tricks to squeeze as much profit from the book as they can.'

Click.

You find yourself in a dark hall. In a distance you spot some closed doors. No light filters through the windows. It is as if there were no windows in the hall. Perhaps there are none but there's a candle somewhere, one tiny candle. The hall looks like a painting by Rembrandt or Georges de La Tour. You're waiting. You hope the butler will come and announce your presence to the hostess.

Nobody comes. Weary of waiting, you go to the door and knock on it several times. You knock again. You knock on the second door, on the third. You try to open them.

You sit down on the floor. The floor is hard, no wonder. But you're not the first to sit down on a floor. No matter. You're not the first, nor the last. This reflection consoles you. You go on counting the number of people who have spent a few hours on floors—ever since the Creation. You even recall a few illustrious men who used to sleep on the floor so as to prepare their bodies for the hardships of military life. You grow accustomed to your uncomfortable posture. No matter. Man needs no cushions to feel happy. Happiness is inside us, in our minds.

You begin to feel happy. Suddenly the doors are thrown open. You hear your name pronounced by a servant. You do not move. The hostess stalks into the hall—she is alarmed by your stubbornness. You refuse to get up.

'I'm quite comfortable in your hall,' you tell her. 'Otherwise I would have left a long time ago, many moons ago. I like sitting on the floor. Even at home I often curl up on the floor, all snug and warm, and listen to the wind in the trees outside. I sleep better on the floor or on a hard cot. I contracted this habit in my childhood. My father hated mattresses and cushions. Like father, like son. I would by no means have accepted your invitation had I not liked the idea of spending some time on your wonderful floor. There's no accounting for tastes. You give parties, I sit in halls. It's my only happiness, you know.'

Long pause.

You've made a mess of your life. 'Once I get these few problems straightened out I should be all right,' you say to yourself. You fail. At last you realise you've made a mess of your life. Nothing doing. You make an attempt to justify yourself. You fail again. Everything seems lost irremediably. On second thoughts, however, you find that your situation shows little signs of improving. Nothing is lost. 'Things are looking up,' you say to yourself. And you look up in order to corroborate your statement. 'I haven't lost,' you say to everybody. 'Nobody believed I had any chance of victory, but I've emerged victorious after a long struggle. Victory in spite of all terror! To the victor belongs the spoils!' And you back up your claim with a sheaf of documents. Nobody reads your documents; even you cannot read them. Never mind. Perhaps you've only won a strategic victory; perhaps you've lost after all. You're alive, aren't you? You're neither paralysed nor dead. And it calls for celebration. You're not Pushkin, but you can become Pushkin with the passing of the years. You can become anybody if you apply yourself. Besides, Pushkin died at the age of thirty seven. And you're still alive. And your brain, the most precious instrument of notoriety, functions perfectly. Your memory is infallible. So everything is all right. You're jumping for joy. And even if your celebrity remains confined to the writing desk you keep on stuffing with your mediocre poems, you feel happy, very happy. Your re-read Chinese philosophers who always preferred the deserts of meditation to rapturous acclaims. You say to yourself that everybody walks through the valley of death. The equality of tombs ridicules human pretensions. Everything is all right—that's what counts. Others are also confronted with problems. Compared with their failures, the obstacles you have to surmount are nothing but an amusement arcade. That's right—you live in an amusement park. That's right. That's right.

Long pause.

People behave in such a fashion that an extra-terrestrial tourist, during his first visit to the Earth, might come to the following conclusion—humans are immortal; they have an eternity before them.

Recently I met a woman who attends all the concerts at the Conservatoire Halls. She listens to pianists, violinists and cellists. She compares their *tempi* and *forti*.

No time to smell tuberoses.

Pause.

There are people who seek immortality through the agency of their children. They have no other means at their disposal, poor devils—no other way of smuggling their names into Eternity which is far more akin to Space than to Time.

At least it often finds expression in Space, seldom in Time.

According to Plato, who takes his cue from Socrates and Diotima, many are obsessed with the desire of becoming immortal. By hook or by crook. The common run of people do so with the aid of their offspring; those who are endowed with talents and lofty ambitions create masterpieces or promulgate laws in the hope of holding sway over the future.

Long pause.

I'm not likely to have children. And my neighbour's son whines so horribly that I don't regret my long-standing reluctance to break out of my loneliness.

Anyway I don't care about immortality. The quick are not influenced by the dead. Human genes are far more important than men and women of genius who are nothing but gravestones on which historians and scholars drop a few flowers now and then—out of gratitude. 'Our breadwinner!' exclaimed a famous Soviet conductor in front of Tchaikovsky's tomb. In the West our orchestras perform mostly his symphonies.

I wonder how many dollars can be detected in the genes of an ordinary human. A human *tout court*. There are no more extraordinary humans.

Perhaps Socrates *was* a hybrid of man and beast, of man and god. In the *Symposium* Alcibiades portrays him as a Silenus, as Marsyas the satyr.

Nowadays humans are just humans.

Click.

There's such a thing as the point of no return. There's also the point of no departure. You keep on drinking tea, and the grandfather clock strikes thirteen. In other words, Time comes to a halt.

Click.

The soul reduces Space to its own dimensions. The soul disdains travel agencies.

Click.

You open the door and enter the hall which is as dark as the hall you've just left. You open another door and see another hall. You continue to open doors and in every hall the same person is seated—yourself. What's the use of going on a journey?

Click.

Joy is relative. A sumptuous meal enjoyed in one country wouldn't satisfy the dogs of another country.

What seemed superb last night disintegrates into chaos this afternoon punctuated by the drops of rain or by the shouts of children. Tiredness and disappointments come to the fore in the periods of euphoria.

Click.

People are the same everywhere. God created one *homo sapiens*. Everywhere he thinks, everywhere he suffers—in prison, in the open air, in his room. Everywhere he builds huts and castles, everywhere he destroys huts and castles. Everywhere he screams, everywhere he dies. He feels a bit weak after his operation, his eyes feel really sore with all this smoke, he feels sorry for what he said yesterday, he is insulted, he is offended, he feels lonely, he feels the cold, he quarrels with his friends, he embraces them, he falls in love, his spirits fall...

Pause.

You walk in the streets of London; I walk in the streets of Moscow. People are swarming around us. They're dressed differently, there's no denying it. But if one of them stops and holds out his hand, it is the same hand we shake in London and in Paris.

And if his face is twisted with grief, it is the same grief we look at in England and in Russia.

It is the same death.

It is the same truth.

Pause.

The same person walks under your windows, under my windows. This person has various gaits and builds. This person lives in London, in Moscow, in Munich, in Paris, in Tokyo.

This person is also you and I.

I see my own figure walk in front of my door.

I'm in my bed and in South America.

Long pause.

Baby Yar. Theodor told me in detail how the Jews were massacred. My existence is an optical illusion. I am the Jews assassinated that day on the outskirts of Kiev.

Pause.

What else can happen to humanity? An atomic war? After the crimes perpetrated in the course of history our life is nonsensical.

Pause.

Do you know Fedorov—a modest librarian who wrote an enigmatic book, *Philosophy of the Common Cause*? In this book he affirms that the happiness of the human race is inconceivable without our ancestors being *physically* raised from the dead. We should integrate the dead into our society, otherwise we'll never experience happiness.

Pause.

And we just put flowers on their tombs.

Click.

What am I left with? Little joys. Little stars.

Twinkle, twinkle little star.

Little joys—how big you are!

END OF FIFTH CASSETTE

SIXTH CASSETTE

What a cassette! Two hours. A worthy rival of the Russian steppes.

Pause.

I found my notebook.

Do you still think that the joy of reunion compensates for the sadness of parting?

Sadness is always more intense than joy. Sadness always gets the upper hand. Or the lower hand—I am down today; down and depressed.

Nevertheless I'm happy I've found my notebook.

Pause.

I spent the night at my mother's. She's been hospitalised. The leg, as usual.

My mother's flat where I've spent so many sleepless nights doesn't seem to like me any more. Yesterday I had the impression I might have overstayed my welcome. It's like walking on quicksand, if you see what I mean.

I *was* walking on quicksand—the carpets all but sucked me in.

Even in *my* flat I don't feel at home. But I don't get sucked in when walking on *my* carpets. Besides, I always have a pair of pyjamas within my reach and I know where my toothbrush is located.

In my mother's flat I must look for everything. And I never find what I'm looking for.

I find something else.

My mother's victories. As a notorious spy, she had won a few victories during her visits to my flat. Her chest of drawers yielded the spoils of her victories: a few letters, your postcard dating back to 1969, my diary.

Last night I slept naked, but I was happy.

My correspondence with Helen. My mother had safeguarded our letters from the whims of weather and from Eugenia's jealousy. My mother's chest of drawers isn't jealous, apparently. A frigid chest of drawers.

May 2, 1978. I was at the Kremlin Hospital.

Pause.

Letters get out of fashion in no time—even faster than feelings and sensations.

Here's a small piece of paper I must have picked up in front of my door on September 8, 1975: '19.32 p.m. We have a rendezvous for tonight, don't we? Your absence seems to contradict my hypothesis.'

I don't even remember the author of this hasty note. The handwriting doesn't remind me of anybody.

At any rate these zigzags have nothing in common with *my* handwriting.

There are people who make appointments with themselves—to soften the garish colours of their solitude.

Pause.

Another message: 'There's something for you under the doormat. From A.N.' My mother must have intercepted the present before my return—there was nothing under the doormat.

Long pause.

My secret diary.

It's not as secret as all that.

In my diary I found the notes I had taken when listening to your cassettes.

'Thrilled.' Why were you thrilled? What had given you that thrill? There are languages in which the word 'happiness' exists only as a foil to its antonyms.

'You're wrong. It was a joke.' Everything is a joke in this world of ours. People crack jokes unintentionally, round the clock. Why don't we laugh?

'A pleasant breaking-off.' What breaking-off did you have in mind? There were so many partings in those days. Now I'm no longer fond of this ritual. And even when my patience is tried to breaking point I don't budge. I prolong my friendships beyond breaking point. It's absurd of course, but since everything is absurd no one takes notice of this absurdity. The scarlet doesn't jar with the scarlet. As Nicholas put it, 'We shouldn't widen our trade deficit.' So we don't part. Nor do we meet lest we might quarrel and part.

'Money.' In the Soviet Union money is worthless. The poor often live better than the rich. The rich lend money to the poor. They know that money is worthless. The poor never pay off their debts—they know that money is worthless.

Pause.

I'm not rich but I don't live as luxuriously as the poor.

Click.

I never pay my bills. Do I really have to give money to our authorities? To thank them for my misery? I get a lot of bills. I'm tempted to throw them out of the window to find out if the figures they bear have an influence on the velocity of their fall. Why not refute Galileo's theory? There are loads of figures on those bills, loads of money. Let pedestrians pay them. They tolerate the ethic and aesthetic ugliness of our streets, don't they? They might accept these figures.

Pause.

'We must find a way to communicate. A direct means of contact.' What means of contact did you have in mind? We'll never shake hands; we'll never touch the same object at the same instant. And we might become invalids as a result of our telephone talks. Like Beckett's characters we would have only our mouths. Even less—only our tongues. And you call that a 'direct means of contact'. As if this black apparatus could join us, tracing a living line between our hearts. And you forget our potential listeners. Our telephone network is a gigantic concert hall where a *pianissimo* resounds like the *Gurrelieder*. And within this network your delicate mouth is a cave full of telltale echoes.

'To dot the i's and cross the t's.' Do *I* tend to dot my i's and cross my t's? Perhaps. I must have a hereditary tendency towards i-dotting and t-crossing; and hair-splitting. Anyway I hate ambiguities in everyday life. And I adore them in literature.

So I remove doubts and eliminate ambiguities. But my friends declare that my words are deliberately equivocal. 'It's quite unintentional,' I assure them. They shake their heads. They have their own i's and t's which do not correspond to mine.

Pause.

Every year a thousand words come into existence; half of them die very soon. Words grow old like trees, like stones, like tombstones.

In the course of my recent dream I visited a cemetery of words.

Sometimes an expression gets lost on its way, in Germany or in Poland; sometimes I welcome a dead word—a word that is no longer in current use.

'For the first time—' Did you experience happiness? For the first time? In your new life everything happened 'for the first time'. Everything happens for the umpteenth time—in my life. Even if it happens for the first time. Everything is old, rumpled and wintry. Heavens are decayed, landscapes dilapidated. The wind blows spasmodically as if crippled with arthritis.

'Family atmosphere—' I've got something to tell you about my family, about little joys.

They still twinkle, you know. Little joys, little stars. I'm entitled to respites.

I might have spoken of our family reunion already. I don't think so. I recalled it during my visit to one of my aunts. A flying visit; a lying, bedridden aunt. She doesn't speak any more. And when she does, nobody understands what she says. To communicate her thoughts and intentions she clears her throat and sings, and sings, and sings, and sings. Very softly, almost inaudibly. But everybody understands what she wants and thinks. Everybody understands what she sings.

And sings the tune without the words.

She never resorts to the language of signs. Her hands remain on the blanket. She doesn't even shake her head. Her head trembles sometimes but she doesn't shake it. Not consciously; no dumb shows.

She sings, she sings. She hums, rather. She hums the tunes that no one knows. Everyone understands them, though. Perfectly.

Her musical monologues. A long family tradition. As my Belgian friend said last week, 'My great-great-grandmother began brewing in 1795 and there has been a family tradition of brewing ever since.'

'In 1796 my great-great-grandmother began to sing', I answered.

Will you understand me? Do *I* have to sing? Will you understand this sensation of *temps retrouvé*?

Paradise Regained.

Pause.

I cannot sing, I'm sorry.

In the forties and fifties, at family dinners, songs would replace parlour games. Sitting around a bottle of champagne, people would sing till dawn. They blew out candles; they continued to sing. They would go to bed and sing upon awakening.

Pause.

Ah, another piece of concrete music! Something has fallen at my neighbour's. I listen to the songs of furniture. Every object has its timbre and tonality so I know *exactly* what happens in my neighbour's room. I have a good ear for furniture and objects.

Her Chinese vase—that's what I heard a few minutes ago. But it didn't break. Her Chinese vase is safe and sound. She picks it up and puts it on the piano. She must have opened the window to air the room. And the draught—

Pause.

Her statuettes. They're falling, one by one.

In this building the windows are enormous. They reach the walls; they stretch beyond the walls, beyond the ceiling. In winter I'm cold; in summer I'm hot. And when I open them I find myself on a fishing boat. In the middle of the Atlantic.

Long pause.

People used to sing spontaneously. First, they would glance around them to make sure their friends were eager to join them. And then they would burst into song; they would sing louder and louder.

Sometimes their neighbours answered them from behind the walls. They might also come and join them in their flats. There was always enough room for singers despite the spatial modesty of the lodgings.

In my family no one has sung since the late sixties. Everywhere else this ritual must have gone out of fashion in 1958, in 1955.

Of course drunkards still sing on boulevards and under balconies. Their morning serenades perturb the sleep of workmen.

I'm not speaking about those farcical songs that constantly elude the musical rigour of tunes. No, I'm speaking about family songs. Their inherent purity enables the participants to sing wonderfully, even though they might sing out of tune now and then.

My aunts could read music. There was a piano at the neighbours'. They listened to the lessons that took place beyond the wall.

In their repertoire there was a number of patriotic songs. No matter—those lugubrious songs were a free expression of their souls, their declaration of human rights.

My uncles were also fond of singing at family reunions. They performed duos, the choirs from operettas.

Pause.

My Aunt Catherine lost weight. She looked so young, just before her death. She looked like a woman in her prime, enticing and tranquil. She was so beautiful that I was ready to agree with her on every point. It's her life I saw and my vision was situated beyond ideologies and divergences.

It was *our* life.

Pause.

They sang until two in the morning. They knew they would never sing again. Together.

Pause.

Do you know what our family doctor told me yesterday? 'Vitamin K is needed to help the blood clot.'

And one of my aunts had a blood clot removed from her brain. Last year.

Click.

What happened last night? The full moon is to blame. To praise, to praise to the skies. We must have been influenced by its fullness, waxing lyrical, maudlin and jubilant for no apparent reason, calling our friends and enemies alike. Whenever I hung up the telephone rang exuberantly. We were crying and laughing and talking about everything under the

moon—even about forgotten or forbidden things. 'Archaeology' I call it in the wake of Foucault. What we excavated, however, was an impersonal structure of friendship and love. And a personal structure as well. What's the difference? And we were over the moon with the results of our excavations.

I wonder what might happen on Jupiter which has at least sixteen moons.

Click.

Le temps retrouvé. Sometimes I hear other people's memories, somebody else's paradise.

Somehow those memories sound familiar and pathetic.

Eleven years ago our composer invited me for a cup of tea. As I came out of his lift I heard the first bars of Chopin's nocturne. Somebody else was playing—our composer has no fondness for Chopin. And he can't bear Richard Strauss. In the absence of her tyrannical son Elena Sergeyevna sat down at the piano—she took advantage of her solitude. She was playing the works she hadn't heard in her flat for years and years.

She would stop and repeat a trill, a cadenza. I suppose she hadn't practised since the war—there were only wrong notes in her performance. But what wrong notes, my dear! What beauty! What remembrance of things past! I might have been less moved by a flawless performance.

The laws of intimacy differ from scenic laws. What would have been indecorous in a concert hall sounded *right* on a landing.

She played three nocturnes and two mazurkas. An hour and ten minutes; an hour and ten minutes of *temps retrouvé*.

Her neighbours would come and go, stop and stay. They looked at me disapprovingly. I didn't care. Yes, I was a thief—a thief of *temps retrouvé*.

I left without waiting for the composer who had forgotten about our rendezvous. As usual.

Once at home I sight-read those nocturnes and mazurkas. I've never been any good at sight-reading. Four hours, my *temps retrouvé*.

Time is a lost-and-found office.

Click.

Military March.

I keep my radio on, creating a sound screen behind which I conceal my chatter. I haven't heard my neighbour for half an hour, for forty minutes perhaps. And I know she's not asleep—every night I can hear loud snoring emanating from her bedroom.

Incidentally, do you know any cures for snoring?

And her bedsprings creak as loudly as my kitchen door. They creak under the burden of her nightmares.

On the other hand I know nothing about my neighbours downstairs. I'm not certain my discretion is reciprocated. 'If you show trust to somebody, that trust will be reciprocated,' as Stalin used to say.

End of March. The Announcer:

—of all Marines...captain...playing On the...by Kenneth...an interesting new book just out by Steven... called Sensibility and English Song...

Music of dreams. It's the music one hears in peaceful dreams. I'm not sleepy; another sleepless night. In your company. English nocturnes will keep me company as well, I hope. Tonight I need neither earplugs nor a mask. I can see your face clearly. We'll talk until dawn, until ten in the morning. I'm waiting for a telephone call around that time. We've got plenty of time—eight hours.

Pause.

Sometimes I hear my neighbour's radio the sound waves of which are conveyed to my ears by water pipes. Or by gas pipes; or by sewer pipes. A sort of piped music.

So I suffer neither from claustrophobia nor from solitude. Every cloud has a *golden* lining. Our destinies are scrupulously weighed in the cosmic scales.

Long pause.

I'm leafing through my diary. I devoted three pages to our friendship in March 1976—the period when we had no contact of any kind. I was planning to write to the *World Service*. 'Could you please play for my friend the first movement of the *Moonlight Sonata*? My friend

lives near Russell Square. From Moscow with love.' It's no longer necessary. You listen to my cassettes, to some excerpts from my diary. What more do we need?

Long pause.

I've lost weight. Like my aunt. Like aunt, like nephew. *L'esprit de famille*, I suppose. Clannishness.

And what about my destiny? Has it also lost weight? Am I nearer to heaven now? Are the cosmic scales dependent on the laws of gravity? Did Einstein ever give thought to this enigma?

My trousers look like an accordion. All that fall. They're sprawling on my shoes. Do you remember the trousers I wore in days of yore? My father was still in the land of the living and he often travelled to foreign lands. Each time he was allowed to leave the Soviet Union he would purchase a pair of trousers for me.

I'm wearing my pyjamas now—under my Japanese dressing gown. These are the only decent clothes I've got at present. I always wear my Sunday best during our long-distance meetings. It's the least I can do.

Click.

I've just heard on the radio that atmospheric pressure is falling dramatically. All that fall. If only I could live in the Crimea!

This fall softens the impact of sleeping pills on my consciousness. Do you know what I call my sleeping pills? My Sleeping Beauties.

Their power is weakened. They don't act at all.

Atmospheric pressure. Nothing helps me when it falls.

For ten hours I pace up and down the corridor. And then I stay in bed. For three or four days.

Pause.

In five days we'll have the full Moon. In England and in Russia. Everybody will have the full Moon.

Long pause.

I've found a great many letters. *Lettres retrouvées*. To pass the time I'll busy myself with reading them. Of course I've read them already. But I can re-read them—as many times as necessary.

Pause.

I'm reluctant to open letters. I'm even reluctant to open my letterbox. No news is good news. I prefer to re-read, especially old letters. Bad news improves with age. Time takes the edge off its wrath.

Click.

I'm waiting for a telephone call. Somebody you don't know must call me around 11 a.m.

Pause.

Life goes on. Life must go on.

What kind of life-support system do I need?

Pause.

It's life, Jim, but not as we know it.

Do I want to know this life?

Long pause.

I won't switch the radio on. I've no secrets from my neighbours.

Click.

I'm not always at home. Your next ambassador can send me a telegram. If he doesn't manage to reach me on the phone.

And if they're afraid of direct contact they can leave cassettes under the doormat.

Pause.

We'll need a code for telegrams.

Pause.

I'm tired.

Click.

I'm hungry. I ate a sandwich around 6 a.m. I thought I would hold out until 11 a.m. At least until 11 a.m. The sandwich must have been too small. Or do I have a voracious appetite now? Does my organism demand more food than before? Do I have to increase my food ration? How?

A voracious appetite, overnight. At this rate I'll be able to wear four pairs of trousers. In a week's time.

Click.

You said in one of your poems: 'There are slow mysteries.' In any event there are slow disasters; as far as I'm concerned.

Slow disasters, irreversible disasters.

They start at one point like liver cancer. Gradually they spread over to other areas, to your entire life.

A car smashing into a tree. For years.

Long pause.

That's why I botched my suicide—to extend disasters.

That's why I don't have cancer.

I have a sense of duration. *C'est le moins qu'on puisse dire.*

Click.

'Wait, you've drunk without me?' Salieri asks this question in Pushkin's tragedy.

How could you leave without me? You knew what was in store for me in this country. You did nothing to deaden my future sufferings. Nothing. You thought only about your flight.

Were you born of woman?

Pushkin believed that Salieri had poisoned Mozart.

'Well, Salieri, listen to my *Requiem*!'

Long pause.

Listen to my *Requiem*. To the bitter end.

Long pause.

END OF SIDE ONE

SIDE TWO

No use. In the wings everything dwindles to a speck. Why should I always walk around the stage?

And my disasters need not cross our borders.

Anyway my disasters travel badly.

Pause.

I'm already in the wings.

I'll never return to the stage again.

An actor playing in the wings.

An actor playing under the stage, in a cellar crammed with old props.

No one hears his voice.

Pause.

Mute letters.

Dumb letters.

Pause.

That's right—mute letters.

Click.

Put yourself in my shoes.

Don't *imagine* yourself sitting in my favourite armchair. That's not enough—put yourself in my shoes.

Put yourself in my slippers.

Click.

Sound of slippers shuffling to and fro. Sound of running water. Door creaks. Sound of slippers shuffling to and fro.

It's 10.30 a.m. In 10 minutes my bath will be ready.

He must call in half an hour. But a-fishing will we go.

Another little joy.

*Sound of slippers shuffling to and fro. Sound of running water dies away. Door creaks.
Sound of slippers shuffling to and fro.*

Bad memories improve with age. Nice memories become marvellous.

I remember walking around the city, two or three years ago. Employing legs as 'porters of the head and heart'.

I needed my heart that afternoon.

My legs took my heart and my head to *Sivtsev Vrajek*.

Du côté de ta dernière bien-aimée. Your last beloved.

That's where she lives at present, your *jeune fille en fleurs*.

Do you remember the song, 'On the street where you live'? Rex Harrison sings it in *My Fair Lady*.

I was sauntering around Sivtsev Vrajek. A very chic district, incidentally.

All of a sudden I burst into a song:

'Ta-ri-ta-da-ri, ta-da-di-do-do, ta-da-da-ta-da-da-da-da-ta-ta-da-da. People stop and stare, but I don't care, on the street, on the street where you live.'

Or where she lives.

Pause.

We had dinner at my place in 1976. I was ill.

She cooked a duck, *un canard aux pommes*.

She made a chocolate cake. I decorated it.

She was wearing a fur hat, *une toque de fourrure*.

Did you ever see her wearing a fur hat?

Long pause.

I was singing on my way back.

Going home.

I was singing on Gogol Boulevard,

I was singing at home.

Even next morning I was singing the song.

Long pause.

On the street where she lives.

Long pause.

She is still beautiful.

Just like old times!

Sound of slippers shuffling to and fro.

Long pause.

Telephone rings.

Telephone rings no more.

