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WHAT IS POETRY

For some reason I resolved to write a poem
On literature. But literature *is*
A poem, and writing a poem about
A poem is superfluous.

I'm writing
A poem about a poem, about
A man
Writing a poem or something that can't be
Pigeonholed. Let's call it
A flower: any name would suit it.

I call it a
Flower. I pick it up and hold it. I smell it too. I
Eat it: flowers are partaken of
In posh restaurants.

SYMBOLS

INTRODUCTION

O swear not by the moon, th'inconstant moon,
That monthly changes in her circled orb,
Lest that thy love prove likewise variable.

Thus spoke Juliet to Romeo from her balcony. A reader confronted with this text does not need to know that the pattern of the moon's craters is seen by the Yakut as a young woman carrying two buckets from a yoke across her shoulders. I am convinced that the moon exerts its influence upon the 'subtle' and superhuman planes and likewise upon the material universe. But the fate of Romeo and Juliet was far more exposed to ancestral hatred than to the rays and pockmarks of the moon.

However, grand themes or archetypes haunt our dreams and waking hours; we cannot get rid of them by a mere shrug of the shoulders. And even beyond an innocent comparison there comes into view the history of humankind with all its legends and beliefs. The enigma of a literary work lies neither within nor beyond it. This enigma is in the making.

THE DEATH OF IVAN ILICH

Nietzsche warns us against probing too deeply into events and works of art where, presumably, nothing can be found except a mere surface—not always glittering at that—or the lines with no space in between. No point in reading *between* the lines, in other words. By putting too much strain on our eyes and intellect we may discover something that no one has ever expected to find anywhere, not only in the work under scrutiny. And such knowledge is bound to turn out either dangerous or utterly insignificant.

The Death of Ivan Ilich is by no means limited to the surface of the pages on which it has been printed, and the reader may and must scrutinise the text to find out what lurks between the lines. What seems to hamper his efforts, however, is Tolstoy's propensity for spelling out his own ideas, his own words and even letters, as if the reader for whom his works are intended was unable to understand their contents; as if this proverbial reader had taken Nietzsche's advice too literally, making no effort to penetrate beyond its glittering surface. In his lecture on the immortal tale, Nabokov translates Tolstoy's ideas into English without bothering to overstep the bounds of reality that keep every word in the right place. His commentary happens to be as real as Tolstoy's stance, as Ivan Ilich himself. And what if Ivan Ilich was partly illusory or dead before undergoing his ordeal? What if he died as a result of his fall from the stepladder—immediately, on the spot? The rest of the work might be devoted to his tribulations *after* death.

Nabokov's aversion to symbols in any shape of form—be they Freudian or otherwise—may be at the root of his genius for creating an ever-changing 'figure in the carpet' which is not conducive to otherworldly ecstasies, to speleological expeditions. There is nothing beyond this carpet except the floor on which it has been deposited. Nabokov's claim to another dimension where every work of his—at least in part—unfolds does not seem to be corroborated by his rainbow-like prose because the gods never walk on this rainbow, proceeding to their newly-built castle. Actually, a literary carpet should be placed on the top floor of a skyscraper so that a downward perspective may open up whenever an inquisitive reader tackles a book stored in his library. But an enchanted reader is not really tempted to leave Nabokov's figures where he or she gets lost with delectation.

When observing a subatomic particle, one may choose to measure its position and its momentum. According to Heisenberg's uncertainty principle these two quantities cannot be measured simultaneously with accuracy. We either 'obtain a precise knowledge about the particle's position and remain completely ignorant about its momentum (and thus about its velocity) or vice versa,' writes Fritjof Capra in *The Tao of Physics*. The carpet created by Nabokov is so overwhelming that the reader has no urge to leave it for the sake of other dimensions. Like a sultan, he sits on it, his hand caressing its fabric and the figure of which he studies every shade, every curve. In this particular case, two dimensions are quite enough. Moreover, their intricacy and beauty *exclude* other dimensions or rather

make them redundant. Here is an example from another artistic sphere: Toscanini's right arm was far more efficacious than the two arms (and bodies) of all living conductors put together.

The other day I was watching a literary programme on French television. One of the novelists invited for the discussion turned out to be so fond of language as a vehicle of thoughts and poetic images that he seemed to ignore all those who proceed otherwise, making use of traditional grammar and lexis. Apparently he did not take into consideration the uncertainty principle which allows neither Joyce nor Céline to conquer transcendental regions where Kafka felt at home, owing in part to the bureaucratic simplicity of his language. The figure he drew on *his* carpet—or rather on a bare wooden floor—was not as spectacular as Nabokov's for the simple reason that his figure had to be transparent in order to help us contemplate whatever was hidden beyond it. This figure might be compared to a square or a rectangle, all the more so since the space we encounter in his works resembles a prison cell or at least a room where one would look in vain for an exit sign. (The magic square, with its rigid boundaries, conjures up a feeling of secret and occult powers.) No one gets entangled in this rudimentary figure, not even the protagonists of Kafka's novels, who do their best to find a way out, a solution, salvation. They range over a huge area in search of the castle's authorities or the court on whose decision depends their life. As a matter of fact, they never leave the room to which they have been assigned by the author. Likewise the reader embarks upon an endless journey, after being repulsed by the rudimentary figure. (Nabokov's figure allures us like a siren.) Or the reader merely walks through the black square, unable to withstand the atmospheric pressure on its surface. (Nabokov's surface reminds us of a Californian beach.)

Even those who do not believe in pre-established harmony are likely to feel from time to time that the world is not chaotic and therefore exists in accordance with a set of rules. There is a balance to it which prevents dark forces from definitively gaining the upper hand in their struggle with the emissaries of light—and vice versa. Or, to put it less crudely, the feminine pole will always alternate with its masculine counterpart.

Musil likes drawing figures on his carpet laid on the top floor of a skyscraper or rather on the spire of a Gothic cathedral. (A flying carpet.) His figures are complicated and elegant enough to make us indulge in unravelling their mysteries; and yet we do not forget about the downward perspective that patiently awaits our scrutiny. Thus Musil achieves a double purpose: he entices us into his figures without giving up the possibility of a downward journey. In the light of this double achievement one is tempted to recall the notion of complementarity, described by Fritjof Capra as follows:

This notion...has become an essential part of the way physicists think about nature and Bohr has often suggested that it might be a useful concept also outside the field of physics; in fact, the notion of complementarity proved to be extremely useful 2,500 years ago. It played an essential role in ancient Chinese thought which was based on the insight that opposite concepts stand in a polar—or complementary—relationship to each other. The Chinese sages represented this

complementarity of opposites by the archetypal poles *yin* and *yang* and saw their dynamic interplay as the essence of all natural phenomena and all human situations.

In Musil's great novel horizontal delights and vertical journey complement each other, matching the notions of modern physics. What Nabokov says about the otherworldly aspect of his 'creative output' seems to reflect the same tendency, although he was not as experienced in the domain of science as Musil. As for Kafka and his fruitless journeys, it is the reader who is called upon to complement them through additional figures, comments and far-fetched conclusions. The same goes for Tolstoy whose propensity for driving the point home induces the reader to escape from this home, from the carpet where a rudimentary figure is drawn—a triangle, in most cases. Of course Tolstoy's figure is not as black as Kafka's: it is very colourful in spite of occasional blackness. (That is why Nabokov preferred Tolstoy to Dostoevsky who might have contented himself with one black zigzag.) Nevertheless, the reader constantly yields to the temptation and leaves Tolstoy's carpet to make a downward or upward journey.

Happiness, unhappiness, a bad life, a bad wife, a good peasant. Upstairs, downstairs. The good peasant, Gerasim, is closer to God than anyone Ivan Ilich has come across in his life. All this fits into Tolstoy's pattern which was rather popular with the Russian novelists of the nineteenth century. Of course Tolstoy goes to extremes as he does his best to emphasise the peasant's goodness and castigate the middle class to which the protagonist belongs; so that, at some point, the reader is bound to mistake *The Death of Ivan Ilich* for a cops-and-robbers Hollywood production. The repetitious nature of Tolstoy's style can only accentuate this feeling: he really drives the point home. In the long run, these repetitions drive the reader away from home, from the inhospitable surface of Tolstoy's carpet. Anyway the realism of his prose is so magnificent that it expands on its own, without our participation. We seem to be flying on the carpet provided by his text; irrelevant thoughts pester us during our space odyssey. We may compare the figure drawn on our flying carpet to the monoliths in Kubrick's movie. We may wonder how a stage director like Robert Wilson would put on *The Death of Ivan Ilich*. Only signs seem to move on *his* stage—signs and symbols.

The stepladder might be installed in the middle of the stage—like Othello's handkerchief in Meyerhold's virtual production. Ladders are pre-eminently symbols of ascension and realisation of potential, related to the symbolism of verticality. They link Heaven and Earth and make it possible to communicate with both from different levels. In the beginning Heaven and Earth were joined, but the connection was subsequently broken. The ladder clearly plays the same part as the World Tree. (Why not install a tree in the middle of the stage?) The notion of the ladder (*klimax* in Greek) recurs among the early Fathers and especially in St John Climacus. The individual succeeds in raising himself from Earth and ascending into Heaven by means of spiritual exercises. 'The ladder of this kingdom is hidden within thee, in thy soul,' says St Isaac the Syrian. 'Cleanse thyself, therefore, from sin and thou shalt find the rungs whereon to mount up.'

First Ivan Ilich falls from the ladder, but, oddly enough, this fall is instrumental in making him climb the ladder all the more easily as he meditates upon his life—his spiritual exercises—and eventually realises how superficial and hypocritical it was throughout his mature years. His forthcoming death propels him towards a real life of which he knew nothing during the long period when things were looking up. All those who come and pay homage to his illness are monsters in disguise—all of them save the virtuous peasant. No doctor will help him because the ladder is hidden in his soul.

'What tormented Ivan Ilich most was the deception, the lie, which for some reason they all accepted, that he was not dying but was simply ill, and that he only need keep quiet and undergo treatment and then the results would be very good.' Those monsters would hypocritically reassure him, but in the long run their masks had grown even more atrocious than their genuine faces. Did they have genuine faces? Did they have faces at all? Were they human beings or wrathful deities?

...dark-brown of colour; with three heads, six hands, and four feet firmly postured; the right face being white, the left red, the central, dark-brown; the body emitting flames of radiance; the nine eyes widely opened, in terrifying gaze; the eyebrows quivering like lightning; the protruding teeth glistening and set over one another; giving vent to sonorous utterances of 'a-la-la' and 'ha-ha', and piercing whistling sounds; the hair of a reddish-yellow colour, standing on end, and emitting radiance; the heads adorned with dried human skulls, and the symbols of the sun and moon; black serpents and raw human heads forming a garland for the body; the first of the right hands holding a wheel, the middle one, a sword, the last one, a battle-axe; the first of the left hands, a bell, the middle one, a skull-bowl, the last one, a plough-share...Fear that not. Be not awed. Know it to be the embodiment of thine own intellect.

(*The Tibetan Book of the Dead*, trans. by W. Y. Evans-Wentz)

The protagonist's wife and colleagues look and sound so much alike that they seem to make up one many-headed monster that Robert Wilson might show us in his staging of *The Death of Ivan Ilich*. And what about Gerasim? 'From the heart of Vajra-Sattva, the white light-path of the Mirror-like Wisdom, white and transparent, glorious and dazzling, glorious and terrifying, made more glorious with orbs surrounded by smaller orbs of transparent and radiant light upon it, each like an inverted mirror, will come to shine.' According to Tolstoy, wisdom has nothing to do with intellectual talk or scholarly hair-splitting and therefore is more often discovered among peasants. Here is an example of Gerasim's wisdom:

Gerasim alone did not lie; everything showed that he alone understood the facts of the case and did not consider it necessary to disguise them, but simply felt sorry for his emaciated and enfeebled master. Once when Ivan Ilich was sending him away he even said straight out: "We

shall all of us die, so why should I grudge a little trouble?"—expressing the fact that he did not think his work burdensome, because he was doing it for a dying man and hoped someone would do the same for him when his time came.

All this may appear far-fetched, but the reader cannot help struggling—alongside the protagonist—with the merciless realism of Tolstoy's prose that seems to incarcerate everybody in the room where death lords it over a helpless human being. Kafka's heroes walk around in search of a loophole through which they may squeeze into the world where their problems will be straightened out. Ivan Ilich is cooped up within his room as if he was already lying in the grave, in a nice coffin acquired by his loving wife and associates. His seclusion anticipates the predicament in which a Beckettian hero is likely to find himself as he sticks his head out of a rubbish bin. Ivan Ilich is not even allowed to stick his head out: his rubbish bin has been closed. Not quite. A black hole lures him into a tunnel, and he tries his best to slip through it as if there was always a light at the end of any tunnel. So far, his contest with death has not been a success story, but this time he scores a surprise victory. 'Suddenly some force struck him in the chest and side, making it still harder to breathe, and he fell through the hole, and there at the bottom was a light...At that very moment Ivan Ilich fell through and caught sight of the light, and it was revealed to him that though his life had not been what it should have been, this could still be rectified. He asked himself: "What is the right thing?" and grew still, listening. Then he felt that someone was kissing his hand. He opened his eyes, looked at his son, and felt sorry for him. His wife came up to him, and he glanced at her. She was gazing at him open-mouthed, with undried tears on her nose and cheeks and a despairing look on her face. He felt sorry for her, too.'

The light he has reached in his effort to get away from the realism of his room transfigures his wife's face and soul; she is a part of the Peaceful Deity now. The blood-drinking Wrathful Deity has disappeared for good as if to counteract the notion of complementarity. But Heisenberg's uncertainty principle has stood the test of the story, of Tolstoy's relentless realism: light and darkness cannot be measured simultaneously with accuracy.

DER ZAUBERBERG

A personal library may be compared to a casket where we keep the treasures that can be enjoyed in the quiet of our room at any time. The matter stands differently with those going to a public library to consult books of dubious chastity: so many readers have touched and studied them.

Many years ago, in St Petersburg, I was taken on a Dostoevsky tour; a friend of mine showed me where the action of *The Idiot* and *Crime and Punishment* had been set. During our extensive walk I realised that books could be inhabited by those who had neither the time nor the desire to read them. But I did not know one could *re-write* a book.

According to postmodernists, the reader re-writes every book he lays his hands on—even history books. Re-writing the *text* of a book is rather banal because many readers—many inexperienced readers, to be exact—always substitute their own selves for the characters they happen to idolise: d'Artagnan, Michel Strogoff. They may on the other hand *improve* upon Vronsky's morals, convinced that Anna Karenina could have been saved if *they* had been by her side in the penultimate part of the novel. But I left *Der Zauberberg* intact; I just joined in to ward off the danger of being hospitalised for high blood pressure. Actually I added another character to the novel—myself. And I was so different from my fellow-sufferers that I got *cured* at this mountain resort associated in the reader's mind with decadence, degeneration and disintegration. After all, I did *not* leave the text intact.

Perhaps it is the word 'magic' (*Zauber*) that singled this novel out from other literary works on which I could rely for my convalescence. (Titles *are* important. Even now I think that Thomas Mann's novel is less important than its title.) Lévy-Bruhl says that the primitive world knows no perception 'which is not contained within a mystical complex, no phenomenon which is only a phenomenon, no sign which is only a sign. How could a word be nothing but a word? Each objective form, each plastic image, each drawing has mystical qualities. And therefore linguistic expression, which is an oral drawing, necessarily has them as well. This power is not confined to proper names, but adheres to all words, no matter what kind.' A number of mystical qualities must adhere to the word *Zauber* because it has been used so many times with a view to curing someone or taming wild beasts or enjoining the sun to freeze to the spot.

My blood pressure grew so insolent I thought I would not survive the night whenever I turned in; this uncomfortable feeling kept me wide awake. The word 'magic' was one of my favourite words during that period when I kept watching TV—half-paralysed, half-awake, half-asleep, half-alive. The *Magic Flute*, a magic pill. Even the piano could not cure me, let alone a flute or a clarinet. Well, perhaps a clarinet *might* have cured me.

So, in the long run, I recalled *Der Zauberberg* and the town where the action or inaction had been set before the First World War. But mountains do not change, do they? They remain magic, if they *are* magic.

I spent a few days at Davos before I realised that Thomas Mann's sanatorium could not be found in the so-called village where my apartment was situated. In point of fact, I was not looking for the sanatorium: my infatuation with the book did not really go beyond its title. I saw many mountains around me and all of them were magic to some extent. At least the purity of the air began to work wonders in my arteries which broadened out and felt altogether relaxed as I walked around the lake or followed a path overlooking the village.

One day I took a funicular railway that brought me up to the spot where I hoped to find a more intricate itinerary for my health-restoring escapades. Suddenly I saw a building that struck me by its Art-Nouveau architecture and antediluvian aura or horror, as a friend who kept me company put it. We were enticed into it despite the crowd we passed through while making our way towards the reception desk. 'We could visit it some other time,' my friend told me: she always shuns the crowd.

'We're already in. Why not ask them what they're waiting for?' Sure enough, all those men and women were waiting for something after picking up a few brochures from the reception desk. I picked one up too—in English. The last paragraph ran as follows, 'The "Magic Mountain" romantic should always be felleable and visible on the Schatzalp. As soon as the heavy iron gates are closed, you can feel yourself transferred back to a time where there was still time and you will always be able to follow the tracks of the young Castorp or the graceful Madame Chauchat.'

'The translation of the German original is awful,' I told my friend. 'What *are* they waiting for?'

They were waiting for a guide who was to show them the former sanatorium—all its nooks and crannies. We joined them of course, reluctant to miss an opportunity to visit the corridors where Madame Chauchat used to strut on her way to the dining room or to the restaurant, as they call it now. (The sanatorium was converted into a hotel in 1953.) 'And today, in the year 2003 we still have guests who spend their holidays here and we have one regular who has, after 47 years the same guestroom.'

My friend looked astonished. 'Why do they stay at this hotel? I can hardly breathe.'

'The air must be rarefied,' I said. 'After all, we are up in the mountains. Or do you smell something fishy?'

'I smell corpses,' she answered. We were walking around the dining room. 'And these are not the corpses of cows or partridges.' She all but fainted in the X-ray room where I saw only a huge screen on which a movie might be shown; she saw two maidens looking at each other. 'Are there any young women in *Der Zauberberg*?' she asked.

'Apart from Madame Chauchat? Of course.'

'I did not *read* about them,' she said. 'These young women must have been staying here in earnest.'

Anyway, there was an *immortal* aura about the sanatorium where one could follow the tracks of Madame Chauchat and meet the young maidens who stayed there many years ago. Besides, the very architecture of the building was 'extensively preserved. The dining room and the conversation room

still appear as they did 100 years ago. Certainly we had to adopt the changes of hygiene and luxury during the years, but the character of the sanatorium was never touched.'

In Taoist mythology there was a mountain located in the middle of the world, where the Immortals used to live. On the peak of the mountain they took care of a peach tree: its fruit conferred immortality. They knew that mountains were leading to Heaven and therefore took refuge in 'the Mountain in the Middle of the World', leaving the world behind and identifying with the Heavenly Way. They ascended into Heaven from its top and it was there that messages for Heaven were deposited. Taoists stress the danger of climbing this mountain—their *Zauberberg*—without training oneself through spiritual exercises. Generally speaking, mountains are often inhabited by fearful beings who bar all trails leading to the summit. Clearly the ascent is of a spiritual nature.

Half-jokingly I assured my friend that the maidens she had seen were immortal and therefore lived at the hotel on their own, having no need to wait for a parapsychological experiment to turn up here and there. 'Madame Chauchat is also immortal—not on account of Thomas Mann's exquisite prose, mind you. It is the Magic Mountain that renders her immortal, almost tangible. In this respect Willem Jan Holsboer who, according to the brochure, "spent nearly 2 years in finding this very spot of land for his dream" must have been more efficacious than the German writer.'

The smell was also immortal. My friend eventually discovered its source in the basement where we finished our guided tour of the sanatorium. It was as if the corpses were still lying around us as they waited for their last journey on what looked like beds on wheels. According to our guide, they were just dumped in the countryside to keep the statistics down and avoid negative publicity: a traditional burial would have increased the number of 'dead bodies', to paraphrase Nickolay Gogol's famous title. Even their closest relatives were not put in the picture.

Once the tour was over we revisited a part of the sanatorium—the dining room, among other places. There I also recognised the smell of decomposition, of putrefaction. Do the Immortals smell like unburied human bodies?

'How come the smell persists in spite of "the changes of hygiene"?' my friend inquired.

'The Immortals cannot smell,' I answered, following my train of thoughts. 'They must do it on purpose, the staff, the owner of the hotel—to attract tourists among whom there are many lovers of Thomas Mann's novel. Besides, unlike the Immortals, humans like death as long as it concerns others—passers-by, sportsmen, policemen. And they're keen on *son-et-lumière* displays. *Odeur-et-lumière, en l'occurrence*.'

'Do you really think they pump the rotten air into the basement, into the dining room?'

'They might do it only for tourists who visit the hotel once a week. Did you notice that we had finished our tour *before* lunchtime? The clients will partake of their dishes undisturbed.'

'And where do they take this air?' she asked, a grimace distorting her mouth.

'Two or three corpses are enough,' I said. 'They must keep them somewhere in the basement. Not in a deep freezer, mind you.'

Death is the harbinger of revelation and, judging from how Hans Castorp behaves at the end of the book, Thomas Mann knew what his subject matter was about.

O Scham unserer Schattensicherheit! Hinweg! Wir erzählen das nicht! Ist unser Bekannter getroffen? Er meinte einen Augenblick, es zu sein. Ein großer Erdklumpen fuhr ihm gegen das Schienbein, das tat wohl weh, ist aber lächerlich. Er macht sich auf, er taumelt hinkend weiter mit erdschweren Füßen, bewußtlos singend:

*»Und sei-ne Zweige rau-uschten,
Als rie-fen sie mir zu—«*

The First World War broke out and Hans Castorp assumed for a moment he had been hit or even killed by shrapnel. But then he rose and continued to sing Schubert's *Der Linderbaum*. But for the years he had spent at the sanatorium, surrounded by death on all sides, he would not have participated in the battle; nor would he have sung Schubert's lied—the sign of revelation. All rites of initiation include a death-phase preceding a new life. Death has psychological properties because it liberates from negative and regressive forces, dematerialises and sets free the ascensional powers of the spirit. The notion of complementarity I touched upon in my essay on *The Death of Ivan Ilich* allows me to venture the following hypothesis: the higher Castorp travels at the beginning of the novel, the lower his spirit plunges; at the end, however, his spirit is on high as he fights a battle down below.

We had a walk in the neighbourhood of the sanatorium; my spirits were far from low on account of the air whose purity had been certified by the brochure. ‘For some reason he [Willem Jan Holsboer] could feel a positive radiation at the Schatzalp, without being able to prove it in terms of science. Alfred Bovis, a scientist who invented the Bovis-Biometer (the normal value is 6500 Bovis Units, whatever lies beneath that number takes energy, whatever above gives energy) and with which we can measure 26,000 Bovis-Units at certain spots on the Schatzalp.’ At some point I noticed that the brochure I had read—the despicable translation from the German—began to merge with Thomas Mann’s book, surpassing it in terms of information. After all, I did not need the graceful Madame Chauchat to cure me of the dangerous disease.

‘You know, some patients spoke English like the translator of this brochure,’ I told my friend. ‘Not all of them knew German. Actually Madame Chauchat might have been responsible for another bout of high blood pressure, had I met her in 1913.’

‘What a pity the weather's so sullen,’ she said.

‘Don’t you like gloomy landscapes? I prefer Kaspar David Friedrich to postcards. Do you recall the man down below? He advised us against this climb. He must prefer postcards. Incidentally, these heights are counterbalanced by my relatively low blood pressure.’

‘You talk like those patients,’ she said.

‘Yes,’ I agreed. ‘Usually I don’t dwell on my physical condition. This dialogue of ours belongs to the book. There are many dialogues in it. A humanist engages in long discussions with a pessimist. I’m no longer a pessimist, you know. Just an unconcerned bystander. Let this landscape speak for itself. Nobody can paint it. Nobody can describe it. I’m reminded of Kaspar David Friedrich—that’s enough. Let this landscape prevail forever. The word “magic” is enough. I’ll never re-read the novel. I’ve just finished it.’

I was wrong: as long as I write this essay, the novel will not be over. ‘The rooms were draft with steps onto the spacious loggias and this difference in height made and still makes it possible to enjoy 2 more hours of sunlight.’ But there was no sun in the sky, nor elsewhere—not even in those rooms. The sun had gone down to the kingdom of the dead and was loath to rise once more. Hume was right: the sun may not rise in the morning, although it has done so for centuries. It may not rise tomorrow; it did not rise today. The sun took humans with it and put them to death as it sank under the horizon.

The Ancient Mexicans believed that we live under a fifth Sun. The four earlier Suns were those successively of the tiger, of wind, of rain (or fire) and of water. The first was that of Tezcatlipoca, linked to cold, to darkness and to the north, the second, of Quetzalcoatl in his original shape, linked to witchcraft and the west; the third, of the rain-god Tlaloc, linked to the south; the fourth, of the water-goddess Calchiuhtlicue, linked to the east.

Our Sun, the fifth, was placed beneath the sign of one of the fire-gods, Xiuhtecuhtli, sometimes depicted as a butterfly. All these ages, which they called Suns, ended in cataclysms when the four tigers devoured mankind, the four winds blew them away and the four rains and the four waters drowned them. The present age will be brought to an end by four earthquakes, and that will be the finish of the fifth Sun.

(*Dictionary of Symbols*, Jean Chevalier and Alain Cheerbrant, trans. from the French by John Buchanan-Brown)

We do not live under the fifth sun any longer. Anyway we do not deserve the sixth sun. Everything deteriorates under the influence of the magic mountain, even capital letters. The smell of corpses—another postcard. *Der Zauberberg* is spacious enough to include the five Mexican suns, but it has no room for the sixth one, wherever it may hide itself. Doesn’t it? After all, I was cured. World wars are out of fashion. I do not need a war to rise from the dead. And what about Schubert’s lied? The sixth Sun?

DER JÄGER GRACCHUS

THE JUDGE: Are you aware that you've died?

THE DEAD MAN: Are you St Peter? Of course you don't carry your keys about you all the time, do you?

THE JUDGE: I'm not St Peter.

THE DEAD MAN: Could you just take me to him? Do you know the story about the actress at the pearly gates—

THE JUDGE: You'll never see him.

THE DEAD MAN: St Peter? But I heard so many stories about the dead. When expelled from the land of the living a man immediately goes to St Peter or God Himself. He doesn't even have to walk or rent a car.

THE JUDGE: Have you never heard about the 'boat of the spirits' which carries the dead to the Hereafter? In Egypt the dead sail through the twelve regions of the Underworld in a sacred boat. Serpents, demons and evil spirits with long knives turn up as the dead proceed to their final destination. Apophis, dragon-like, breathes fire, raises the waves and seeks to snatch a dead man's terror-stricken soul.

THE DEAD MAN: Could I have an appointment with St Peter? I'm sick and tired of this oriental nonsense. My father made me read *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*. Never been so bored in my life.

THE JUDGE: After death one may get bored rather easily.

THE DEAD MAN: Besides, I'm neither a Tibetan monk nor a pharaoh.

THE JUDGE: Death is universal. There are no frontiers in the Hereafter.

THE DEAD MAN: What about Hell, Purgatory and Paradise? Aren't they separated from each other?

THE JUDGE: They are not. Actually they don't exist, contrary to your theological doctrines and popular legends.

THE DEAD MAN: What *does* exist then?

THE JUDGE: Boats, the ocean on which the dead navigate like Hunter Gracchus. 'Kafka is important to us because his predicament is the predicament of modern man,' said W.H.Auden. But Kafka's predicament is universal and concerns all ages, all creatures. Even animals can't escape from its clutches.

THE DEAD MAN: Concentration camps? All these prophecies about totalitarian regimes!

THE JUDGE: Kafka was no prophet. He just described the state of affairs that reigns on earth and even beyond it. Kafka wouldn't be a great writer if his predicament related only to modern man, whoever he is or was. Incidentally, we shouldn't call this state of affairs 'predicament'. As I said earlier, this is an ordinary state of affairs. And you're not allowed to move off the beaten track.

THE DEAD MAN: But there are free people in the world. Don't they enjoy their lives? Pop stars, multimillionaires, top models, actors, Olympic champions, fashion designers?

THE JUDGE: What's the point in enjoying yourself? Hunter Gracchus was also prosperous. 'But a-hunting we will go!' Then he died in the Black Forest and has been on the way ever since.

THE DEAD MAN: Where to?

THE JUDGE: You all believe in the final destination. Even the Egyptians walked into the trap—or sailed into the trap, if you prefer. They thought that if the boat withstood the attacks of Apophis—the awesome incarnation of Set—it would sail out into the light of the rising Sun to enable the justified soul to indulge in the bliss of eternal life. Of course, apart from Apophis, the dead were to cope with rocks, hell-gates and monsters with gaping jaws as they sailed towards Paradise. But they were *bound* for Paradise, according to the Egyptians. Well, to err is human. It's better to err on the side of caution, though.

THE DEAD MAN: Should one take precautions?

THE JUDGE: Just don't pin your hopes on the Hereafter. In your lifetime you're also in a boat, on the sea. Some of your idioms reflect this ordinary state of affairs: 'I'm all at sea with this or that'; 'We're in the same boat'. You *are* in the same boat, whatever country you come from. The Hereafter is not unlike your vale of tears. You just stop dead in your tracks for a while.

THE DEAD MAN: Am I in between two worlds?

THE JUDGE: There's only one world, but every dead man believes that he sails in his own area, tailor-made for him alone. Hunter Gracchus says his boat lost its way—'a wrong turn of the wheel, a moment's absence of mind on the pilot's part'. He doesn't know exactly what caused his boat to lose its way, but he is convinced it strayed too far from the route. Why? Because it didn't convey him to Paradise, to the final destination. By the way, Willa and Edwin Muir translated '*Todeskahn*' as 'ship'. A grievous error on *their* part, wishful thinking. Ship is associated with strength and security. It is a picture of life where the individual must choose a goal and steer a course. You can choose *something* and believe it is a goal one should pursue in order to prosper and attain eternal bliss. A grievous error on *your* part. It's not just a moment's absence of mind—you firmly believe in your course of action and the goal you must reach at all cost. But there's no goal to reach. What kind of goal is there in the middle of the ocean? Do you wish to re-discover America?

THE DEAD MAN: But Gracchus lands somewhere, he talks to someone.

THE JUDGE: He's always talking to himself. In the long run he has talked himself into believing his fate is unique in the annals of humankind. It is not, needless to say.

THE DEAD MAN: But not everybody is a hunter. And I didn't die in the Black Forest. I died in Paris.

THE JUDGE: Everybody has a boat, a personal boat. The pilot is not absent-minded so there are no wrong turns of the wheel. There are no turns of the wheel at all, as a matter of fact. The course was set once and for all.

THE DEAD MAN: Where's *my* boat?

THE JUDGE: You seem to know Kafka pretty well. Are you being influenced by his story? 'I had been glad to live and I was glad to die. Before I stepped aboard, I joyfully flung away my wretched load of ammunition, my knapsack, my hunting rifle that I had always been proud to carry, and I slipped into my winding sheet like a girl into her marriage dress. I lay and waited. Then came the mishap.' Is that how you visualise the whole thing?

THE DEAD MAN: I'm happy. I don't mind being dead. And I would joyfully fling my load of ammunition away if I was a hunter. I am not. Why should I try and remember who I am, who I was? I was somebody, otherwise I wouldn't have been here. Where's my winding sheet? Where's my boat?

THE JUDGE: You're standing inside it. You see, every boat is pretty large at the outset of the voyage. Then it grows smaller and smaller as it shrinks like Balzac's *peau de chagrin*. Finally you realise it *is* a boat—a *Todeskahn*. You can't step aboard, for all your efforts. There are no mishaps either. Does that console you?

THE DEAD MAN: Why should anything console me? I'm dead already. What does it matter if the dying man was perspiring?

THE JUDGE: 'Did the patient perspire before passing away?' 'He did, Doctor.' 'Jolly good, jolly good.' You see, I know all your stories.

THE DEAD MAN: So I've always been in the same boat?

THE JUDGE: 'The bonds are loosened. I have thrown down all the evil which was upon me. O mighty Osiris, I am born again! Behold me, I am born again!' Thus sang the justified soul at the end of its otherworldly ordeal. The Egyptians thought about it in terms of the final destination. What is this final destination? 'A rediscovery of the cradle,' as Bachelard put it. 'If Death were the first sailor...the coffin, according to such a mythological hypothesis, would not be the last boat. It would be the first boat. Death would not be the last voyage. It would be the first voyage.' There's only one voyage, however.

THE DEAD MAN: The first and the last?

THE JUDGE: Exactly.

THE DEAD MAN: The cradle is a coffin—a timeworn cliché. As soon as you're born you're old enough to die. But my happy life, the fairy tale I produced, was different from this ordinary state of affairs. I was in another boat.

THE JUDGE: On the same sea. Everything comes from it and returns to it. The sea is a place of birth, transformation and rebirth. Taoists adjusted to this state of affairs. 'All waters flow into it without filling it,' says Chuang Tzu. 'All waters flow from it without draining it. That is why I go to the sea.'

THE DEAD MAN: Leave me alone.

THE JUDGE: Your wish has been granted. Your boat has no pilot, no rudder, driven as it is by the sirocco that blows in the undermost regions of death. Or birth, if you wish.

THE DEAD MAN: I don't wish anything. Leave me alone.

THE JUDGE: You *are* alone.

NEWSPAPERS

FIVE PAGES FROM *THE INTERNATIONAL HERALD TRIBUNE*

A few years ago cinema became a centenarian invalid, although somebody—Dustin Hoffman in all probability—said it was too young to be judged in terms of the arts like literature or painting. It is young in comparison with other arts which were brought into prominence before Jesus Christ's birth, but this relative juvenility should not beguile us into believing that a glorious future lies ahead of it. I would even venture the hypothesis that its future lies *behind* it, judging from what Bergman and Fellini did for this unfledged teenager. Indeed, only a mature art can give rise to such figures who, in the domain of literature, correspond to Musil and Proust whose novels are the fruit of a long experience spreading over almost three millennia.

Now cinema is in its second childhood, which may remind us of what occurred in this domain of art in the early twentieth century when the burlesque dominated the screen with the exception of a few masterpieces like Griffith's *The Intolerance* and *The Birth of a Nation*. Of course the quality of those childish movies was far superior to contemporary comedies, psychological dramas and horror blockbusters, but cinemagoers often content themselves with special effects, taking no notice of other aspects of the seventh art. In their seventh heaven there is no room for grand narratives, big questions and high culture, as if this heaven, situated too low for grown-ups, were also in its second childhood.

Maturity and childishness may confront each other within one page of a newspaper, providing there is enough room in it for the former. Even one article is likely to become a playground for such confrontation. *The International Herald Tribune* allowed one to relish a literary sparring match on Thursday, November 3, 2005. The article in question is devoted to the Irish writer John Banville whose novel *The Sea* won the Man Booker Prize despite strong opposition on the part of some critics and all booksellers. At the prize dinner the latter 'grumbled that the novel was the least commercial of the six finalists' Only 3,721 hardback copies had been sold before Booker night on Oct. 10; the total has since risen to just more than 9,100.

For more than two decades sale figures have been the only yardstick by which the success of a literary work is measured. It is true that even in the early twentieth century—the golden age of literature along with Dante's and Elizabethan times—the number of copies sold might have played a role in a writer's career. But in those days there *were* readers whose aesthetic disposition focused mainly on novelty and style. What is more, some elitists devoted their precious time *exclusively* to abstruse, unpopular works as if deliberately spurning whatever could appeal to the multitude. Now elitists waste their time on repudiating such works branded as elitist—a vicious circle.

Let us compare two statements I found in the article published on November 3, 2005. The first comes from John Banville himself and may be entitled *A Song of Maturity*. 'English writers for the most part try to follow Orwell's dictum that prose should be a pane of clear glass through which you look. But Irish writers think of prose style as a distorting lens. We love that ambiguity; we love that a word can have three or four meanings at the same time.' The second is culled from *The Sunday Times*

of London. In 'areas important for fiction—plot, character, pacing, suspense—*The Sea* is a crashing disappointment' (David Grylls). How to criticise this critic? In the first place, plot is not an issue because, to my knowledge, there is no book without a plot. *Malone Dies* by Beckett is a magnificent story about a dying man who meditates upon his whereabouts, his body and mind, upon story telling. The reader wonders how the pace of his disintegration will vary throughout the novel—a beautiful example of suspense which counts only if linked to words, to style, to the texture of a book, to its grandeur. A genuine literary work is a detective story where words and poetic metamorphoses play the parts of criminals, witnesses and sleuths.

But is suspense a must in a work of fiction? Anna Karenina is doomed from the very start and at some point the reader stops wondering about how her life will interrupt its course: her dilemmas and sufferings are far more important than death. And there is no suspense in her sufferings—in anybody's sufferings, come to think of it. They are rather monotonous and seem to disregard the twists and turns of one's destiny. Suspense is not an outstanding feature of such works as *Der Mann ohne Eigenschaften*, *Ulysses*, *A la recherche du temps perdu*, *Das Schloß*. Were they more exciting in this respect, the reader would not be able to savour their numerous perspectives in peace.

To remain in the Kingdom of Childhood—the first or the second, as the case may be—I shall permit myself to quote another article printed on the same page of the *Herald Tribune*. The article is devoted to a production of Wagner's *Ring des Nibelungen*. The stage director, Robert Wilson, speaks of the operas thus: '*The Ring* is a family saga. It is a children's story. It has a god, dwarves, giants and bad guys. I would not want to make my *Ring* too heavy, too intellectual. All true theatre people I know have a little child hidden inside them.' But one individual can have enough room for both a child and a grown-up: Wilson's staging is another song of maturity.

Only occasionally can one leave the Kingdom of Childhood nowadays. In my teenage years I envied grown ups and imitated them whenever I could; and my coevals were subject to the same mania. This general trend has been reversed over the last forty years as if old men and women—not only the Americans, mind you—were eager to contradict Carl Jung, demonstrating that one can enjoy eternal bliss within the bounds of the second childhood. (Oddly enough, most of them have never so much as leafed through his works.) So let us stay in this kingdom where naiveté and ill-founded jubilation are stock-in-trade. Here are a few excerpts from *The Sea Washes Ashore, Lifeless*—an article published in another issue of *The International Herald Tribune* (Wednesday, November 2, 2005). Written by Michiko Kakutani, it previously appeared in *The New York Times*. 'This was an uncommonly rich year for British fiction—' 'Banville...has always been a highly cerebral author, who emphasises style over story, linguistic pyrotechnics over felt emotion. His novels have tended to be wilfully lapidary works, filled with dense, pictorial descriptions and recondite words and allusions: think of a self-conscious attempt to wed Nabokov to Wim Wenders.' (I am curious to know what Nabokov would have said about 'felt emotion'.)

On the same page of this second issue I read about Woody Allen who, "in a rare interview, appearing this week in *Vanity Fair* magazine...gives himself a B for his body of work and laments never having made as great a movie as *8½* or *The Seventh Seal*..."I feel that level of greatness is just not in me," he said.' A man who admits he is not a sage is a sage, if only in part. But Woody Allen is right on the whole: he has *not* made as great a movie as *8½* or *The Seventh Seal*. Anyway, speaking about greatness in the Kingdom of Childhood is an exploit which may be likened to either movie—in terms of audacity.

At least cinema gives one an opportunity to enjoy the beauty of an actress—Monica Bellucci, for instance. (Much to my regret the number of beautiful actresses has diminished alarmingly.) The page of a novel consists of mere words; there are neither special effects nor bathing beauties on it unless a writer chooses to enliven his or her text with stimulating images. (Once I almost purchased a book because its cover appealed to my senses.)

That is how I would talk to a child about the difference between literature and cinema. Or I would compare their present state to a decrepit couple sitting on a park bench. A well-known Russian painting entitled *All is in the Past* depicts an old man and his spouse who have neither the strength nor the urge to hold each other's hands.

I found a sort of war in the last issue of the *International Herald Tribune* where they speak of Cossacks as if to comment on the commentary I provided for Gogol's half-masterpiece, *Taras Bulba*: you just cannot leave Cossacks alone. This time you come across them in a foreign newspaper that shows you a huge photograph – on the front page, into the bargain – under which you find the following caption: 'Cossacks in traditional dress at the funeral of a comrade in southern Russia last month. They have emerged as a kind of mascot of a conservative ideology propagated by the Kremlin.' As you read the caption you find yourself in the midst of a more or less peaceful war because no armies can be seen either on the photograph or in the streets; at least the view afforded by your window says nothing about these proverbial armies that clash at night and mostly in broad daylight. Of course, the newspaper you are reading does not forget the Islamist fighters who peer through rifle scopes and machine-gun sights at the remains of a Syrian military convoy disabled on the highway several hundred paces away; but for the moment these two armies do not clash and you take advantage of this momentary truce to read the rest of the news.

Back to Cossacks, to their barracks. 'In his third term, President Vladimir V. Putin has offered one clear new vector: – the propagation of a conservative, nationalist ideology. Cossacks have emerged as a kind of mascot, with growing financial and political support.' Upon reading the article you are bound to realise that any nationalist ideology is linked to angry crowds and moods, and consequently such a linkage is likely to give rise to a real war, not just to a battle of toy soldiers. Instead of a large pile of sand, you see a pile of money, a hill of money and even a mountain behind

which our Cossacks live in their tents, saying to journalists, ‘We thought we’d take the precaution of preparing for rain by putting tents up where people could take shelter.’

‘Why did you carry your tents to the hills this morning?’ say the journalists.

‘Rain had dampened our tents so we left them to dry in the afternoon sun,’ say our Cossacks.

‘The city is building new housing for our Cossacks,’ says Putin.

‘How does it feel to be back in civilisation after all those centuries in tents?’ say the journalists two years later.

‘Don’t forget that we lived in Dubno for a while,’ say our Cossacks. ‘But there was very little moderately priced housing in the city so we moved to the countryside and put up a few tents.’

‘History had a lapse of memory,’ say the journalists.

‘So did God,’ say our Cossacks.

‘But now everybody remembers you.’

‘That’s right.’

‘The Kremlin is dipping into a deep pool of history: Cossacks are revered here for bravery and a pre-modern code of honour, like cowboys in America or samurai in Japan.’ We already know that Cossacks can shoot their sons dead if their sons betray their fathers and fatherlands, which may happen in a work of fiction and even in an ordinary, military life punctuated by wars and a few episodes akin to Tolstoy’s descriptions of peace. They can also fall in love with beautiful ladies who happen to live in their enemies’ houses that do not look like tents and therefore are destined for another way of life associated with the proverbial American way of life, with skyscrapers and shopping malls. But there are a few cowboys in America and these cowboys live like our Cossacks who put their tents up in some fields overgrown with weeds and tame horses, for they are aware of the fact that most horses are like shrews and therefore should be tamed – not only in Shakespeare’s comedies.

And what about samurais? They also have their code of honour and are often enjoined to memorise the following excerpt from *Hagakure*: ‘To hate injustice and stand on righteousness is a difficult thing. Furthermore, to think that being righteous is the best one can do and to do one’s utmost to be righteous will, on the contrary, bring many mistakes. The Way is in a higher place than righteousness. This is very difficult to discover, but it is the highest wisdom.’ Some Cossacks are not really righteous: they fall in love with foreigners and even their enemies because they think that peace is more important than war and that love is the best guarantor of peace. At least that is what popes and their congregations say throughout the world as they pray to God, saying they sin a lot and hope their sins will be forgotten on the grounds of their repentance. Sure enough, they plead not guilty on the grounds of diminished responsibility. ‘The more we repent, the smaller our responsibility becomes,’ they say to popes and ordinary priests. And they often replace the verb ‘to repent’ by the verb ‘to love’.

‘We should love each other,’ they say to their fathers. At least some young Cossacks utter these words in front of their fathers.

‘But you shouldn’t love the Poles,’ say their fathers.

‘But Polish women are *so* beautiful,’ say their sons.

‘I’ll kill you,’ say their fathers whipping out their guns.

‘All right. But don’t kill *her*.’

‘I won’t kill you,’ say their fathers.

‘Why did you raise your gun and take aim?’

‘Do you know what Captain Stadnikov said? He said, “With Cossacks involved, there’s a prophylactic effect, a kind of education.” Can you feel this effect?’

‘Afterwards, a top official said the state should allow Cossack patrolmen to carry “traumatic” guns, nonlethal weapons that can inflict severe injuries at close range – a proposal endorsed by the governors of both Krasnodar and Stavropol.’

‘If a person has cancer and metastasis has begun, if a professional doctor doesn’t take care of this metastasis, he will die. It is the same with society. If there is already metastatic cancer on our territory, one has to take appropriate preventive measures.’ I do not know to whom the words I have just quoted belong: I am holding a scrap of paper on which only these words and conclusions can be found. Did the new Pope say this in his latest speech? What did he mean by ‘our territory’? The Catholic world? The entire universe where entropy daily triumphs over philanthropy and the rich lord it over the poor?

Francis, who chose the name of a medieval patron saint of Italy who came from a wealthy family and took a vow of poverty, is the first pope to come from the Jesuit order. Its members also take a vow of poverty and have traditionally shunned careerism inside the traditional Vatican or diocesan hierarchy, instead focusing on service, education and engaging with the world.

International Herald Tribune, Friday, March 15, 2013

A Russian newborn Christian, Rita, reads the same issue of the *Herald Tribune* and says to herself, ‘I like the idea, but I can’t follow in the new pope’s footsteps because I’m not a Catholic.’ She converts to Catholicism and throws a wad of banknotes out of the window after making sure the poor have already gathered under the same window in the hope of seeing a few banknotes fly amidst the clouds. ‘He always, always has a preferential option for the poor,’ says Cardinal Donald Wuerl as he looks at the pope, and Rita throws another wad of banknotes out of another window under which another bunch of former hooligans contemplate the sky. These hooligans promised a bunch of judges that they would set up their own business – a gigantic office where they might work together for the sake of

their community. 'But before we announce the start of this new commercial venture we must get two million dollars,' say the hooligans. 'What do you take us for? We're not liars.'

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

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

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

'Did you read St Francis' biography?'

'No,' says her father.

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

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

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

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

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

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

'What about a Jaguar?' asks a passerby.

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

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

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

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

Rita begins to undress and her dress can be thrown out of the window because a few poor women are waiting outdoors and traditionally the poor wait only for money – not even for love, for you do not love anybody if you are starving to death. Of course you continue to love God, hoping He can get there just in the nick of time. Where? You do not need to communicate your address to God because He knows not only your address – the bridge under which you waste your life – but also the number of your mobile phone: today, even tramps own mobile phones. I do not.

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

‘Crisis of confidence in France.’ They always speak of this or that crisis and confidence is not the right word, especially if one lives in this world where one cannot count on St Peter and his keys that open all the gates of Paradise. ‘President François Hollande, below, tried to restore confidence as France drank in the revelation that his former budget minister, Jérôme Cahuzac, had lied to him and to Parliament about foreign bank accounts.’ Hollande is below and, as everybody knows, from the top of a skyscraper the cars below look like insects, which means that Holland is an insect, provided you see him from a skyscraper or even in a newspaper.

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

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

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

‘Who are you talking about? Winston Churchill?’

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

‘Doesn’t matter,’ I answer.

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

And what does the *Herald Tribune* say? I remember what it says and insinuates all the more distinctly since I also have a bank account in one of the lands situated outside *la douce* France and even outside the Kingdom of Belgium where I have just bought a house. (A land of antiquated social rules and suffocating traditions.) We are used to lying about our bank accounts because we aspire to become as rich as Russian swindlers who keep their money on the Moon and even on Venus where they may also pick up some bathing beauties. I do not know if these beauties can bathe on Venus, but they count on the Russians to help them and the Russians say, ‘Once you’ve tasted luxury it’s very hard to settle for anything else.’ They are right, of course, and the bathing (sunbathing) beauties believe them because they believe in money and want to bathe twice a day or even more often, weather permitting. And nature permits anything and everything, on condition that you have enough money for the sun, for a warm or cool breeze and also for the lap of luxury.

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

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

A SACRIFICE

A self-imposed torture is not my cup of tea, although even Proust, who was by no means Russian, speaks about the importance of suffering in a writer's life which, being put on the safe side—*du côté du bonheur*—may give rise only to shallow, one-dimensional works. Other dimensions come from bitter experiences, from unrequited loves, from lost paradises, from a woman taking French leave after so many French kisses enjoyed in a living room with the shutters closed—the semi-darkness praised by Tanizaki—in a bedroom, in a bathroom. Some women disappear into thin air or rather into the thick air of a city where a great many lovers and husbands await them impatiently; others stay forever against all the odds. I read about such a woman in a Russian tabloid newspaper I was given on an Aeroflot flight: passengers should be entertained instead of being supplied with stock-market reports or the American president's speeches.

This proverbial woman—any woman depicted at length in a tabloid is proverbial—was unable to find the man of her life despite the impressive number of suitors who pestered her with their offers day in, day out. As a result, she became a recluse, going outdoors only when her hunger proved to be as intolerable as her solitude in which, however, she took pride: it is better to be on your own than to compromise with the unworthy universe. (The Russians often substitute the 'universe' for the mere 'world', thinking big whenever an opportunity presents itself.) Scorning the gifts showered on her fellow creatures by television companies, she treated herself to newspapers now and then in order not to lose touch with the universe she did not favour. One day she read about a penal colony where, according to a journalist, there lived a man who immediately appealed to her senses; and yet the journalist supplied no details as to the physique or spiritual disposition of this man. He just mentioned his name and said he had been given a life sentence—the fact that might appeal to some women, mainly of Russian origin. But she hardly took notice of this fact: so many people had been given life sentences in her province. What she singled out from this succinct account was the *name* of the prisoner, the name she had never heard before. Of course she had been acquainted only with a limited number of names, considering she neither travelled nor watched television; but she was unlikely to repeat *any* name she was not familiar with—for the sake of its sound. She did repeat the name she chanced upon in the newspaper, relishing its sound to such a point that only the word 'mantra' appropriately describes this state of affairs. Finally she gave in to her irresistible urge and decided to pay a visit to the man who, without knowing it, had awakened her libido at last. As a matter of fact I do not recall whether they ever indulged in lovemaking inside the enclosure protected by electric wires, and I am pretty sure he was not supposed to leave it for an hour or so. But I do believe that her libido was the mainspring of the whole affair. For once, the Decembrists and particularly their wives should not be dragged in to praise a deed of this magnitude—a beautiful woman caring for a lifer at great personal sacrifice.

The sound of the prisoner's name arouses our heroine, making her undertake a perilous journey at the end of which there awaits her lifelong gratification unknown to those who doggedly stick to the clichéd pursuit of happiness. She is permitted to see her husband only once a week, which does not prevent her from enjoying the other six days in a hut she started to build on the very day of her arrival at the penal colony. In the twinkling of an eye she realises that the man she has been looking for all her life is standing before her, behind the wires: the name coincides with its bearer. In his absence she repeats his name, strokes it, cuddles it, makes love to it. One might wonder why she cannot perform the same ritual in the city she left fourteen years ago—on a whim, as her relatives maintain. Perhaps any name needs the body to which it has been attached for a considerable stretch of time, and the nearer the body is located in relation to the name, the better. Besides, she must have a longing to see the name in the flesh, as it were; otherwise, it may grow disembodied in the long run, turning into a mere 'it'.

TELEVISION

THE SUN GODDESS AND HER FAMILY

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

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

A true idea must agree with that of which it is the idea and the sixth race neither agrees nor corresponds to the idea associated with another race or the Sun Goddess whose credentials command a great deal of respect – in Japan, among other countries. In Russia they do not seem to believe in the Sun Goddess. Her daughters or distant cousins are rejected on the grounds of their incompetence: instead of relying on their *natural* beauty, they undergo cosmetic surgery and exhibit their breasts whenever they are invited by producers and other VIPs. 'Have you never seen the sun?' they ask. 'Don't you know it's much bigger than the Earth? Our breasts are proportional to its size.'

A MARRIAGE

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

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

'Don't you? And what about our mothers?'

'What about them?'

'They want you to marry me and vice versa.'

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

LITERATURE

PUSHKIN

I began to speak at the age of four and one year later I was already reading Pushkin's poems – *Ruslan and Ludmila*, for instance. I did not read *Eugene Onegin* at the time and even if I did, I would not have realised I had a choice between Onegin and Lenski, between a superficial glance, an ironical stance and real involvement. Brigitte Bardot has been involved with animal rights for many years. Animals bring us even closer to life and its implications than humans, men and women, and Lensky stopped at the stage related to humans only – his early death did not permit him to turn his attention to animals and plants. But he became too emotionally involved with the humans he met and befriended in the course of his life which was devoted mainly to Olga who was not worthy of his love. He was too serious, too romantic and Olga took everything he said with a pinch of salt: 'He tends to exaggerate,' she would think whenever he went on his knees to pour his soul out more effectively.

Onegin, on the other hand, was more attuned to Olga's point of view, to her attitude towards life and reality which was not real in his opinion – not to the extent of making him participate in its intricacies and conflicts. Once Onegin saw a flock of birds skim across the tops of the waves. Their example was eloquent enough and he vowed to imitate it throughout his life: he thought he would never *plunge* into the sea. In other words, he decided not to fall in love and not to quarrel with his friends so as not to fight too many duels. Both duels and strong emotions are harmful to one's health and Onegin was opposed to whatever was likely to lead him astray and make him explore the subterranean tunnels of human existence.

I think that Pushkin was keen on Onegin's attitude towards human destiny; he did all he could to adopt his hero's point of view, which might have allowed him to treat death and love from a distance. He did not succeed, needless to say, and Lenski would loom ahead of him whenever he walked along the path at the end of which a Russian variety of Nirvana awaited him. You remain motionless in spite of temptations and the women who walk and dance in front of you as if determined to enrich your collection of amorous and sexual pleasures. You remain motionless and your harem is empty: whenever you venture outdoors, you come back empty-handed and disappointed. Life is far away and it is better not to get closer to it unless you wish to get your fingers burnt. And only masochists may come up with such projects, with suicidal stratagems that should be kept at bay for the sake of your health and hopes. Of course you can call your friend and go with him to the nearest pub; you have a couple of drinks and are in high spirits. But after a while you start to rub each other up the wrong way; this quasi-quarrel dashes your spirits and when at last you get back home, you realise you are low-spirited and frustrated. So it is better to have a couple of drinks at home, in utter solitude. Of course you can have an argument with yourself, but the outcome of such an argument is never as disastrous as a problem that may arise in a pub around 11 p.m.

You skim across the top of the waves. You do not care whether you skim across them or just fly somewhere, not too far from the surface of the Earth. You fly or you sit in your armchair: even on your divan you can skim over everything, provided you take neither yourself nor others too seriously. And what about death? At the age of 65, you tend to exaggerate whatever is related to death and its consequences. Even at the age of 55 you might say to yourself that the future is as big as eternity. What is more, you own the whole of it because you are healthy and in love with a woman who is 30 years your junior. But at *my* age I am quite justified in fearing decay and my eventual demise that might spoil my pleasures and erect an unsurpassable barrier between a young woman and my body.

Pushkin writes at some point:

Can it be true that really and indeed,
without elegiac devices,
the springtime of my days is fled
(as I in jest kept saying hitherto),
and can it be that it has no return?
Can it be true that I'll be thirty soon?

As usual, I quote *Eugene Onegin* in Nabokov's translation, although I do not really like it. We might say it is faithful to the original, but our faithfulness to whatever we encounter is many-sided. And the translation I am used to quoting often reveals its flaws that do a disservice to Pushkin's masterpiece, leaving a bad taste in our mouths. Well, I have no other translation of Pushkin's works in my library and I am not prepared to scour the bookshops for another English version of the novel I know by heart in my mother tongue.

Pushkin yearns for the softness of dreams – their *dolce*, to use the Italian word one encounters rather often in music. At my age, I still have dreams and I can even feel their *dolce*, their *dolce vita*, providing I do not nip my enjoyment in the bud, saying to myself, 'Too late, too late.' I had better wait until I reach the stage where it is pointless to say 'Too late' because it *is* too late; it is too late to cancel the dream by chasing it away. Too late indeed! It has already taken root in my consciousness and even in my body so that I am waiting for a young lady to come and pay me a visit in my humble abode. At the age of 30, I might have thought the springtime of my days had fled forever, but the older I grow, the more optimistic I become without, however, paying tribute to Nietzsche (or Pythagoras) and his eternal recurrence.

The older I grow, the more I rely on *Eugene Onegin* which supplies me with various patterns of behaviour and with the thoughts I may need if I decide to shut myself off from the world. In Chapter Four, Pushkin deals with the injunction 'Love thy neighbour' by pointing out how futile and dangerous it is to trust our friends and relatives, our wives and mistresses. Cicero, Montaigne and

many other thinkers spoke highly about friends, putting friendship above love and conjugal life. Here is Pushkin's view on the subject:

I only in parenthesis observe
 that there's no despicable slander
 spawned in a garret by a babbler
 and by the rabble of the monde encouraged,
 that there's no such absurdity,
 nor an ignoble epigram,
 that with a smile your friend
 in a circle of decent people
 without the slightest rancour or designs
 will not repeat a hundred times in error;
 yet he professes to stand up for you:
 he loves you so!...Oh, like a kinsman!

Pushkin dedicated many poems to his friends and one is at a loss to understand what he wished to convey by this diatribe against friendship. 'Friends, our union is wonderful,' he wrote once or perhaps twice, deploring the disappearance of many friends who would have come to the reunions he had in mind, had they been on the surface of the Earth and in a position to walk. But I, for one, understand his contradictions: one day I am eager to kiss my friends and a week later I hold a grudge against them. I do not mind their inveterate habit of forgetting my birthday. What makes me bitter is the contempt they have for their own promises.

And what about women? I have seen many of them over the last month and I am weary of *their* promises and smiles. Some of them lie down on your lap and seem to offer you whatever you wish; and you wish always the same things. You begin to stroke their thighs and at some point they say, 'Danger, danger.' I am too old for violence and unbridled lust. I wish I could say: 'She showed admirable restraint and refused to be provoked.' I am sure she offered only token resistance that I would have overcome in no time at all, and we spent five hours together; but I got the feeling I had no time. Is that what they call 'decomposition'? The rot must have set in and I cannot do anything about it. Should I try?

Upon awakening, I wished to write something about Pushkin for the simple reason that I am used to it, to *Eugene Onegin*. Why should I forsake both of them? There is no end to *our* relationship and even if the world comes to an end, I shall still write about Pushkin, about his dream of becoming his own hero. He was loath to squelch through the mud, although he did not really know what mud he had in mind. High society, human beings, the world itself? He had already achieved his main ambition in life – to become a great poet. But there was something even more important than that: losing touch

with the Earth, becoming *Eugene Onegin*. 'I doubt whether I'll ever be able to fulfil my ambition,' he wrote in his diary.

His wife has a dubious relationship with his future murderer and he is back in the mud again. No point in flying on Pegasus' back: sooner or later you will come down and step into a web of intrigue. In a way, his wife slaps him in the face too often and he wonders why he has to turn the other cheek which has already been slapped so many times, by so many people. His life was akin to a pilgrim's journey towards union with a god – with Apollo, for instance. 'I seemed to spend the last mile of the walk knee-deep in sludge,' he writes in his diary. He does not know yet that the rest of his walk will have more and more affinities with the mud. Furious and wild, he writes a letter that seals his destiny once and for all – a real end of the world. At least Russia survived his death only imperfectly, being unable to cope with the mud on her own.

Pushkin is Lenski, not Onegin. The former takes offence at a ball and departs without taking leave so as not to attract the attention of those who enjoy themselves, paying no heed to his suffering. The crowd always mocks poets; or it ignores them as if they were harmless insects. One of my friends says he never speaks of his profession in the United States for fear of being laughed at. And yet he is not really a poet; he is a writer.

Lenski has not the strength to bear the blow;
Cursing the pranks of women,
He leaves, demands a horse,
And gallops off. A brace of pistols,
Two bullets – nothing else –
Shall in a trice decide his fate.

A pithy description of the poet's fury. One wonders whether Pushkin was writing about himself – in a fit of pique. Two bullets, not three, not five. Neither of the duellists was supposed to miss the mark and reload his pistol. Going through the end of the world, marching towards one's adversary. In his late verses, Pushkin bade farewell to the world by looking at it with an indulgent smile. He parodied fairy tales as if to convey to us that the world is nothing but an illusion, a bad dream, not even a dignified nightmare. Is it worth our quarrels and duels? A brace of pistols, two bullets, an ordinary horse – not Pegasus this time.

I like one of his last poems in which he describes a corpse in a fishing net. Two or three kids run home to inform their father about their catch. He does not believe them, but then he sees a ghost which is more real than any living man or woman. I do not recall what happens next and I fail to find this poem in my Russian edition of Pushkin's works. Well, what counts here is the way the author mocks both life and death. The kids pull their net out of the river – or the sea – and find a corpse instead of a salmon or a sturgeon. Their father does not believe them because he expects to see a noble fish and a

bowl of caviar on his table. He thinks that his children hid the fish in order to sell them next day. He does not ask himself, 'Are you sure there's a market for the product?' Everyone wants caviar and even sturgeon is regarded as a dainty fish or dish by all those who have eaten it, if only once. Even kings like it, let alone workmen and peasants. Then he sees a ghost that is larger than life, than our ghostly and ghastly life. I think he gets rid of it in the end. But how can you get rid of ghosts? How can you get rid of life that is larger than life? The end of the world did not come; it will never come, in my opinion. We are ghosts, all of us, although we are probably smaller than life. Few phenomena are smaller than humanity.

In times agone our village
 was lovely to behold;
 our bonny church on Sundays
 was full of young and old;
 our happy children's voices
 rang in the noisy school;
 in sunny fields the reaper
 swung fast his flashing tool.

I remember these lines and also their source or rather their sources: the Russian Revolution, the French Revolution. Almost 40 years ago, for the first time I went to the Château de Versailles where I was given yet another opportunity of walking through the void: the furniture had been sold by the revolutionists, according to the guide. The revolutionists were trying to promote commerce between France and England, between France and Germany; so did our communists, selling off icons and precious manuscripts at half price – to England, France, the United States and Germany. Whenever I go down and reach my childhood, I recite *A Feast during the Plague*, a Pushkin masterpiece:

But now the church is empty;
 the school is locked; the corn
 bends overripe and idle;
 the dark woods are forlorn;
 and like charred ruins the village
 stands stricken on its hill:
 no sound; alone the churchyard
 is full and never still.

Our teachers got us to learn *some* Pushkin poems by heart, but the feast I am keen on quoting did not appear on their lists – for *some* obscure reason. This reason was not as obscure as it might seem to an unbiased observer, for our teachers had decided to avoid any question related to the text in question. They never said: ‘There will be a question-and-answer session at the end of the talk’ and for once they were speaking the truth. Generally speaking, they did not like questions, being aware of their subversive influences. In other words, no one was allowed to question the wisdom of our rulers, of our revolutionists.

‘My parents say the village where I was born was lovely to behold.’

‘I’m sure it’s become even more beautiful,’ says the teacher.

‘And our church was full. Now it’s empty.’

‘Why go to church? Have you forgotten something in them? Your gloves, your scarves?’

‘God.’

‘Do your parents speak to you of the Almighty?’

‘They do.’

‘Do you know that concentration camps opened on Lenin’s orders in 1918?’

‘I didn’t know that.’

‘Do you realise these camps are *not* churches?’

‘I do.’

‘Should they remain empty, in your opinion?’

‘I don’t know.’

‘Our concentration camps are full of young and old – not only on Sundays. As for our school, it’s not locked, is it?’

‘It isn’t.’

‘Do you know why? Because you must learn a lot about the camp where your next of kin will spend the rest of their lives.’

Of course they did not say a word about those camps and even the fate of the tsarist family was hidden from us as if they had secretly been ashamed of the crime perpetrated by Sverdlov, Lenin and other revolutionists who must have viewed the situation in terms of genes: progeny should be destroyed forever. Yet Stalin hated the idea that fate – even the fate of a fruit fly’s eye – was determined by biology. ‘If you change the environment, you can do whatever you like,’ he used to say.

‘Why should we assassinate the tsar’s children?’ asked a prisoner.

‘Because the tsar and his wife have managed to instil confidence into them. My cronies heard the tsar say to his wife: “I have every confidence in my son. He’ll be perfect for the job.”

‘Why not change their environment? What about a steel factory?’

‘Do you know that people who work with furnaces in steel factories need to wear protective clothing?’ asked Stalin. ‘Why should we spend our money on the tsar’s children?’

‘They won’t wear anything,’ said Sverdlov. ‘They’ll work stark naked round the clock.’

By way of an answer, Stalin gave his crony a look of real dislike. ‘If looks could kill,’ said Sverdlov.

‘Just look at the tsar and his next of kin,’ said Stalin.

Whenever I reach my youth, I remember death and realise I do not always think about destruction, annihilation and bones; sometimes death sinks into oblivion and I begin to enjoy life to the utmost as if life and whatever happens in it were all roses, nothing but roses and rosebushes. And then I watch a documentary on the battle of Stalingrad and learn that Stalin refused to comply with his marshals’ wishes, saying: ‘The evacuation of civilians is out of the question while the fighting continues within our sacred borders.’ With the exception of a few party officials, no one left the city before the battle; and it was too late to leave it after the battle.

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

There’s bliss in battle and there’s bliss
on the dark edge of an abyss
and in the fury of the main
amid foam-crested death;
in the Arabian hurricane
and in the Plague’s light breath.

Pushkin’s fans know that their idol was inspired by Wilson’s tragedy *The City of the Plague*, and consequently they have no alternative but to love Wilson as well, although they have never read him either in the original or in translation. They cannot even say, ‘The English version is boring – perhaps it has lost something in translation’ because they do not know the English version of Pushkin’s tragedy. But they are convinced the latter is much better than the former – on account of Pushkin’s genius which is far superior to whatever gift the English playwright might have boasted about in the nineteenth century, assuming that he did not live earlier – in the seventeenth century, for instance.

What does Pushkin (or Wilson) try to convey to his readers and admirers? Suppose death is just in front of us, which is actually true whenever our body happens to move: death is *always* near it, even if we walk away from death by building the body’s natural defences. Fresh fruit and vegetables are an essential component of a healthy diet that is believed to keep death at bay and no one says, ‘Death is just round the corner’ because you turn the corner and see only health in front of you – health,

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

At Eden’s door a tender Angel
let sink his radiant head,
while, gloomy and restless, a Demon
flew over hell’s abyss.

The spirit of negation, the spirit of doubt
gazed at the stainless spirit
and an involuntary glow of tender feeling
for the first time he dimly knew.

Quoth he: ‘Forgive me, I have seen you,
and your radiance has not been lost on me:
not everything in heaven I hated,
not everything on earth I scorned.’

Another poem by Pushkin, another influence that stems from languages and goes back to languages, for there is nothing else in the world, provided you write all the time and have no time for other distractions and continuations. Your show must go on and it does go on, obeying an instinct or some destiny or other. With the passing of the years you come to know all these destinies and you are even allowed to choose the one that suits you best today, in Versailles. I am still the spirit of negation or

rather one of those spirits that negate whatever they are allowed to negate and doubt as they proceed from one object to another, from one slice of life to another slice of something they may regard as life. And they may be right, for all I know, because life is what it is and if you say anything along these lines, you have to admit that life is life – and also death of course; and the afterlife and whatever is situated in front of life, not beyond it or on the left-hand side, somewhere in the middle.

The poem I quoted seems to contain a few tendencies that I do not even try to reconcile, allowing them to thrive on their own because my tender feelings do not exclude the wrath and scorn to which I often pay tribute, being a plaything of this day and age which makes one yawn and give free rein to one's indignation and the negation upon which Pushkin touches in his poem. But the Angel's radiance has not been lost on me either and I often think of love when I watch TV and listen to what our heroes and heroines say to each other in the woods, near swimming pools, on the seashore at night.

In Russia they say, 'Pushkin.' If you ask someone, 'Shall we go for a walk?' the person you are in love with can answer thus:

'I'll keep you company when I've done my chores.'

'Let's go now,' you say to your beloved.

'And who'll do my chores? Pushkin?'

'Why not? Let Pushkin do them.'

'But Pushkin is busy writing out the wedding invitations.'

'Another poem?'

You cannot say anything of the kind to your liver, to this gravedigger in disguise that is eager to offer you cirrhosis as soon as you hit the bottle and say to yourself, 'Life is a feast during the plague.'

'How do you mean?' asks death.

'Why shouldn't I enjoy myself in your company?' you answer. But death looks perplexed and once again you try to explain the meaning of your words. 'I wish to enjoy myself in spite of your presence.'

'In spite of my presence?' asks death.

'Yes. Or rather *because* of it.'

'Your answers are obscure and confusing. I wish your ideas were clear and logically presented.'

'How do you mean?'

'I need some explanatory notes with a diagram.'

'Explanatory notes? That's not my department.'

'Whose department is it? Pushkin's?'

And so, Dark Queen, we praise thy reign!

Thou callest us, but we remain

unruffled by the chill of death,
 clinking our cups, carefree,
drinking a rose-lipped maiden's breath
 full of the Plague, maybe!

PUSHKIN II

I love their feet – though I confess
 that all of Russia can't contribute
 three pairs of handsome ones – yet there
 exists for me one special pair!
 one pair! I pay them memory's tribute
 though cold I am and sad; in sleep
 the heartache that they bring lies deep.

XXXI

Oh, when, and to what desert banished,
 madman, can you forget their print?
 my little feet, where have you vanished,
 what flowers of spring display your dint?
 Nursed in the orient's languid weakness,
 across our snows of northern bleakness
 you left no steps that could be tracked:
 you loved the opulent contact
 of rugs, and carpets' rich refinement.
 Was it for you that I became
 long since unstirred by praise and fame
 and fatherland and grim confinement?
 The happiness of youth is dead,
 just like, on turf, your fleeting tread.

For once I do not resort to Nabokov's translation of this novel in verse, but I must confess I would have been tempted to use it once more, had I been at home where my library always helps me find whatever I am looking for in the domain of literature which is never too far from philosophy, theology and black magic. Of course the countryside where I have already spent a week does not deprive me of the Internet, and I know I can count on its generosity whenever I feel like quoting a few sentences from a masterpiece that I need to broaden the scope of my works – to enrich its space, to be exact.

When ploughing through the information stored up in the memory of humanity, I came across another translation of the masterpiece I am used to quoting whenever in doubt or in the middle of the void, for I am reluctant to kill a child, following in Charles Dickens' footsteps. 'Appearing unannounced in 1977, Charles Johnston's verse rendering of *Eugene Onegin* established itself

immediately as the best English translation of...' Any translation broadens your horizons even if you know the original by heart – I do, by the way – for Johnston and Nabokov see Pushkin's text from a distance, as it were, however close they may get to it while coping with its intricacies and Russia-oriented verses.

It is better to read two translations than one – plus the original; for once I shall say neither 'needless to say' nor 'it goes without saying', for it does go without saying. We are dealing with two excellent translations which – a piquant nuance – are really poles apart in the domain of translation and so allow readers to enrich their horizons considerably, if not immeasurably. As everybody knows, Nabokov's translation is literal and therefore shuns both Pushkin's meter and any rhyme, however distant from the melody one enjoys in this novel in verse. Johnston adopted a radically different method as he embarked upon his herculean task, and oddly enough his rhymes and meter remind me of Pushkin, although I know for sure that *Eugene Onegin* cannot be faithfully translated into any foreign language, be it English or Polish. Even Slavic roots are of no help to an indomitable translator who has to struggle with time, Pushkin's vocabulary and dandyism, Lenski's second-rate (and second-hand) inspiration and Onegin's disdainful smile.

It is all the more astonishing that Johnston partly succeeds in overcoming these obstacles and the result seems to serve my purpose better than Nabokov's prudence and pedantic stance; and yet I respect his translation which enables one to visit yet another basement in Pushkin's museum where one finds another collection of roots, muses and feet.

Pushkin keeps wondering where these feet – the ones that seem to have haunted him for a long time – are hiding as he pulls out all the stops for the sake of the reader who is entrusted with their safekeeping: only the uncommon reader can visualise and take advantage of this pair of feet in Pushkin's absence. Even the common reader is able to do it, provided he does not confuse Pushkin's description with his memories of a porn movie or a brothel where many feet distract our attention from ancient monuments, from the masterpieces of the past.

FATHERS AND SONS

What do you have?
 What do I have?
 We must have something
 In common. What?
 This poem? My mood?
 My dawn?

It is my dawn,
 My sunrise, my sunset.
 What do *you* have?

It is my poem,
 My insomnia, my ecstasy.
 What have *you* written?

I'm dancing:
 Siegfried, the White Swan,
 The Black Swan.

The conflict that goes by the name of 'fathers and sons' turned our history into a nightmare from which James Joyce tried to awaken in *Ulysses*. 'Once upon a time' is an expression suited to fairy tales, and this conflict is neither a fairy tale nor a myth: it is deeply ingrained in human society. So it neither happened nor began once upon a time like a story that is bound to end in the near or distant future. This is an endless story composed by a deity who, if subjected to the scrutiny of contemporary critics, may prove to be a second-rate writer: no plot, no suspense adorns his or her tedious opus. Sons always win because their age enables them to take advantage of so-called progress, be it technological or spiritual. (Kierkegaard, for one, persistently denied the likelihood of spiritual progress.) Even in Ancient India fathers knew that their sons would outlive them and therefore bowed to the inevitable as they prepared the future for the younger generation.

Dance reflects tradition and eternity, being a component of many rituals. On the other hand it dramatises the father-son antagonism more effectively than literature—at least in our times. Nietzsche picks up the thread of Dyonisian dance which, but for his luscious intervention, might have got lost amidst Apollo's sycophants. Pushkin seems to join *their* club when he describes the pirouettes of a renowned ballerina:

Resplendent, half ethereal,
 obedient to the magic bow,
 surrounded by a throng of nymphs,
 Istomina stands: she,
 while touching with one foot the floor,
 gyrates the other slowly,
 and suddenly a leap, and suddenly she flies,
 she flies like fluff from Eol's lips
 now twines and now untwines her waist
 and beats one swift small foot against the other.

(*Eugene Onegin*, Chapter One, XX)

Nabokov's literal translation conveys no idea of how this excerpt sounds in Russian: Pushkin's rhymes and tetrameter establish a vital link with the dance executed in St Petersburg. Here are the two last verses from the above stanza: '*To stan soviot, to razoviot / i bistro nozhkoy nozhku biot.*'

But even Pushkin (and poetry) cannot make words dance, for words are too heavy in comparison with the human body. Nietzsche, who worshipped both throughout his life, gets closer to dance than other prose virtuosi, especially in *Also sprach Zarathustra* where two dancing songs enact the Orphic tradition. Here is an excerpt from the first song in Walter Kaufmann's translation:

Do not cease dancing, you lovely girls! No killjoy has come to you with evil eyes, no enemy of girls. God's advocate am I before the devil: but the devil is the spirit of gravity. How could I, you lightfooted ones, be an enemy of godlike dances? Or of girls' feet with pretty ankles?

Let us compare this wonderful translation with the original:

Laszt vom Tanze nicht ab, ihr lieblichen Mädchen! Kein Spielverderber kam zu euch mit bösem Blick, kein Mädchen-Feind.

Gottes Fürsprecher bin ich vor dem Teufel: der aber ist der Geist der Schwere. Wie sollte ich, ihr Leichten, göttlichen Tänzen feind sein? Oder Mädchen-Füßen mit schönen Knöcheln?

One cannot help noticing an impressive array of trochaic two-syllable words: *Tanze, Mädchen, bösem, Gottes, Teufel, aber, Schwere, sollte, Leichten, Tänzen, Füßen, schönen, Knöcheln*. Even '*bin ich*' and '*feind sein*' sound like trochaic two-syllable words. This rhythm punctuates Nietzsche's text as if to emphasise the figures executed in the course of the dance. A whirling ballerina looks at us after every circle she draws in the air with her 'swift small foot'. Or is it more appropriate to speak of whirling *dervishes* in relation to Nietzsche's text?

Fathers and sons may paper over their disagreements through the rituals described by Nietzsche and Pushkin. Thirty years ago I would even have advocated a visit to the Bolshoi theatre where a few Istominas displayed their versions of Pushkin's text. A disco does not seem an ideal place for reconciliation, given the decrepitude of fathers. (They *are* decrepit when judged in the light of their sons' braggadocio.)

Even in a nineteenth-century ballroom one might overhear the following dialogue: 'I don't understand young people any more. Look at them!'

'They're strange indeed. Our parents didn't dance like that.'

'We don't dance like that either.'

'Why do *they* dance like that? Because they're young? Do they want to teach us a lesson?'

Even among teenagers one is likely to come across fathers and sons—retrogrades and progressionists. The latter always know everything about the latest dance; the former are laughed at. Apparently rap is a symbol of the nineties, but I still cannot come to terms with it. What is more, I would not have succumbed to its allure at the age of eighteen. And yet, at the end of my teenage period, I was a great admirer of the Beatles, King Crimson and Pink Floyd. In a way, I am at once a father and a son.

NAUGHTY CHILDREN

In Dickens' numerous works unhappy children and their tears stand out in sharp relief against grown-ups, their cruelty or commiseration. Children shed tears whenever grown-ups either maltreat them or shield their bodies and souls from a misfortune. The point is their tears of gratitude are also moving. (In their turn, readers are supposed to be moved to tears.) Their sorry plight and poignant behaviour would redeem the whole of humanity if our unconscious—and our memory—did not remind us of other children who are capable of going so far as to murder their next-of-kin. Newspapers dutifully inform us of such disasters and, though lagging behind reality in this domain, literature also enlarges upon the innate perversity of some children, if only occasionally and metaphorically.

So, in a work of fiction, we seldom encounter a real murder in which a child makes adroit use of a dagger, a revolver or sleeping pills. Instead, we are allowed to watch a group of children mock a gullible middle-aged man who firmly believes in their innocence, in their angelic nature. He often trusts them to the point of hoping they might get him off the hook or at least guide him to a back door through which he will escape from his real or imaginary prison. In the long run he may learn, however, that children are more frightful than grown-ups because of their supposed innocence. It is not for nothing that Zarathustra sees angels and children side by side in one of his nightmares:

And amid the roaring and whistling and shrilling the coffin burst and spewed out a thousandfold laughter. And from a thousand grimaces of children, angels, owls, fools, and butterflies as big as children, it laughed and mocked and roared at me. Then I was terribly frightened; it threw me to the ground. And I cried in horror as I have never cried. And my own cry awakened me—and I came to my senses.

Nietzsche, *Also sprach Zarathustra*, Second Part, *Der Wahrsager*, (trans. by Walter Kaufmann)

'Butterflies as big as children'—a nice touch. Superbutterflies instead of supermen. Actually some boys and girls *are* bigger than grown-ups, metaphorically speaking. I wonder how Nabokov would have elucidated this excerpt: after all, he knew much more about the perversity of butterflies than Nietzsche.

Killing your enemies outright is a vulgar form of vengeance to which only uncouth, uneducated individuals resort—mainly in 'real' life where no one except the happy few can dally and waste their time on elegant tortures, on sadistic stratagems. In movies, on the other hand, the denouement is often delayed for the sake of plot, of proverbial suspense, of cinemagoers whose sadistic potential disports itself while a hero wanders in the midst of guns and sarcastic smiles.

Stalin was an uncouth, uneducated individual who, however, might afford to destroy his enemies in slow motion, so to speak. (He was rather fond of cinema.) He often indulged in a game of

cat and mouse—or in a game of Stalin and Bukharin, as his subordinates used to call it—neglecting more important affairs such as Hitler's invasion of the Soviet Union. He would assure his victim that nothing threatened him—his victim—except his own fears which were ill-founded and could, moreover, cast a shadow over the Kremlin brotherhood. Reassured, the victim would tell his wife that everything was in order, that Stalin loved him more than anybody else with the exception of his own wife.

Most children are uneducated, but they can scarcely be likened to Stalin whose 'art of torture' is renowned worldwide thanks to Khrushchev's Secret Speech and the *Gulag Archipelago*. But they have other means of making their enemies toe the line and respond to every move they make on their hopscotch ground. (For all their ingenuity, those children may not know how to play chess or draughts.) They may bounce a ball off the floor and catch it while running around a room where a scholar is immersed in a commentary on the *Divina Commedia*. What is more frightful, however, is the way they bounce a ball off the floor in an *empty* room. They are aware that somebody must be watching them all the time—a prisoner, a dying man or woman—but they go on with their game as if no one was in the wings. They play their solitary game as if they were on their own—they are *not* on their own—bouncing the ball along the ground. The ball hits the ground and bounces high into the air as if to imply that Paradise is around the corner, wherever this corner might be. This corner is around the corner—that is how the prisoner deciphers their game, being unversed in juvenile subterfuges.

As everybody knows, Lolita is a late child to whom Nabokov offered many traits of his former heroines; the latter were liable to bounce a ball off the floor, off the ceiling. In *The Invitation to a Beheading* the protagonist is enticed by a little girl into believing that his escape from prison will occur in a matter of hours. She bounces her ball against the wall—'in a flood of pale light'.

At this point the passage was wide, and at first it seemed to Cincinnatus that the left wall contained a large, deep window, through which all that strange additional light was flowing. Emmie, as she bent down to retrieve her ball, and at the same time to pull up her sock, looked at him slyly and shyly. The little blonde hairs stood erect on her bare arms and shins.

She pulls up her sock *innocently*, estranging herself from mature women who do nothing of the sort in public unless they are bent on arousing the curiosity of those watching them. But nobody watched Emmie except Cincinnatus who, at some point, pinned his hopes on her innocence, on her bouncing ball, on her sock, on her age. Like any other prisoner—with a few Stoic, Buddhist or Christian exceptions—he was determined to escape from his cell by fair means or foul. A child was an ideal choice under the circumstances. (A child is always an ideal choice for some people.)

Intoxicated, weak, slipping on the coarse turf, and catching his balance, he set off downward, and immediately, from behind a projection of the rampart, where a black bramble bush rustled

its warning, Emmie darted out to him, her face and legs painted pink by the sunset, and, firmly grasping him by the hand, dragged him after her. All her movements betrayed excitement, rapturous haste. 'Where are we going? Down?' Cincinnatus inquired haltingly, laughing from impatience. She quickly led him along the fortress wall. A small green door opened in the wall. Stairs, leading down, passed imperceptibly underfoot. Again a door creaked; beyond it was a darkish passage in which stood trunks, a wardrobe, and a ladder resting against the wall, and there was a smell of kerosene; it was now apparent that they had entered the director's apartment by the back way for, now no longer clutching his fingers quite so tightly, already absent-mindedly releasing them, Emmie led him into a dining room where they were all sitting and drinking tea at a lighted oval table.

Emmie led the prisoner to the room where his jailer was having high tea, putting on a show of being surprised as he saw him in the company of his daughter who did all she could to accomplish her task. What *was* her task? She had to make the prisoner hope he could escape from his cell by following the ball that led him along the darkish passage, away from his hell, away from sweat and tears. Were they really surprised, the jailer and his wife, the executioner? Were *they* in the know? Emmie might have done it on her own initiative, doing justice to the perverse streak in her nature.

Butterflies, superbutterflies. They flutter among us and we realise that the human brain is mature enough to make one kill or torture one's neighbour *before* it develops into an organ where Heisenberg's uncertainty principle or *Der Man ohne Eigenschaften* may lodge securely. They cannot help playing games and their attitude towards humans is often modelled upon the way they treat their dolls, balls and cats that may be hung by their tails or flung into rivers. Grown-ups have lost their innocence and therefore cannot play these games properly: they have hidden motives and calculate their moves instead of enjoying the simplicity of human suffering.

Kafka's photographs bespeak such purity of heart that one is tempted to associate him with those children who are unversed in the art of mockery and psychological torture. Oddly enough, in *Das Prozeß* one encounters a group of little girls bent on tormenting the hero whose innocent question triggers off their unwholesome curiosity and leads to psychological harassment on their part.

'Is there a painter called Titorelli living here?' The girl, slightly hunchbacked and barely thirteen years old, replied by poking him with her elbow and glancing up at him slyly. Neither her youth nor her physical deformity had prevented her from having already become completely debauched...K. thought it would be useful to find out quickly a little more about Titorelli. So he said:

'I want him to paint my portrait.'

'Paint your portrait?' she asked, opening her mouth excessively wide, then she hit out at K. gently with her hand as if he had said something really surprising or tactless, lifted her already

very short skirts with both hands and ran as fast as she could after the other girls, whose screaming was already fading somewhere upstairs. But at the next bend in the stairs K. met them all again. Obviously the hunchback had told them what K. wanted, and they were waiting for him. They stood on either side of the stairs, squeezed up against the walls so that K. could easily pass between them, and smoothed their aprons with their hands. Their faces, and this lining up to make him run the gauntlet, all betrayed a blend of childishness and depravity.

(Trans. by Douglas Scott and Chris Waller)

Later on, those children almost break into the room where Joseph K. talks to the painter who eventually makes him purchase some of his pictures in exchange for the information on the Court he can provide. 'Please don't paint him, he's so ugly!' shout the girls. Once again Joseph K. becomes involved in a lengthy conversation about how the Court functions and what can be done to obtain an acquittal. But the girls' continuous interference is even crueller than the intricacies of the Court's procedures that Joseph K. endeavours to unravel. He is already used to logical or illogical games that the officials he confronts have been indulging in ever since his arrest. The girls, on the other hand, are playing a different game that belongs to another world altogether: the protagonist—an adult in his own right—would rather play chess than hopscotch. It is a cruel world from which human thought seems to have been banished forever. Only a sort of energy remains—a destructive force that persecutes an underdog, making him a plaything in the hands of irresponsible and unresponsive creatures. After all, it is better to face the Law and its intricacies than to walk in the midst of little savages who open their mouths excessively wide, point at you, laugh and scream.

A friend told me a story about his daughter who, incidentally, has outgrown her perversity and is quite adorable now; she is twenty-four and lives in Paris. At the age of nine, however, she was almost as naughty (to put it mildly) as Kafka's literary offspring, although she would neither open her mouth excessively wide nor scream while pointing at the object of her scorn. She would content herself with walking out on those who expected her to stay and listen to them. Once her teacher at primary school said to a group of children: 'Those who are bored may leave the classroom.' She picked her things up and, without even looking at the teacher, left the classroom, paying an unexpected homage to silence. Grown-ups might also have risen to the occasion and performed the same ritual aimed at destroying the reputation of their colleague or superior, but an ironic smile would have betrayed their purpose. Even silent and unsmiling grown-ups are full of thoughts which can be read on their faces, however distant and indifferent; or some non-existent thoughts may be read *into* their faces because we cannot help believing that an adult must think and map out his or her conduct. And a *purposeful* act is not really offensive because we may disregard or despise the purpose behind it—on moral or ideological grounds. It is an absolute *lack* of purpose that hurts and inflicts incurable wounds on which psychoanalysts dwell with gusto and almost sadistic pleasure. (But we know what is behind *their* professional bravado.) When a child walks out of a classroom—silently and with no intent to hurt

us—we might get the feeling of being spurned by a primordial force, by nature itself. And one cannot fight nature because it is synonymous with God—in Spinoza's teaching.

Dostoevsky may be regarded as Dickens' twin brother, especially when it comes to his treatment of little boys and girls who suffer from perverse grown-ups and may go so far as to commit suicide. But there is a perverse child in *Crime and Punishment*, whose exploit is unequalled in the domain of literature: she manages to surprise a notorious precursor of Humbert Humbert. Svidrigailov is indeed well versed in the science of paedophilia and only in his dream does he come across his match—a Lolita who is far more perverse than Nabokov's Lolita. (His unconscious orchestrates her depravity.)

This Lolita *avant la lettre* is redeemed by a child ruthlessly assaulted in *The Possessed*. Stavrogin is another precursor of Humbert Humbert, but he does not love his Lolita and she commits suicide instead of getting married and conceiving a child—another Lolita perhaps. Wasn't I moved to tears when, at the age of thirty, I read at last Stavrogin's confession which had been suppressed by the author and many of his publishers?

MY TURN

THE SCREW (1)

Some think we are ghosts. We are also the ghosts in the machines and the machines in the ghosts, and all this does not really matter as long as we can walk and whisper; providing we do not frighten little children, turning the screw minutely as described by Henry James. He permits us to visualise both the screw and the turns executed by this screw, and sometimes we call these turns and twists ‘our dance of death’. I read the story for the first time almost 42 years ago and I took a liking to it at once; I might even say I fell in love with it, assuming you can fall in love with ghosts. And there are only ghosts in the domain of literature and the arts in general unless you put yourself in a museum, as some of us did many years ago. And they may still play with coyotes or other animals, calling their performances a ‘slice of life’ or just a ‘slice of the human body’, considering that neither in the Bible nor in the books devoted to philosophy (with very few exceptions) our animals are taken seriously. And if they *are* taken, they are thrown away into the nearest rubbish bin or rubbish chute or both. They cut a dog or a rabbit in two and throw one part into the aforementioned rubbish bin and the other part goes the other way – the chute way, to be precise. Of course one might take into consideration – when speaking of the Bible and its attitude towards animals – Balaam’s ass; and also the horses on which they ride in the Apocalypse. But we might safely discard all sorts of symbols linked to animals, their shapes, stupidity, bravery and wisdom; after all, this book is devoted to ghosts, their shapes and connotations.

But what do I know about ghosts – about anything, as some of Chekhov’s characters say all the time? Yes, we know nothing about the world and so it would be less pointless to say ‘no’, than say, ‘yes’ every day and almost every minute; unless you say, ‘Yes, I know nothing about the world because it is a ghost. And I’ve never encountered any of them, not even in dreams.’ I had a book on ghosts where you could even see photographs taken under various circumstances and featuring various ghosts, in various postures, in various rooms and castles. I know to whom I lent this book and I hope this person will bring it back tonight or tomorrow at the latest; otherwise I shall have to relinquish the idea of writing a book on Henry James’s *The Turn of the Screw* – on all his screws and turns and phrases, in point of fact. Frankly speaking, I am not tempted to say anything about his novels some of which I read many years ago, driven by my sense of duty: I am an English poet and am therefore supposed to know the best representatives of this tribe. But I can hardly recall any novel, any subject matter connected with his novels except that they are partly devoted to the problems faced by the Americans who travelled to Europe and fell in love with it. Their infatuation might prove fatal, for all I know and remember, and so they were left stranded (by themselves) in a no-man’s-land, in a no-woman’s-land, even if there were many men and women and animals around them. Or they were left to their own devices, and they had none whatsoever, either within their reach or even out of it. In my library I have a film entitled *The Bostonians*, and I know that this work of art is based on another work of art – on one of Henry James’s novels. But I am too lazy, too old to watch this film let alone read the

novel which I also have in my library. What is more, I even saw its cover as I looked for some of James's short and long stories on which I shall base my narrative or essay or whatever I am writing today, at this particular moment. At this stage of my life, sometimes I just content myself with covers, with first or last pages, and I imagine, visualise or write the rest because it all amounts to the same thing which is not always real, as Henry James or Chekhov might have put it somewhere. What is real or not boils down to the problem of ghosts and their spectators, their plays and the audience which does not always applaud. Now and then we are just paralysed with horror or amazement, although at this stage of my life I am no longer amazed or surprised as if I were not yet in my second childhood.

Today, we are driven to conclude that not only priests and mere bandits, but literally every one of us is a paedophile in disguise or openly, plainly and honestly. So, if for some obscure reason (and the word 'obscure' contributes to eerie and spectral atmospheres) one finds oneself in a medieval castle or just in a castle – in any old castle brimful with stories and lives and suicides – one is mentally prepared for encounters with ghosts. What is more, one eagerly *expects* them, otherwise one might be disappointed and even commit suicide, for ordinary life is boring and downright disgusting. Husbands hate their wives and their wives hate their husbands, sparing their children who are always ill; at least they were ill in the times of Henry James and Chekhov who have dominated my story so far. And yet Henry James, who is the protagonist of this story, was not acquainted with Chekhov, showering his critical, professional gifts on another Russian writer, Turgenev, about whom I have cared at some points of my life. I even wrote an essay on *Fathers and Sons*, but there are not many ghosts in Turgenev's works; if any, if any. At least I have never encountered any ghosts in his novels, stories and prosaic poems. And anyway I have every right to revert to one of my juvenile loves, Henry James, without making unwarranted detours and giving vent to poetic licence.

So you find yourself in a castle; and this time you happen to be a young woman engaged by a handsome young man whose psychological burden includes two children. We all have burdens and even our billions cannot always spare us a multitude of obligations, duties and responsibilities. And if two children are part and parcel of these obligations, moral or otherwise, our burden doubles its weight and grows gigantic and almost unbearable. So the handsome young man says to the beautiful woman, 'You just teach these children whatever you can teach them, without bothering me unless the situation you get involved in borders on the unknown, mysterious, incomprehensible – on death, in other words. Just don't write to me at all because I'm very busy and anyway I've got other fish to fry. And these fish don't include the children we're talking about. They're not mine anyway; they will be yours so you may do with them whatever you wish as long as you don't bother me.' Of course the young woman does not fail to fall in love with the man, and he probably realises the danger he is exposed to: an avalanche of love letters, telephone calls. I have no idea if there were telephones in the castle I am talking about; or indeed anywhere. I think they had already come into existence because, at some point or other, James speaks of buses and trains employed by children and also by their governess or professor, I suppose. Be that as it may, the young man to whose care the children were entrusted at

some point does not wish to be disturbed, even if death descends on children and adults alike, coming out of the black. He does not explicitly say so, but we gradually grow aware of his hostile, anti-humane attitude towards lives and deaths and curses and perversions of all kinds. I am not sure he was in the know at the very beginning of the story, during his meeting with the young, intelligent (and knowledgeable) woman. At least I am not sure he knew that the children were on the point of being attacked by two paedophiles whose perversity knew no bounds. (A lot of perverse, abominable knowledge was involved in this intricate situation.)

The person I touched upon last night with relation to the book on ghosts – I did not *touch* this person who was more or less ghostly as if coming from the book – brought back the book in question this morning and I did touch her this time. In the book I found engravings based on real apparitions, on real ghosts, so to speak; and consequently I can speak of them now, at least to some extent. And this extent will enable me to approach the subject matter in a manner suited to the occasion, to the apparition of two paedophiles on the scene of the crime depicted by Henry James. In the book we come across the Christian martyr St Denis who, after his death, carried his head every day among those who had persecuted him. And whenever he was asked, ‘Whose head is it?’ he would answer frankly and honestly, ‘This is my head which they cut off because I believe in our Lord, in Jesus Christ and also in his Father.’ There was a cross on his head or helmet which seemed to testify to the veracity of his words, to the truthfulness of his comment upon the image. Another ghost you come across when leafing through the book allows you to experience erotic feelings, not entirely divorced from cinema and its delights: you catch sight of Marilyn Monroe. You look at a wall, for no reason at all, and suddenly she appears – not out of nothing, as they usually say because she has been embedded in your psyche for some time, for several years, ever since you saw her in some comedy or other, dancing, singing or just smiling at everybody, at every film buff. What does she shower you with her sex appeal for? She smiles and has no idea what kind of suicide awaits her in the wings, in her own house. Sleeping pills? An open window? How careless she looks as if all our problems were a whiff of garlic, nothing more. You put up with this garlic and whiff for an hour or so and then go on enjoying life as if nothing had ever happened. And then you swallow a number of sleeping pills, even if you are not Marilyn Monroe or Clark Gable who might have never resorted to sleeping pills or other drugs; in his legendary life or in his former lives.

Apparently these ghosts – not Clark Gable, exceptionally – do not come out of the blue: they are our tenants whose lives nip at our astral bodies. At some point these astral bodies we often boast about, when short of arguments and exciting topics, become *them* – those creatures of no flesh, no blood. Of course they had both – in abundance, and we can envy them this abundance of blood and flesh that we admired almost daily on the many screens we found within our reach. But we can also stumble upon uninteresting creatures, phantoms whose presence no one really longs for. The matter stands differently with Marilyn Monroe to whom you can belatedly make love, even if this romance is fatally limited by the size of the wall or ceiling where she exhibits her numerous, almost uncountable

charms. But what to do with our run-of-the-mill acquaintances? They settle in our astral body, usurp it, devour it, and when asked about the astral phenomena, we just say, 'My astral body is called John Johnovich, I'm sorry to say.' 'Don't you have anything else to offer us?' our neighbours ask, their faces displaying unbearable mockery. 'I'm afraid, I've nothing else to offer you tonight. I've run out of cognac and coffee, of astral bodies, of former lives.' But we are talking about paedophiles whose astral bodies – all the bodies and souls they can rely upon – contain a lot of children who walk and fly around them as if waiting for another assault, harassment. Strange as it may appear, some children are so used to these assaults and brutal caresses they enjoy nothing else: their lives are limited to the tortures inflicted on them by innumerable men. And we should not strike the female of the species from our list – especially in the light of what really (or ghostly and ghastly) happens in the story we are dealing with in our story.

How to go about it? Suppose you are longing to become a paedophile; for argument's sake, for the heck of it or for other reasons unknown to yourself and the world at large. How do you set about changing your life, habits and hopes? You are an ordinary human being, an ordinary young woman whose aspirations have always been limited – not only in your cradle. After all, she will never become the Queen of England, and she is perfectly aware of the fact, of this particular doom she is bound to face day and night, throughout her life. What is more, she is not beautiful enough to pin her hopes on a prince, on his infatuation with her body, mind and other elements of her substance or persona. That is what actually happens in *The Turn of the Screw*; and yet one of the characters – I think she is the housekeeper or a mere servant – keeps on saying, 'You're beautiful Miss, as beautiful as your predecessor.' But you can neither marry this servant nor even make love to her – all this is out of the question for obvious reasons; and these reasons are known to the readers of the story and also to the movie buffs we touched upon some time ago. There is a movie based on this story, and if you have an opportunity to watch this movie, you will realise (almost immediately, as a matter of fact) that no sexual connection can be envisaged within the framework of *their* relationship. I am talking about the young governess or tutor and the housekeeper played by an actress whose beauty I have admired for many years. But I admired her youth, her lithe, almost virginal body, not her old, unattractive self, the one we are offered in the movie under discussion. Of course she is not *supposed* to look either beautiful or young, otherwise she might have taken notice of the two men involved in the situation we are confronted with, for better or for worse. And yet this dilemma or double possibility does not really arise, for even at the very outset of the story we feel somehow we are in for evil things and beings. And it is not only the title that puts us on the right track; there are right or evil tracks all over the place where the action is set – for worse, for worse.

There are people who disagree with you relentlessly and any tiny issue becomes a question of life and death that they answer without batting an eyelid (you should bat a dozen eyelids before answering this question): 'Life, life, life, life, for better, for better, for better.' And they always have the last word, and this last word is 'love' of course; and they are even prepared to stroke your cheeks,

both of them, if they question your trust or intelligence. They seem to impart to you the following unquestionable truth, 'If I stroke your cheeks, I love you. What better proof of universal love can you ask for?' And if they see a picture of Marilyn Monroe either on the wall opposite or just on the back of an armchair, they say, 'I'm blessed with the holy vision of the holy Virgin.' They think it is beneath their dignity to entertain Marilyn Monroe and her likes. In other words, they cannot bring themselves to say, 'Our holy Marilyn.' And they are quite aware that Marilyn was not a virgin either on her deathbed or even on her birthbed, as the Puritans pigheadedly affirm.

In the book I am analysing there is a vision that might be likened to the visions we read about in religious books where children encounter either Jesus or the Holy Virgin and seldom St Anthony of Padua, at least to my knowledge. Where do they encounter the representatives of our faith, our beliefs, hopes and Christian roots over which we trip all the time – to be reminded of our sins? We forget them altogether unless there is a series of roots that makes us think in terms of obstacle races and falls deprived of the soothing influence of water. I think the race I have in mind is 3,000 meters in length and a miniature lake is one of the features of the route, making you think of Paradise and its eternal peace. But you had better not seek refuge in this lake unless you do not care about the outcome of the competition, about your dignity and your fans' loyalty. That is why, within the framework of a saintly mind and soul, this lake is traditionally associated with sin – with *voluptas*, in particular. Here is a pertinent quotation from the story I am scrutinising from every point of view, from mountains and cherry orchards and lakes and suchlike: 'The old trees, the thick shrubbery, made a great and pleasant shade, but it was all suffused with the brightness of the hot, still hour. There was no ambiguity in anything; none whatever, at least, in the conviction I from one moment to another found myself forming as to what I should see straight before me and across the lake as a consequence of raising my eyes. They were attached at this juncture to the stitching in which I was engaged, and I can feel once more the spasm of my effort not to move them till I should so have steadied myself as to be able to make up my mind what to do.'

Our unconscious does its best to hide from us the fact that we are not desired by anybody – at least not by the person we fell in love with a few days before. The young lady, the governess I am talking about in Henry James's footsteps, had to let the owner of the house sink into oblivion: this was the only way to get rid of him. And he could not be consigned to oblivion *automatically*, *mechanically*, and the young lady's unconscious, out of sheer compassion for its mistress, carried out the operation by substituting a beautiful young lady for a handsome young man. Our young lady fell in love with another young lady so as not to go mad, ending her life in a lunatic asylum or inside Shakespeare's *King Lear* where there is enough room for lunacy and its countless representatives.

But I am jumping the gun. First the heroine of Henry James's story fell in love with two children on whose education she was to concentrate all her energies and capacities. She was a sex maniac and the present work is designed to unravel the intricate web of her passions, contradictions, sins and self-tortures.

MOSCOW

You leave your hometown, your native land and go somewhere to see if the grass is really greener beyond the horizon or probably just before, a few steps before the line of the horizon. This line often proves to be as dead as a doornail and so, before stepping over it, stepping over anything, before overreaching yourself, you had better take stock of your life and often, after carrying out this operation, you retrace your steps, repeating to yourself and even to your mother, brother or sister, 'It's not time yet. I'm not yet ripe enough for such a metamorphosis. I know nothing about the world I'd like to settle in forever. Anyway, nothing ever lasts forever, and death has its exceptions, its leaves of absence, which means you are allowed, now and then, to tear yourself away from death, and simply, calmly, walk back or forward, getting closer and closer to the realm you know nothing about. In one of Henry James's stories the protagonist finds himself in a place he can hardly recognise so that one can safely declare he does not recognise it at all in spite of his servant's presence. But his servant reminds him of his obligations, of others who continue to write to him, triggering off an avalanche of letters, requests and contracts of which he would like to be blissfully unaware. And a few pages further the uncommon reader discovers a place where one can forget one's worries and quarries and quarrels and what not. One just remembers not, not what, but once again I am jumping the gun. Several minutes ago, when sitting down at my writing desk, I was resolved to speak of Russia, of my departure from my native city, of my return to it, the experience often defined as 'prodigal son is back'.

The book on which I relied for the material I need – if I am still prepared to enlarge upon the comings and goings that Henry James's compatriots indulge absent-mindedly in – is downstairs, not really far from the writing desk cluttered with other books I cannot use on this occasion. But I am too lazy to go anywhere, either towards the horizon I cannot even see, not at this hour, not from my window that seems to be in love with trees, bushes and clouds, nor downstairs. What *did* I know about the horizon I was about to reach and cross on June 10th, 1974? I go back to this space-time point, whenever the wish to understand what turning points really mean in one's life gets the upper hand and takes control of my leisure hours. But for a long time I have been fed up with my departure, with the day on which I left not only my motherland but also my juvenile self behind. I had better concentrate on my return, on the snow crunching under my boots or my shoes or just my bare feet – I do not remember anything with the exception of this crunch I always hear, even when I merely crunch on an apple or when it comes to the crunch, whatever 'it' means under the circumstances. For years and years snowflakes got mixed with my memories that focused on Russia and my past; I had no other past, being forbidden to leave the country on my own, without any legal, governmental permission. And then I returned to the same native land – to the same snow, I might say, in spite of Heraclitus' rivers and impossibilities. I cannot remember exactly what I felt upon my return: the turmoil of my senses and their quantity did not allow me to take in anything, with the exception of the same snow and the restaurant where I saw a lot of tables cluttered with dishes – the Russian way, as I used to say.

They just put all sorts of appetizers, *zakuski*s on your table as if to prevent you from seeing the immaculate purity of the tablecloth; or rather its impurities. James's hero, on the other hand, does feel and remember a lot, which enables his author to say, 'Everything was somehow a surprise; and that might be natural when one had so long and so consistently neglected everything and taken pains to give surprises so much margin for play. He had given them more than thirty years – thirty-three, to be exact; and they now seemed to him to have organised their performance quite on the scale of that licence.'

If you are surprised, you remember something, otherwise they say your morale is at a low ebb; and yet you are just indifferent to whatever happens outside your body that continues to live its own life. Only when your body stops relying on itself, on its own existence, can you take in the situation, the whole of it and avail yourself of a few exclamations stored in your chest, heart and soul; even in your head sometimes, if your personal stars do not object to the birth of such a phenomenon. I was picked up at the airport where I had landed, being aware of the presence of my native country, of the country I had left more than 15 years before. It was the same country: it was not only the snow that I recognised as my friends drove me to the restaurant where there were too many plates, too much music, too many voices; and too many bottles. It was as if I had never left either Moscow or my friends who had not changed. I cannot say I was looking for surprises; nor had I given any margin to them. Nor can I say I was utterly indifferent to what was going on around me: I am not as thick-skinned as some of my friends and foes say all the time as if I could forget either their voices or their opinions. Now I begin to forget them – probably in the light of the general drift, with its generous help; and this drift constantly, inflexibly refers to the gradual loss of my memory. I might even say it draws its energy from this loss; it creates its own losses on the basis of this general loss. And the loss of my legs' mobility and agility is part and parcel of this loss, of my generalisations.

I am not sure I was ever really born in Moscow because you are always born elsewhere – prior to any birth your parents and relatives may talk to you about. You are born in an old house, in the world where your ancestors touched the pieces of furniture you are also to touch one of these days. Everything, your birth, youth and thoughts will always be in this old dwelling place; and in this sense, there are no departures. This everything and everybody do not exist in my life, for the simple reason that I was born in the Soviet Union where the roots had been annihilated well before my birth. And when I was born at last, I saw them suspended in mid-air; for a moment or two. And after those moments, even the suspended roots, the hanging gardens of my being disappeared so that today, in order to hang myself, I have to fetch a hammer, a nail and a noose and do my best to do my worst.

He spoke of the value of all he read into it, into the mere sight of the walls, mere shapes of the rooms, mere sound of the floors, mere feel, in his hand, of the old silver-plated knobs of the several mahogany doors, which suggested the pressure of the palms of the dead; the seventy years of the past in fine that these things represented, the annals of nearly three generations,

counting his grandfather's, the one that had ended there, and the impalpable ashes of his long-extinct youth, afloat in the very air like microscopic motes.

Henry James, *The Jolly Corner*

It is not my or anybody
 So it is everywhere and a samovar comes
 As if it could pierce so many

There are clouds and mansions,
 And they'll die in due, and
 Nothing is due

THE SCREW (2)

We have a young woman on our hands and our hands are not big enough to hold her body and all her whims, inconsistencies and unlawful desires. She cannot stay at home twiddling her thumbs because her father – a minister of the old school – does not admit laziness and indifference towards God's injunctions. And he reminds his daughter that we should till the Earth, otherwise we shall not go to Paradise. And he adds that even the woods we can see from our windows would be out of reach, and he even sings a French song, '*Nous n'irons plus aux bois.*' Our young woman respects her father and his precepts that so far have enabled her to eschew what he calls 'your sinful behaviour', but she gets restless, which can be understood, given the context of her life. It is true that she goes to the woods almost every day, and she even finds a lot of mushrooms in these woods. And her father eats them with pleasure, thanking God for the abundance of food he can enjoy thanks to the woods, the rain and the existence of the world. He usually forgets his daughter's hands and fingers as if the mushrooms he devours had jumped into her basket on their own initiative. Yes, that is how it usually happens, according to the minister and his narrow-minded brain. His daughter is allowed to go to the woods, and God does not prevent her from coming across a lot of mushrooms – on account of the minister's prayers. In the morning, our minister opens his eyes and begins to recite his daily prayers, saying among other things, 'Our Lord, our dearest God and the Almighty! Please don't disregard my love for mushrooms in the course of my daughter's stroll in the nearby woods. You know what woods I have in mind, don't You? I don't care about other woods, You know. If You wish, You can set fire to them. They can go to Hell for all I care. We sin too much and You're right whenever You punish us and our woods and all our belongings severely. But please spare the woods I depend upon for my lunches, dinners and breakfasts. Deprived of mushrooms, I may falter in my belief in You. I may become guilty of the sin of neglect. So I count on You, on Your understanding of my spiritual problem.'

Sooner or later his daughter was to feel bored not only at home, when spinning and singing, when spinning, but not sinning. Usually a sin takes root in your psyche and body when you are prohibited from sinning and consequently substitute an innocent song for perversions of all kinds. It is little wonder that, in the course of this confinement, the minister's daughter accumulated a lot sins in her bosom and other parts of her hospitable body. Every morning they would awaken before she herself took the trouble to open her eyes and say her prayers which were growing more and more inaudible as if she were afraid of disturbing her father's sleep. But her father was already eating mushrooms in the kitchen, and so she heard his voice and the following injunction uttered by his voice, 'Speak louder, speak louder! Neither our Lord nor I can hear your prayers.' Sometimes she obeyed this imperious command, sometimes she did not. Whenever the latter solution was adopted by her psyche, her father slapped both her cheeks viciously as if anxious to leave traces of his wrath on her virginal but not entirely pure face. Even at that stage of her life one could see the vices stored up in her soul, and we all know what happens when vices, sins and perversions grow visible. Those who suffer from diabetes know that everything is more or less in order if no sugar can be found in your urine: only your blood is overburdened with it to the point of making you vomit whatever you devour, even if the mushrooms you collect on your romantic strolls in the woods are not really poisonous.

One might affirm that her escape from the minister's house and household was a sort of *deus ex machina*, but on the day of her definitive departure she cared neither about God nor about machines: motorcars and suchlike. She knew that the only means of transport she had at her disposal was situated in her body, in its nether part. Her legs were in good working order and she took advantage of their swiftness which spared her a lot of worries related to her father's wish to recover his daughter and the mushrooms she was to bring him almost every day. No one can say she fled her father's house with the police in pursuit: not even their dog pursued her as if he had understood her motives and her irresistible longing to sin in the open air, unhampered by baskets, mushrooms and berries of all kinds. The minister realised at once that, alongside the mushrooms, he would be deprived – until doomsday perhaps – of the opportunity to slap human faces for the sake of redemption and with God's unconditional approval. And he admitted to himself that his fingers were used to this exercise to the extent of being unable to forego it *completely*. So he started to slap furniture – two cupboards in particular; and he said to himself that the kitchen cupboard was his favourite substitute for his daughter's cheeks – on account of the cups and cutlery he heard as he continuously struck the poor piece of furniture. Actually he hoped it might feel *something* during this ritual, and even when he was hurt in return – the wood his hand encountered was not as innocuous as all that – he rejoiced at his victory over evil and the Devil.

In the meantime, his daughter reached London or the suburbs of another city and set about looking for a job: reading job advertisements, talking to neighbours and ordinary passers-by. Some passer-by asked her if she was fond of children. She had never asked herself this question: she had grown up alone, away from other children and their schools. But she knew that the only correct answer

to this question was, 'Yes, of course. I adore them.' Until recently this was the correct and even the only answer to the question in which lurked the danger universally denounced as paedophilia. But in those days ministers, priests and other representatives of the Almighty on our planet were not used to soiling their hands (not only their hands, alas) by harassing babies, while leaving their mothers and fathers unharmed. And if you attempted to put such and such person in the picture about what was going on in this field, that person would say, shrugging his or her shoulders, 'So what? The world is teeming with bandits. And it's an open secret that bandits don't believe in God. And only faith and the Church can hold your libido in check.'

Anyway, the daughter was given some advice and shortly afterwards she obtained permission to have a job interview in the course of which she was asked the same question, 'Do you love children?' And she repeated the same answer – with more ardour and conviction: this time her livelihood depended upon this love, be it perverse or humane or God-fearing. Of course, on the day of this interview, she did not know yet she would fall in love with her charges, with the handsome man's nephew and niece. And the love I have in mind as I try to piece together the details of Henry James's story has nothing to do with Jesus Christ, his redemption, salvation and teaching. The hints I have in mind and also under my very fingers (once again I am leafing through the story) are palpable – as palpable as the famous hit in *Hamlet*. And yet they do not always seem so at first glance. You read, for instance, the following piece of information: 'What I said to myself above all was that Miles had got something out of me and that the proof of it, for him, would be just this awkward collapse. He had got out of me that there was something I was much afraid of and that he should probably be able to make use of my fear to gain, for his own purpose, more freedom.'

I suppose that the awkward collapse upon which the heroine does not enlarge – for reasons known to everybody – refers to her over-indulgence in a touchy-feely approach hypocritically meant to protect her charges from two ghosts. As soon as one of these ghosts appears, the heroine grasps at her charges' shoulders, clothes, necks and holds their bodies tight – so tight in fact that her victims stop breathing and are often on the verge of mental and physical collapse. But when you consult her diary, you get the feeling that you are attending a sort of play where a pretty young woman hugs her teddy bears tightly to her chest or ribs. Incidentally, one wonders why she did not manage to seduce her manager or rather the uncle of her victims: the woman with whom she shares her responsibilities thinks she is as beautiful as the female ghost haunting the aforementioned lake. And also the staircases one has to climb in the house where the drama unfolds to the detriment of the children's education and wellbeing. One might suppose the heroine's hourglass figure seduced her employer upon her entrance into his study. And his infatuation with the future governess must have lasted until he saw her face at close range and did not fail to discover the scars and other vestiges of the punishments inflicted on it by the minister and his respect for God. And her employer was so disgusted by her disfigured face that he said, 'For nothing in the world should you get in touch with me, even if these children are in danger of leaving this world prematurely. Actually no one knows what is premature and mature in human life.'

A child speaks on his deathbed, and his mother says, once everything is over, “I thought his speech was very gracious and mature.” Do you think she’s wrong?’

So the boy going by the name of Miles got something out of the governess as she occasionally let the cat out of the bag: she could not help it. Never before had she sexually harassed boys and girls, and her father’s ghost (‘Remember me!’) was constantly near her. Daily, hourly she could sense him behind her, hovering and building up the oomph to strike her again – in earnest this time. ‘Next time I’ll kill you,’ he said many times, and she thought he was now sufficiently cross with her (the lack of mushrooms) to carry out his threat. And she thought the boy might make use of her fear to gain, for his own purpose, more freedom. On all sides, at every minute she was surrounded by foes some of whom were ghosts, the inhabitants of the Hereafter.

I have kept to this day the heartbreaking little idea of how he seemed to know that (her intentions and inclinations) and to play with it. ‘And you can’t say I’ve not been awfully good, can you?’ (Putting up with her bear hugs and other caresses.)
I laid my hand on his shoulder, for, though I felt how much better it would have been to walk on, I was not yet quite able. ‘No, I can’t say that, Miles.’
‘Except just that one night, you know – !’
‘That one night?’ I couldn’t look as straight as he.
‘Why, when I went down – went out of the house.’
‘Oh yes. But I forget what you did it for.’
‘You forget?’ – he spoke with the sweet extravagance of childish reproach. ‘Why, it was to show you I could!’ (I could escape from the cage!)

There is always an element of sexual innuendo in their conversations, and they *are* aware of these innuendoes and their unquestionable sexuality; and yet the governess continues to question everything, even her own perversity. The children she is taking care of – in every sense of the term – try to escape her notice and chiefly her body which clings to them as if it were their clothes; as if they were a handrail, as if their governess were always walking down some slippery steps. In point of fact, now and then she did talk about the force of gravity, saying, ‘This morning our lesson will be devoted to Newton and the force of gravity he chanced upon when watching his apple tree. The apples kept falling and he said to himself, “They don’t fall for nothing. They impart to me the truth related to the law they know nothing about.” Sure enough, other humans knew nothing about this law and he wrote a treatise about it. I hope you’ll learn it by heart this afternoon.’ And then she would ask them to lie down and feel her body’s weight which was to demonstrate the law she was enlarging upon and also its physical, inescapable power. And sometimes she just said, ‘I’ll collapse, if you don’t help me combat the force of gravity I talked to you about the other day and also last night.’

She also took a sheet of paper and drew a tree on it. And her body, its likeness, was hanging from a branch of the tree she had drawn for the sake of her pupils and libido, her own libido. She said, 'As you can see, I'm one of the apples.'

'Where are the other apples?' asked Flora.

'There are two rotten apples on this tree,' answered the governess. 'But I won't show them to you tonight.'

'What are these two rotten apples doing on the tree?' asked Miles. 'Shouldn't they fall, once and for all?'

'They fell the other day,' answered the governess.

'Why are they still hanging on the tree?' asked Flora.

'Are they? I can't see them,' said the governess.

'But you've just said they're on the tree,' said Miles. 'Are you in the habit of contradicting yourself?'

'Emerson said you could contradict yourself as often as you wished.'

'Two rotten apples are hanging on a tree. How come?' asked Flora.

'They're both dead and alive. They're ghosts, you see. Do you see them?'

'The ghosts?' asked Flora and Miles in unison.

'The ghosts I'm talking to you about.'

'No,' said Flora and Miles in unison.

'Anyway, I'm an apple,' said the governess. 'And I'm about to fall on you.' And she did, she did, keeping her promise.

'Why did you fall on my belly?' asked Miles.

'Because my upbringing didn't allow me to renege on my promise.'

'What about the other apples? Why haven't they fallen yet? How long do we have to wait for them to fall?' asked Flora. 'Could you call me Falla?' she asked all of a sudden.

'They'll never fall, I promise,' said the governess.

'Why? Why? What's the reason?' asked her charges.

'Because they're rotten.'

'Rotten fruit falls earlier than other fruit. It doesn't have enough energy to cling to branches and twigs. Why doesn't it fall?'

'Would you like the rotten apples to fall on you? Why? Do you think your libido I talked to you about two days ago has already been involved in *their* game?'

The governess spent her days and nights doing her best not to allow the two rotten apples to fall from the tree of life or death. She had already got lost in the life-death kingdom and so the dead as well as the living walked around her and sat on her bed, whenever they felt like it; and they liked her bed very much, almost as much as the governess's hourglass figure. 'Where are your rotten apples?' asked her pupils from time to time. At first she would not catch their meaning, engrossed in the reality

of her own juicy, ripe desire. But gradually she realised they were speaking about her predecessor and a despicable man who might have been in love with her predecessor, a beautiful woman described as follows, ‘A very beautiful, wicked woman wearing black clothes and black humours, moods and so forth. Immensely sad, immensely dead. Sufficiently alive to pounce on my children at the earliest opportunity.’

The children saw their governess’s body on the tree designed to illustrate the force of gravity quite *realistically*, not *schematically*. They all played a drama in which the law of gravity did not limit its scope to apples only, but spread all over the world, asking young men and women to take part in the process and drama, not to say tragedy, to which our life can easily be reduced. Sooner or later corpses or living bodies fall from the Tree of Life and children welcome them with open arms (with open bodies, one is tempted to say) because they cannot do otherwise. What *could* we do otherwise, one wonders? We could buy another packet of sweets to suck on the journey.

PARIS

Of course our life can be reduced to memories, ghosts and our representation that pictures to itself either reality or unreality. We see a distant figure, in white, in black, in the middle of the night during which we cannot doze off, not for a second. On such nights we may wonder why we are not in Paris, in one of its cafés where everybody sat, drank and spoke to celebrities in days of yore. Not too long ago, to tell the truth. But at such moments we do not really hanker after truth that continues to elude us because we never really hanker after it, leaving it alone, partly forsaken. In one of these cafés I might have talked to Beckett. Instead, I talked to myself, and I still talk to myself as if I had not bored myself to death many times. Redeemed and forgiven, you rise from the dead and go to Paris in the hope of having dinner with Gilles Deleuze or Flaubert. After a painful, fruitless search you realise they are dead and gone, and you wonder whether they rose from the dead, where they rose from the dead, or from the quick.

In one of these cafés I was writing the novel entitled *Yo el Rey*. With the passing of time I turned it into *Hall of Mirrors* and the novel still bears this title as if it could not get rid of it once and for all. I discarded many pages, removing them from the manuscript one by one, hesitating and finally burning two-thirds of it. What remains amounts to very little indeed, as I often say and type out now as if taking stock of the situation I found myself in some time ago. With the passing of time, with the passing of the years. Neither these years nor time disappear and very few people accuse them of selfishness. They outstayed their welcome a long time ago, but someone, somebody, says, ‘Welcome, welcome. Stay until the rain has stopped.’ And the rain never stops.

Here is a forsaken paragraph, one of them:

‘You fall asleep in the presence of your sovereign?’ I cried. As he persisted in his arms-of-Morpheus attitude I felt it was my sacred duty to inflict on him the ‘boxed-ear punishment’. At

once his head resumed its I-have-my-orders oscillation, so I made it say 'yes' 17 times in a row. Yes, yes, yes, yes...It is easier done than written. Gradually his whole body came to accompany this head-melody by a somewhat disorderly, muddy harmony which did not seem to be in keeping with the clear-cut structure of my gestures. And yet that *Symphony of Punishment* had been written by *one* composer. Incidentally, a friend of mine used to end *his* friends' disagreement by pointing out they were both wrong. But this excellent method could not, alas, be adjusted properly to my predicament, for the head was right, thanks to the flawless technique of my hands. So I merely got worked up and since the planning of time-space was still entrusted to me, the events were working up to a climax. Grudgingly I let go of his ears and seized my pen. 'Along with other misdemeanours, he had the impertinence...Off with his head. Off with his head, even though his head is right. He must kneel with his head on the ground and hand me the axe.'

'In nine seconds' time I shall have broken the "neck" of the job,' I said. I gripped and weighed the legendary weapon, executed the off-with-head ascending curve, annexed the conquered territory of gravitational forces to the kingdom of my strength and, bringing into play the sharpened edge of the axe, severed the head from the out-of-tune body. 'Let's call it a day,' I said. 'Let us call it a day,' I wrote. As I put the pen down I heard a muffled tremolo whose tonality seemed to be at odds with the trivial sound produced by a pen banging on the writing table. I turned back. Calmly stooping, he retrieved the rolled-away head, clasping it by the dishevelled hair and, after having bowed to me – well might I have reproved him for not bowing low enough – mounted his large green horse.

All those metamorphoses were succeeding one another like the pages of a notebook through which a student glances the day before his exam. Contradictory, incompatible with any logical explanation, they look like a number of *different* earths that go around me and, to Galileo's great delight, revolve, revolve, revolve on their slanting axes – faster, faster, faster, faster. 'He cannot keep pace with things,' we say about a man who has driven over to a country station with a view to seeing his fiancée off. And as the train moves off – off, off, off, off, mumbles the Devil, tearing his heart to pieces – he starts walking 'after' the train: first like a dwarf, then like a giant; first along the platform, then along the track. See how he runs, see how he runs. Did you ever see such fun in your life? First he manages to maintain the picture of their compartment in front of his eyes as if the train were but his neighbour's Mercedes parked straight across from the house. Then the picture moves off – a train in the train, so to speak – and another compartment occupied by another family forms a right angle with the direction of his eye-rays. A succession of compartments glides past him; another train takes over.

Three paragraphs. As if I had gained momentum. There are so many momentums in my life I am weary of counting them on my fingers and elsewhere. They said (some literary critics did) that I was

mad because the novel is centred upon Louis II of Bavaria's life and death and madness. I am not mad, contrary to whatever exists and can be imagined on the material supplied by literature and its critics. But I am a king without subjects who are too cumbersome and burdensome – to such a point of no-return that I do not understand (I, for *one*, I suppose, considering the number of tyrants) why one should have a lot of subjects – the whole of Russia, for instance – in order to feel happy once and for all; until your doomsday, until you get assassinated in Siberia. I am still a king without subjects, and I know a koan that informs me that there is *no* one in the whole world, and even beyond its borders. I am the king who does not care about the world and even the great Beyond; and yet the great Beyond must be great, at least to some extent, reaching some borders that count somewhere.

There is another paragraph from my past, from yore, or rather mine, that I am tempted to quote, for it reminds me of Paris, of what I felt in that capital of the world. The former capital, the future capital. What matters is my text and the rest is the city where I lived for 33 years, going to cafés, restaurants and theatres; and just to Nowhere which was, however, situated within Paris – within its boulevards and boudoirs, as I put it in one of my novels.

Your words have a hollow ring. Instead of skimming along your river in the wake of your moonlight, once inside other brains, they take a beaten footpath winding in loops across *la matière grise*, to use Monsieur Poirot's favourite expression. The only thing to do is to re-open the dictionaries, pick up some words at random and arrange them in a beautiful order with a view to making your feelings, mentality and existence fit the polished text.

But his own actual business half an hour later was with a third floor on the boulevard Malesherbes – so much as that was definite; and the fact of the enjoyment by the third-floor windows of a continuous balcony, to which he was helped by this knowledge, had perhaps something to do with his lingering for five minutes on the opposite side of the street.

Henry James, *The Ambassadors*

But his drift was, for reasons, to the other side, and it floated him unspent up the rue de Seine and as far as the Luxembourg. In the Luxembourg Gardens he pulled up; here at last he found his nook and here, on a penny chair from which terraces, alleys, vistas, fountains, little trees in green tubs, little women in white caps, and shrill little girls at play all sunnily 'composed' together, he passed an hour in which the cup of his impression seemed truly to overflow.

Henry James, *The Ambassadors*

And I forget, I forget. I forget the rue de Seine. I forget what you did it for. Would I have forgotten Miles's motives and behaviour in general, in particular, in everything and everywhere? I have never been interested in children – as objects of my irresistible urges, dark desires, light aspirations. The

governess takes every opportunity to clasp them to her heart and to her head, her lips that kiss, kiss, kiss, kiss. They know no other words, movements, nuances. Everything is a kiss to her. I don't think she went any further. Where could you go from there, from all those kisses and leopard hugs? What are the women we watch on TV, on DVDs? They preside over trials and last suppers. Cats, leopards, tigresses? She was all of them, this governess to whom I have already devoted a few paragraphs; from an abandoned work, no doubt. I have no idea where I abandoned it, how and why. Was it so bad? As bad as my juvenile prose? I don't think so. I don't think anything, anyone, anywhere – with the exception of Paris, the rue de Seine I cannot recall.

Nabokov and his *Lolita* did nothing – no states of sexual arousal – to arouse my interest in the domain traditionally defined as forbidden, illegal, leading to trials and tribulations. Or just to trials and Siberia. Every country has its own Siberia, if not Sakhalin, as Chekhov might have put it. His (Nabokov's) hero is straightforward, primitive, almost prehistoric. He does not seem to have read James's story, otherwise he would not have relied on sleeping pills, on physical comings, entrances and goings. 'You tore something inside me, you brute,' shouted Lolita. 'You tore *everything* inside me.' Lolita's body tore right down the middle, one might say and write. The middle of what? Of the story? Of the world axis? In the middle of her lover's libido? Humbert Humbert tore Lolita apart and bought her candyfloss. A candy-ass, as the Americans put it so rightly. The right word in the right place. Henry James's heroine is subtle – posthistoric, in a way.

There were moments when, by an irresistible impulse, I found myself catching them up and pressing them to my heart. As soon as I had done so I used to say to myself: 'What will they think of that? Doesn't it betray too much?' It would have been easy to get into a sad, wild tangle about how much I might betray; but the real account, I feel, of the hours of peace that I could still enjoy was that the immediate charm of my companions was a beguilement still effective even under the shadow of the possibility that it was studied. For if it occurred to me that I might occasionally excite suspicion by the little outbreaks of my sharper passion for them, so too I remember wondering if I mightn't see a queerness in the traceable increase of their own demonstrations.

But let us descend and find Humbert Humbert crouched down behind a bush, in his prehistoric posture. Lolita is playing tennis beyond another bush, and he enjoys the performance – to the point of describing it in graphic detail. And that is what the novel amounts (or descends) to: descriptions, descriptions, descriptions. Lolita on a bike, Lolita on Mike. Before his death, George Steiner said we did not judge the 12-year-old girls we met in the streets as we had done before the novel's appearance in some bookshop or other; in all bookshops, as a matter of fact. But do these matters and facts really count? I know for sure that no young girl has ever attracted me either physically or spiritually: she could teach me neither Casanova's methods nor Zen Buddhism. What *could* she teach me? Humbert

Humbert's vulgarity? He could not even recite sophisticated poems to her, limiting his instruction to Edgar Allan Poe – Nabokov's prehistoric infatuation. The Kingdom by the Sea. The Kingdom by the Seine where I spent 33 years; and many other years lived and patiently borne in the Soviet Russia.

And all these motels, my God. When I met Mrs Nabokov in 1980, I asked her if her husband had really taken the trouble to describe those motels of no note – of no *musical* note, that is – in his 'immortal' novel. She was delighted to meet another Russian dissident, and so she answered all my questions rather eagerly as if questioned by St Peter in front of the paradisiacal gates. She said, 'Yes, yes, yes,' paying homage to her husband's infatuation with *Ulysses*. (I wonder if 'infatuation' is tantamount to 'love' and can replace it, whenever we feel like saying something ecstatic or pathetic. Or when in need to say nothing.) So you have to listen to the groans, moans and so ons – and ans, ans, ans – coming from beyond a wall, or ceiling, or whatever. As usual 'whatever' is far more frightful than any void, or *Nichts*, or *Michts* that means: I am a nonentity. You listen to their way of making love, to the American way of life, and I wonder – it's a wonderful life – if all the nonsense and anysense and nowaysense drew Nabokov's attention to the whisper or shouts he heard; or to the words they contained. Did they? There were no words in those motels; no logos. Only bogos, whatever that means. Or rather cocos: coco bean, coconut, coco butter. And Coca-Cola. No Coco Chanel, no way!

THE SCREW (3)

Should your eyes travelling over the British Museum library light on the word 'passion' you will have to brace yourself for a shock and, laying aside your personal attitude towards the stormy word, to operate a necessary adjustment in your organism. The next stage would consist in searching for the object of your passion. After shifting your gaze to the vault, gently lower your index or any other finger on a page of, say, Encyclopaedia Britannica, and without undue tremor prepare to face your fate. I often went through the similar experiences during my trips in the unconscious whose gaps must be filled before it is too late. If I do not keep my own unconscious in proper repair, no one else will, I suppose!

From the Governess's Diary

So this young woman does not know to whom she can make love: her employer rejected her body without taking the trouble to undress it. So her hourglass figure remained hidden from his libido, lips and hands that might have explored it to their advantage; his hands, her body and their libido would have greatly enjoyed the procedure. But nothing happened in the course of that interview. The gentleman cracked a few coarse jokes and dismissed the lady rather mercilessly, paying no homage to God and the vulnerability of the human race. The young lady realised she might go mad in the wake of this encounter, and in a way she had no alternative but to lavish her élan vital and praise on the children, on Miles and Flora. (The housekeeper was an old, ugly woman.) 'The little girl who accompanied Mrs Grose (the housekeeper) appeared to me on the spot a creature so charming as to

make it a great fortune to have to do with her. She was the most beautiful child I had ever seen, and I afterwards wondered that my employer had not told me more of her.' What could he have told her about his niece? 'She is much more beautiful and sexy than Lolita, you know. But you shouldn't stroke her tits and cunt too coarsely. Don't imitate my language and manners. My niece felt an instant aversion to them, and that's why I left my niece and nephew to their own devices. Despite what many people think, aversion therapy is no longer used by professional psychologists in this country and elsewhere, you know.'

The point is that her art of seduction, the ways she used to seduce both the boy and the girl, had nothing to do with what usually happens: brutal caresses, the brutality of sexual acts, the brutality of departure and candies, and money, and second-rate motels. She would resort to methods which were so allusive and elusive that sometimes the result of her subtle labours eluded even their author. What did she actually do with those children? And also with the woman whose apparition troubled not only the governess herself, but also the whole tale, judging from the uneasiness of the action and its exposition. The heroine often comes to a standstill on the very brink of disclosure, revelation and a full confession. It is never full, one is bound to admit, although all the elements are there, embedded as they are in the very texture of the text; or life, one might conclude. What can one think about the following dialogue?

'Well, I think also, you know, of this queer business of ours.'

I marked the coolness of his firm little hand. 'Of what queer business, Miles?'

'Why, the way you bring me up. And all the rest!'

I fairly held my breath a minute, and even from my glimmering taper there was light enough to show how he smiled up at me from his pillow. 'What do you mean by all the rest?'

'Oh, you know, you know!'

I could say nothing for a minute, though I felt, as I held his hand and our eyes continued to meet, that my silence had all the air of admitting his charge and that nothing in the whole world of reality was perhaps at that moment so fabulous as our actual relation.

Every *grand masturbateur* knows that the utmost, most exquisite pleasure one can draw from this do-it-yourself ritual is linked to brinks of all kinds. On the brink, back, towards the brink, almost, back. Oh, you know, you know. What? What? What? What? On the brink, on the brink. Several entries in the governess's diary put us on the right track of what was actually going on in that old house – as old as the housekeeper.

Playing with his penis is far more delightful than actually putting it inside you. Playing, playing, caressing – that is what my actuality is about. You can measure his penis, saying, 'Today, we'll do our best to understand William Shakespeare and his contribution to literature and our souls.'

We'll start with the comedy *Measure for Measure*. And we shall measure his penis. First I shall compliment him on its size and then I should set about caressing it, prepared to jam on the brakes on the very brink of his ecstasy and my accomplishment. Actually my accomplishment will consist in skilfully putting the brakes on the well-known, universally acknowledged procedure; at the right moment. And then I shall ask him to caress my vagina. Measure for measure, I call it. 'This is your measure, Miles. And this is mine.'

From the Governess's Diary

And what about Flora? For some obscure reason (everything is obscure in this tale of imagination and horror) the only entry linked to Flora's personality and body is rather succinct – an enigmatic account of their relationship: 'On the verge, on the virgin, on the verge, on the virgin.' There are a few descriptions of Flora's beauty and we may classify them in the category known as 'On the Brink'. We catch a glimpse of Flora's relationship with the ugly housekeeper which might be classified as 'Towards the Brink', although nothing ever came of it: it was too late. Watching a sexual act that remains on the brink of it is an unparalleled pleasure depicted thus in the diary we are perusing:

I instantly became sure she had just come out of the copse (of the corpse). She waited for us, not herself taking a step, and I was conscious of the rare solemnity with which we presently approached her. She smiled and smiled, and we met; but it was all done in a silence by this time flagrantly ominous. Mrs Grose was the first to break the spell: she threw herself on her knees and, drawing the child to her breast, clasped in a long embrace the little tender, yielding body. While this dumb convulsion lasted I could only watch it – which I did the more intently when I saw Flora's face peep at me over our companion's shoulder. It was serious now – the flicker had left it, but it strengthened the pang with which I at that moment envied Mrs Grose the simplicity of her relation.

The flicker, its disappearance, Flora's immobility, Flora's mobility (her face peeping at the governess), Flora's yielding body, (not to her, not to her!), this dumb convulsion, *her* relationship. Let us not overlook the importance played by jealousy – throughout the story. The so-called ghosts, Miss Jessel and Peter Quint, materialise now and then and their respective (not respectable) parts are described as follows, "When you open the box, a clown pops out," my father told me many years ago as he offered me this box. I need two clowns (my screens) and two lovers (my masturbation). The other day Miss Jessel was sitting in my room, my favourite clown. She did exactly what I enjoined her to do. How delightful it is to describe the effects of my commands from outside – as if she were doing all this on her own, independently of my will and her part in my tale. But at the moment I took this in I had already become aware that, in spite of my entrance, her attitude strangely (sic!) persisted. Then it was – with the very act of its announcing itself – that her identity flared up in a change of posture. She

rose, not as if she had heard me (not as if she had heard me!), but with an indescribable grand melancholy of indifference and detachment (sic!), and, within a dozen feet of me, stood there as my vile predecessor. Dishonoured and tragic, she was all before me; but even as I fixed and, for memory, secured it (I did not need to!), the awful (and delightful) image passed away. Dark as midnight in her black dress (The Queen of Night, forsooth!) her haggard beauty and her unutterable woe, she had looked at me long enough to appear to say that her right to sit at my table was as good as mine to sit at hers.'

Ghosts might leave us, all of them (all of us), if we could live without their assistance and otherworldly understanding. Their perspective is far more spacious and its length allows them to see whatever happens beyond us, beyond our backs and lives; and even beyond our former lives. The governess knew how to use her companions, adjusting them to her needs and the descriptions she heard from the housekeeper to whom she would say from time to time, 'Do you really think I am too jubilant, too rapturous in their (the children's) presence? How could one help being in love with them? Anyway, I'm in love with Ms Jessel and she's dead. No sexual harassment, you know. Nor am I a necrophiliac, whatever you may assume when jumping to your hasty conclusions. Let me give you a piece of advice: Don't jump too often. It's bad for your health! By the way, I'm also in love with Peter Quint. He is just the opposite of my employer – a real fiend, the Devil incarnate. Imprudent, spoiled, depraved. God and the Devil. They are opposite sides of the same coin, of my highly-strung, sex-imbued, love-exuding nature. *Coincidentia oppositorum*. Anyway, you're allowed to love as many ghosts as you wish, coming to terms with your libido – at last, at last. And my little charges are also coins, angels and demons. Two sides are better than one. To widen the scope of my yearnings! Two children are better than one. Two adults are better than one. The only snag is my employer is not as divine as might be assumed upon reading my description of his beauty and elegance. I don't believe he is vulgar, but he does use language hardly suited to a gentleman of his rank, status and dignity. There's something devilish in my employer and I was probably seduced by this dark side of his nature – but his badness, as Miles put it. Like uncle like nephew. Like uncle like niece. Can you be madly in love with a wholly virtuous man? With a holy man? Head over heels? I'm seduced, enthralled by the way he keeps his distance. As if he were a ghost himself.'

As I've already pointed out, there are comings and goings in the ghost story under scrutiny, and they do not refer exclusively to the ghosts who anyway cannot stay with us all the time: they are not allowed to, judging from what Prince Hamlet's late father disclosed to his son at the end of *their* meeting. But the ebb and flow of the governess's sinful desire – a sort of aphrodisiac – are tantamount to what we contemplate on a seashore or in the domain where muses and inspiration reign to the detriment of sheer business: 'counting out his money,' as the popular song has it. Usually, our governess's libido behaves in accordance with the highly (or basely) vicious back-and-forth custom. Here is an exception to the rule that we might call 'On the Brink' (not *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, God forbid):

He was gentleness itself, and while I wagged my head at him he stood there more than ever a little fairy prince. It was his brightness indeed that gave me a respite. Would it be so great if he were really going to tell me? 'Well,' he said at last, 'just exactly in order that you should do this.'

'Do what?'

'Think me – for a change – bad!' I shall never forget the sweetness and gaiety with which he brought out the word, nor how, on top of it, he bent forward and kissed me. It was practically the end of everything. I met his kiss and I had to make, while I folded him for a minute in my arms, the most stupendous effort not to cry.

Do this. Do what? On the brink of the orgasm (one should on no account confuse it with climax) you enjoy superfluous inquiries, the repetition of words, the sight of a little fairy prince; or just of a little fairy. In this case, brightness does not propel you into the kingdom of God, but it enables you to sustain the required tension – in compensation for your lack of spirituality. 'No orgasm, no orgasm,' she writes again and again in her diary and letters addressed to her immoral friends ('Those I liked,' as Miles put it.) 'Darkness is pernicious. Thanks to brightness and its rays I can hold out for another five minutes.' But the coins have two sides that do not always coincide, for all the opposites coming together somewhere, in the sixth dimension, beyond a shadow of a doubt. You may worship light and even kneel down before it, but the other side of the coin is dirty, as preachers usually say. And they speak at length of your guilty conscience. Let us not forget that the governess's father was a minister.

Not only did she withdraw from *jouissance* and the ensuing emptiness, but her father's ghost also paid her visits – in Miss Jessel's and Peter Quint's footsteps, one might say and even affirm. Often she was on the verge of collapse/tears/suicide/nervous breakdown. And she was not keen on those verges. 'I am not Peter Quint on those verges,' as she wrote in a letter to her employer. And she went on thus, 'Those in favour say aye. The ayes have it. What? On what side was public opinion before the vote? People are not likely to be on the side of death, at least as far as their own life is concerned. Murderers, on whatever scale they may be operating, are not believed to turn against themselves as long as they can turn against others. Nevertheless, if at the end of a film they find themselves cornered in a cul-de-sac littered with dead bodies and empty magazines, if, at the very end of the film, they really do not know which way to turn, if they see nothing but gun barrels backed up by an equal number of well-stocked magazines, they may turn their own gun barrel in the opposite direction, preferring self-slaughter against which the Everlasting fixed his canon (cannon!) to the slaughterhouse of Justice. But even on the very brink of death, on the threshold of the everlasting cul-de-sac, they continue to adore life which, for them, is nothing other than the death of others.'

I suppose her employer dismissed her letter from his mind rather quickly: one is not always inclined to face the whole rigmarole of guessing what is hidden behind a young woman's complaints

and declarations of love. It is clear, however, that her suicidal urge (or her father's ghost) had grown so obtrusive she attempted to flee to the mountains where, she thought rather illogically, this urge would no longer pester her; as if suicidal urges were unable to climb and even fly – at least on a plane, keeping you company, serving you drinks and poison. (The same goes for fathers. Not only for Mozart's father.) 'I might easily put an end to my predicament by getting away altogether. Here was my chance, there was no one to stop me; I could give the whole thing up – turn my back and retreat.' Alas, she could not live without her interior comings and goings. Here is an example of such occurrences, of such psychological jerks, of the ebbs and flows I enlarged upon some time ago, convinced that the mystery lay in them and in the domain where ghosts score points over the quick.

(At the bottom.) *At that moment, in the state of my nerves, I absolutely believed she lied. (Going up.) And if I once more closed my eyes it was before the dazzle of the three or four possible ways in which I might take this up. One of these, for a moment, tempted me with such singular intensity that (on the brink), to withstand it, I must have gripped my little girl with a spasm that, wonderfully, she submitted to without a cry or a sign of fright. Why not break out at her on the spot and have it all over? – give it to her straight in her lovely little lighted face? (Still on the brink.) 'You see, you see, you know that you do and that you already quite suspect I believe it; therefore why not frankly confess it to me, so that we may at least live with it together and learn perhaps, in the strangeness of our fate, where we are and what it means?'* (Would have been over the top.) *This solicitation dropped, alas, as it came (going down): if I could immediately have succumbed to it I might have spared myself – well, you'll see what. (Back, back, back.) Instead of succumbing I sprang again to my feet, looked at her bed and took a helpless middle way. (Down, down, down.)*

My comments, however derogatory, do not mean I delight in poking fun at the poor girl. On the contrary, I think her method deserves a lot of respect on the part of those who are sincerely, wholeheartedly interested in eroticism, in its zigzags, ups-and-down, and ups, ups, ups, and downs, downs, downs, and phews, and whews. Incidentally, whenever she found herself at the bottom of the mountain she was to climb every day, let alone every night – climbing, skiing down – she had nothing in common with Gorky's *Lower Depths*; nothing at all. Her downs (and bottoms) were as triumphant and exhilarating as her tops of the world. But what do I care about her tops, jobs, about the children she continually harassed without doing anything except this, this, that, that, what, not? In one of her letters she seemed to disclose her intentions and the turns assiduously taken by her libido and life. 'I have to get rid of Flora, for ghosts are much more exciting, libidinous. There is a distance between the Hereafter and the world where we are engaged and work and talk to housekeepers. And this distance is so spine-tingling I forget whatever lies or stands beside it. Flora and Miles, their real, physical bodies, pale into insignificance beside the cosmos and God. It is not my father I'm facing day and night. It is

Him, it is Him, it is Him. I should get rid of Flora. I should kill Miles. They will come again, always, disembodied, disembowelled. Ghosts are God, ghosts, God, God, God.'

What do *I* care? About *her*?

How, through all hesitations and conflicts and worries, the thing, the desire to get back only to the big (scenic, constructive 'architectural' effects) seizes me and carries me off my feet: making me feel that it's a far deeper economy of time to sink, at any moment, into the evocation and ciphering out of that, than into any other small beguilement at all. Ah, once more, to let myself go! The very thought of it soothes and sustains, lays a divine hand on my nerves, and lights, so beneficently, my uncertainties and obscurities.

From *The Notebooks of Henry James*

Bostonians, Parisians, Muscovites. What do I care?

PARIS (2)

The function of a true living organism is to establish a logical hierarchy among its parts which, left to themselves, enter into the spirit of psychological warfare, whereupon the body goes into tremendous contortions in an effort to reconcile the conflicting tendencies, to put together what has been separated, torn apart, torn to pieces. Panting loudly I rush out into the street, halt, retrace my steps and rush back into the entrance hall as if I had forgotten something in my room – a pipe, say, or a lighter; then rush out again – I do not smoke – and in a few strides catch up with some pedestrian but, on second thoughts, decide to return to my room. Presently I notice, however, that my left leg drags me towards a taxi crawling alongside the pavement, whereas my right hand waves desperately trying to attract the attention of a young traveller who is mingling with the anonymous, alien crowd. 'Wait for me, wait for me!' To all *inward* appearances the order has been transmitted to the tongue but the letters linger around, and the inarticulate sounds attract the attention of a policeman or a psychiatrist who is about to cross the street. Meanwhile the head has been set in lateral, pendulum-like motion precluding any collaboration on the part of bewildered pedlars. And to crown it all, a taxi door flings open and, in spite of the reiterated 'no' of the head, I scramble inside. For a while the taxi remains motionless, blocking the traffic completely; then it shoots forward, slows down at the intersection, makes a U-turn, drives to the nearest intersection, makes a U-turn.

Yo el Rey

If, however, the parts of my many-sided personality happen to drag me in one direction only – in point of fact, a straight line is not of frequent occurrence here – the crowd draws aside and lets me through because I put all my speed into the attempt to reach the destination conceived

through a particularly fine balance of the criss-cross movement of my body. But in my eagerness to bring the undertaking off I unintentionally infringe the fundamental principles of displacement. Besides, the precarious harmony of my movements has been out of tune with the harmony of the Milky Way. Had I taken the trouble to open the window and tune my itinerary in accordance with the 'A' of the heavenly tuning fork, I would have directed my steps towards the nearest racecourse and bet three hundred pounds on the horse 'Indomitable'. But I only listened to my own tuning fork which exceptionally offered one note instead of the customary chromatic scale. As soon as I realised the oneness of my inner strings I clasped my hands – instead of washing them with the soap I must have bought in the perfume shop located in the main street, not far from the main square – and went out with the rapidity that was not warranted by the length and strength of my legs. As I was passing through the front door an inconspicuous, run-of-the-mill lorry dropped a stone that started rolling in the direction of the pavement. Without pausing at the second traffic light – which might have mitigated the barbarism of the dissonance – I crossed a square and cast a glance at the rainbow nailed on the sky. I kept losing control of my breath and consequently altered the right rhythm which could have relieved the suffering.

Yo el Rey

A thing must be bounded, and the boundary constitutes its form. And man's boundary is death, and it is open to man to increase the element of death in his nature. One may, for example, go to the opera and act without singing – the lure of the footlights! One may also stay at home and listen to the outspoken doctor's last judgement; and, in this case, all one has to do is follow the doctor's advice. 'I do in friendship counsel you to leave this place, to leave this place.' Or any other advice. That doctor will get you off the hook. Thus you will gain mastery over Time and Space: 'I'll kick the bucket at 3...Bury me at...Here's my epitaph...' Have no fear; they will bury you with full military honours.

Yo el Rey

What was the general charm? He couldn't, for that matter, easily have phrased it; it was such an abyss of negatives, such an absence of everything. The oddity was that, after a minute, he was struck as by the reflection of his own very image in this first interlocutor seated with him, on the easy bench, under the high, clear portico and above the wide, far-reaching garden, where the things that most showed in the greenness were the surface of still water and the white note of old statues.

Henry James, *The Great Good Place*

How it was all managed he couldn't have told – he had been content moreover till now with his ignorance of cause and pretext; but whenever he chose to listen with a certain intentness he made out, as from a distance, the sound of slow, sweet bells. How could they be so far and yet so audible? How could they be so near and yet so faint? How, above all, could they, in such an arrest of life, be, to time things so frequent? The very essence of the bliss of Dane's whole change had been precisely that there was nothing now to time. It was the same with the slow footsteps that always, within earshot, to the vague attention, marked the space and the leisure, seemed, in long, cool arcades, lightly to fall and perpetually to recede. This was the second impression, and it melted into the third, as, for that matter, every form of softness, in the great good place, was but a further turn, without jerk or gap, of the endless roll of serenity. The quiet footsteps were quiet figures; the quiet figures that, to the eye, kept the picture human and brought its perfection within reach.

Henry James, *The Great Good Place*

If nothing is done and a lake comes
 From everywhere. Then everywhere comes
 And I'm just here as if, as if,
 Nothing were a melody, a noise of no
 Difference any. Not even
 In the innermost

STILLNESS

Literature is not a key component in our lives because we can do without it, even if the stories we tell our neighbours enable us to tide over hectic periods and lick our wounds. We are fond of gossip and this gift bestowed upon us by God or destiny propels our bodies and souls into the future despite the problems that everybody comes across now and then—all the time, to speak the truth. Why shouldn't one speak the truth, given that only the truth counts in this world? And the truth can be expressed by gestures, by mimicry: we need not *speak* when on the verge of a revelation, however unimportant. Actually words often betray us, as everybody knows.

In my childhood I attended a performance of Marcel Marceau's, who was far more *eloquent* than Lloyd George or Mussolini: a mime artist always prophesies, even if he intends to do nothing of the sort. A gesture is mysterious enough to entice one into the domain where eternity makes its appearance, if only modestly; a word is linked to the present, to the judgement one can pass on memories or projects, on current affairs or chimeras. Gestures go beyond all that as they hint at what lies beyond thoughts, dreams and revelations: even revelations lie within the bounds of human logic—

within our *representation* of God. Gestures reconstruct the logic of God Himself, which cannot be communicated through words.

But I am getting too far from the subject matter of my work. What is this work about? Words? Certainly not: I am *against* literature. So I get up from my armchair and make a few gestures that do not mean anything. I do my best to deprive my gestures of any *literal* meaning; I just execute a few gestures that might mean *something* in another world, in a parallel world.

I wish I could end this opus right here; but I am sitting in front of my computer and my fingers continue to type as if unmindful of my intentions.

Alas, literature will always get the upper hand in the struggle with stillness.

THE DECLINE OF THE ROMAN EMPIRE

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

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

The ascent to greatness, however steep and dangerous, may entertain an active spirit with the consciousness and exercise of its own powers; but the possession of a throne could never yet afford a lasting satisfaction to an ambitious mind. This melancholy truth was felt and acknowledged by Severus. Fortune and merit had, from an humble station, elevated him to the first place among mankind. 'He had been all things,' as he said himself, 'and all was of little value.' Distracted with the care, not of acquiring, but of preserving an empire, oppressed with

age and infirmities, careless of fame, and satiated with power, all his prospects of life were closed.

Two (or three) lovers meet at a secret rendezvous in the park. Perhaps it is a thing of the past, given the number of computers they might use for their secret and ostentatious meetings which need neither benches nor trees to satisfy any desire, however daring. In the quote above death and life meet openly and not only on my computer screen or in Gibbon's book: Severus did live and suffer, according to historians, and his death was mingled with life, making him disillusioned with power and all the things he had acquired in the course of his reign. He went so far as to say that nothing really had any value in his eyes; and yet he had to thank his fortune for his elevation, for his journey from the bottom rung of the ladder to the highest. Of course he was not blessed with the vision for which Jacob is justly renowned and therefore *his* ladder did not allow him to meet our Father, Who art in heaven, as they say so eloquently. Nevertheless, this ladder brought him to the throne and it was not the ladder's fault he derived no satisfaction from this imperial seat, from his stature and the statues they had erected to him in Rome and elsewhere.

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

It is pointless to speak about my ascent to greatness because I am still on the lowest rung of the ladder and I do not see how I could go any further, given the decline and inevitable fall of our civilisation or what passes for our civilisation. I do not think it deserves any name except what they call 'four-letter words' that you can utter 24 hours a day if you feel like talking about this day and age for such a long time without taking a break. If you do take a break, however, you think of the past, of what is now a thing of the past, and since we have no time this past will never come back, even if we fall down on our knees and implore it to join us on our road to death. The past is dead and we cannot take the road that leads to it or at least to some parts of it – the eighteenth century, for instance –

because our common road forked half a century ago and now we squelch through the mud and this mud has nothing to do with *La Bohème* and romanticism.

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

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

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

'As long as the cruelty of Maximin was confined to the illustrious senators, or even to the bold adventurers, who in the court or army expose themselves to the caprice of fortune, the body of the people viewed their sufferings with indifference, or perhaps with pleasure. But the tyrant's avarice, stimulated by the insatiate desires of the soldiers, at length attacked the public property.' At last I know the name of the tyrant, but it is a useless piece of knowledge, for any other name would fit the bill rather nicely except that Stalin attacked both the illustrious senators and the public property – at the same time and with the same unrelenting vigour. He might have begun with a few senators, but

then he exterminated a million poor citizens who had never read Gibbon's masterpiece and thought only in terms of the tsarist regime and its supposed (or real) cruelty.

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

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

'At a country hotel?'

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

'Yes.'

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

'Perhaps.'

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

'Perhaps.'

'How are the nurses? Are they plain or beautiful?'

'I don't look at them.'

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

'I'm always praying.'

'Does this really prevent you from looking at the nurses?'

'I don't know. Perhaps it does.'

'I've got some really juicy gossip for you.'

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

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

But the Gordians were no tyrants and I realise that history can be merciful now and then – for a short period of time at the end of which it resumes its bloody course, saying to its critics, ‘Changing the course of history would cause serious environmental damage to the whole world.’ So it hastens to reassure the critics by getting rid of ‘good emperors’ and other ‘benefactors of humankind’ to pave the way for decline, destruction, fall, ruin, death and other nightmares about which James Joyce spoke in *Ulysses*.

The younger Gordian sallied out to meet the enemy at the head of a few guards, and a numerous undisciplined multitude, educated in the peaceful luxury of Carthage. His useless valour served only to procure him an honourable death, in the field of battle. His aged father, whose reign had not exceeded thirty-six days, put an end to his life on the first news of the defeat. Carthage, destitute of defence, opened her gates to the conqueror, and Africa was exposed to the rapacious cruelty of a slave, obliged to satisfy his unrelenting master with a large account of blood and treasure.

You are victorious and no one calls you tyrant because you are a benefactor of humankind and of all other kinds that can be encountered on Earth and in the universe – not only in *our* universe, mind you. You say to yourself, ‘It’s been a tough six years and I feel I’ve earned a few weeks off,’ but an army goes here and there and you hear a few shouts that remind you of your status: after all, you are at the head of a gigantic army. Being killed on a battlefield is in the line of duty and you know that you are even better than any other soldier because you are a general. You have seen many deaths in the course of your life: either on battlefields or in courtyards where soldiers are court-martialled for disobeying

their commanding officers. Be that as it may, you make a speech and your army marches through marshes and woods, hoping to see the enemy in the near future – before starving to death in one of the deserts that are strewn all over the world, especially if you are at war. You are being acclaimed as the greatest strategist of your generation and once again you live up to all our expectations except that you lose the battle because you cannot win it: no reinforcements, no food, no horses, no bullets, no cannonballs, no cannons, no luck. A bullet finds you, although it cannot really bear a grudge against you: Why should a bullet avenge itself on a general? He killed neither its brother nor its father; what is more, he has never met this bullet before, in spite of his venerable experience and his acquaintance with death as such. Why should the bullet bear him a grudge?

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

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

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

According to Gibbon, Marcus Aurelius ‘lived long enough to repent a rash measure, which raised the impetuous youth above the restraint of reason and authority,’ meaning that the successor he named – his own son, Commodus – was unworthy of his trust. He *could* have cursed his son on his own deathbed, realising he was leaving behind not an emperor, but a slave in whose mind ‘every sentiment of virtue and humanity was extinct’. But this slave was his son and he probably reined in his anger which might have led him to the act for which two Russian tsars – Peter the Great and Ivan the Terrible – are blamed by oversensitive mothers: they think their children are *always* right. Marcus Aurelius did not kill his son; perhaps he knew he would be killed anyway, for such was the destiny of most Roman emperors and even an emperor whose conduct was beyond reproach often fell victim to assassins, contract killers and angry crowds. Anyway he did not wish to dirty his hands by piercing his son’s nauseating body with his immaculate sword, letting out a lot of blood, a lot of mud.

Old people, who are not yet on their deathbeds, however, note with growing alarm the tendency chiefly displayed by youngsters to bury themselves in their cellphones and to retreat from human contact – not because they are to be buried in the near future and so have to prepare for their future homes, but because they wish to keep up with the times. They do not look at the world or indeed at their fathers and mothers who may talk to them about their future and even about their past and ancestors to remind them who they are, helping them ascertain their whereabouts in history and on their genealogical trees. Instead, their look at their screens where they see no trees, no past, for these rectangles are usurped by pieces of information and silly remarks that have nothing to do either with Marcus Aurelius or other heroes of Gibbon’s and their battlefields. A screen is not an honourable history-haunted battlefield; nor is it the room where Julius the Apostate used to study Greek philosophers and think about how they reflected the life he was going through like a pagan god, wise and harmonious.

HUMANS AND ROBOTS

Well, whatever they can say and do – those who take care of their bodies to the extent of forgetting their immortal souls and *their* needs – I am prepared to discard my mortal body for the sake of eternity and its advantages which no one takes notice of because these advantages are in no way related to swimming pools and other status symbols. Even my voice and its intonations count more than my body that might be replaced by a homemade robot, provided this robot can speak and voice its grievances on my behalf – in the presence of those scientists who are capable of recording and deciphering its enigmas recorded by a trustworthy machine. In Dino Buzzati's novel I read in Italian, there is a lady whose spirit goes beyond death thanks to her lovers' efforts: the project is a joint effort between the two lovers, to put it bluntly, and there is no other way of putting it because none of these lovers can disappear forever, saying to his rival, 'Feel free to manipulate the robot to your heart's content.'

I feel like quoting a few sentences from this novel – in the original; anyway, nobody can prevent me from doing whatever I wish, for the lovers described in the novel are present only in its pages, leaving *my* pages alone. (My pages are *always* alone.) Their relationship could not be marred by my careless errors and light-hearted treatment of human sentiments, even if I set about rewriting the whole story for the sake of my own immortality which, in Buzzati's opinion, may be linked to the sentiment of freedom and love. '*Ora, Elisa, si è mai domandata il nostro senso di libertà dove nasce?*' Where does our sentiment of freedom come from? (This Elisa has nothing in common with Beethoven's *Für Elise*.) *La condizione prima e indispensabile che ci fa sentire, perfino in prigione, perfino nelle malattie mortali, padroni di noi stessi.* You should be a master of yourself – not just your master's voice. Like Stoics, you should enjoy your freedom in prison, on your deathbed – wherever you happen to find yourself during your trials and tribulations (or trials and errors). Even in Paradise you should be able to change your mind, leaving the Garden of Eden for the sake of Hell – as Bernard Shaw's commander did in a play dedicated to Don Juan.

Elise was brought back to life by two men who are still in love with her in spite of the barrier erected by death and human memory which has a knack of blurring infatuations, loves and the past in general so that we just go to the nearest pastry shop, buy a lot of *madeleines* and reread Proust's account of his search. To tell the truth, I am weary of both Proust and his search because at the end of the road he took there was only an *ersatz* version of the past, not the past itself, its palpitating body – the body you can touch and talk to, listening to the words you have never heard before. And Proust's characters repeat what they said a long time ago; we realise that the past remains in its tomb to which neither the present nor the future have any access, being banished from other times by time and its inexorable movement, by its straight line going from point A to point Z or Zero.

Buzzati's heroes, on the other hand, are not satisfied with *madeleines* and stones, however eloquent and past-oriented; they bring Elise back to life in the shape of a machine which talks to them,

saying something new and even unexpected, unpredictable. They recognise Elise's voice but not her thoughts which they try to understand as they decipher the words uttered by her inimitable voice. They listen to it as often as they can – when their wives are too far to spy on their betrayals. In the course of their labours, they endeavour to reconstruct the *authenticity* of their beloved, diligently eschewing the ideals and models one may be tempted to project onto a woman one falls in love with: ideal husbands and women exist only in the domains of literature and hopes. '*Perché fosse veramente Laura, occorreva metterci dentro il veleno, le menzogne, la scaltrezza, la vanità, l'orgoglio, i pazzi desideri.*' Loathing and bile, a cunning woman, vanity, arrogance – Elisa in the flesh, in other words. And yet the protagonists say about the machine they constructed on a whim, out of love, 'She's very unpredictable so there's no knowing how she'll react to her resurrection and our handling of her body.'

Of course they suffer as a result of their loyalty to the original, of their faithfulness to the text of life – to the Book of Life that contains only originals.

SAMUEL JOHNSON

I would not like to be myself in my next incarnation, upon my return to the circumference of time, for I am not fond of my defects or what I regard as such, being an exigent manager of my own life and mind. Why not stand in for Samuel Johnson inside the house allotted to him on the same space-time circumference?

I fell in love with Samuel Johnson upon reading the epigraph to Nabokov's *Pale Fire*:

This reminds me of the ludicrous account he gave Mr Langston, of the despicable state of a young gentleman of good family. 'Sir, when I heard of him last, he was running about town shooting cats.' And then in a sort of kindly reverie, he bethought himself of his own favourite cat, and said, 'But Hodge shan't be shot: no, no, Hodge shall not be shot.'

At the time I already had a cat – *another* cat who died in 1978; I was still in Belgium and continued to broaden my horizons by travelling and reading the authors who were not published in the Soviet Union for political and ideological reasons. Nabokov was of their number and I remember a small room in the Lenin Library where a few intellectuals read forbidden books on theology, philosophy and other subjects the use of which was restricted or prohibited in the country where Marx was regarded as a king of philosophers and all others either guided us to his pedestal or hopelessly dragged behind, swimming in some alligator-infested swamp. I remember one woman who came to the library every day; she read only Nabokov's books, whereas I was ploughing through philosophical treatises and numerous commentaries on The Bible.

Then I fell in love with Nabokov and little by little God receded into the distance until finally He became invisible to such an extent that I no longer needed to look at Him in churches and pictures gallery. The same goes for theological treatises: I stopped reading them, although I might occasionally look at their dusty covers as I walked about my big terrace in search of secular entertainments.

Pale Fire was a labyrinth I used to visit quite often – for the simple reason that I liked labyrinths and thought they were signs by which a good novel differed from the trash exposed on those shelves where bestsellers usually rub shoulders in a business-oriented bookshop. Today I no longer equate labyrinths with high literature, and other signs or symbols associated with Borges; and his views also seem to have been forced into exile except tigers who continue to remind me of my cats – especially of the last one. So, from time to time, I say to myself and others, 'But Musil shan't be shot: no, no, Musil shall not be shot.'

'I am not as fond of mirrors as I used to be; the same goes for labyrinths which every artist has to explore without talking too much about them' – a quote from one of my essays. Of course every book I have written so far endeavours to build a labyrinth or at least *The Palace of Arabian Nights* – a picture I hung in my living room – and all my books are mirrors that bespeak my willingness to help

enigmatic authors; my books accomplish this honourable task much more efficiently than my eyes where only indifference is reflected day in day out.

In 1979 I finally bought Boswell's *Life of Johnson*, and I find many notes in its margins as I leaf through it today, for I cannot read the whole book at this stage of my life which continues to shorten my attention span – and also my spine, according to a friend of mine. 'As you grow older, your spine shortens by about an inch,' he says whenever I talk to him on the phone. I do not mind: my spine can do whatever comes into its head as long as it does not affect the rest of my body and – God forbid – my soul that is fragile in spite of its foretold immortality.

I reread the passages I singled out many years ago as I was sitting in the woods near Versailles – not in the legendary park, I am sorry to say – and inevitably I come across Samuel Johnson's encounter with the King, which may be instrumental in bringing about my identification with Johnson's life: I am not presumptuous enough to usurp the King's prerogatives.

His Majesty enquired if he was the writing any thing. He answered, he was not, for he had pretty well told the world what he knew, and must now read to acquire more knowledge. The King, as it should seem with a view to urge him to rely on his own stores as an original writer, and to continue his labours, then said, 'I do not think you borrow much from any body.' Johnson said, he thought he had already done his part as a writer.

The problem of identity is fragile because it cannot be solved; and identity itself is fragile and often depends on a feeling one should not trust, and more often than not one does not, especially if one knows that all feelings are fallacious and may let you down at any moment. I wished to shelve my plans to write my last novel to the 'victorious end', as the Russians put it, and through my identification with Samuel Johnson I might have done so successfully, given that Johnson thought he should read, acquiring more knowledge in the process – before proceeding with his own writings which, as we all know, were mostly inspired by Shakespeare and other poets and writers. But my destiny decided otherwise and a bout of melancholy – let us call it a drinking bout – finally came to an end two days ago as if determined to let me embark upon my work once again, even if no victorious end could be envisaged and hoped for in this case – and all other cases, for that matter.

Of course Samuel Johnson often sounds like a melancholy piece of music and, from the perspective of this music, I could spend some time in his company – if not in his shoes – adopting Boswell's thoughts and tone of voice which, incidentally, suits me perfectly, for I am enamoured of eighteenth-century England. Johnson is not likely to mind my invisible presence – from *his* and time's point of view – and, though my literary talent is in no way comparable to that of Boswell, our friendship might make our lives more tolerable. Yet time is bound to prevent us from walking about London and dining in one of those taverns I find in the book that I partly read many years ago and

shall continue to read instead of writing my own book, disregarding my busy schedule encumbered with many pieces of furniture and countless books: I have to leave this country next month.

Voltaire says that writing is an occupation or action that helps him to survive in the world where our – and Werther's – sorrows far outweigh our common petty joys and any happiness, however great and magnificent. In other words, you should busy yourself with tidying up your desk or using it as a support for your computer on the screen of which the vestiges of your inspiration will remain for years and years, if not for all eternity; and if all these toys do not keep you occupied for hours and hours, you risk having another bout of melancholy linked in your mind to many a bottle of wine and whisky.

Besides, writing is a sort of therapy to which you can resort to get rid of your drinking bouts or your bouts of insanity; and even if you happen to become *permanently* crazy in this life of ours, you can write poems like Hölderlin, and do not forget that Beckett preferred Hölderlin's mad poems to his songs of sanity and innocence. During the days I devoted to my bout – call it what you wish – I realised I could not become normal by neglecting the books in which I describe my death to come and also the life I am living now in spite of everything, in spite of insults and humiliations, of all the sorrows described by Goethe and Voltaire. And no one will ever prevent me from quoting *The Life of Samuel Johnson* – if I do not have enough ethical food to meet my needs and mirror my imaginary deeds, my wit and wits, my witty repartees.

Of course I can lie wailing on the ground, prostrate with grief and many other things of which I often do not know much because we often feel unhappy without knowing the cause of our unhappiness and melancholia. Beckett, for one, could sit quietly for hours staring into the distance, thinking of what might have been or what had happened before his birth; and yet he thought that he had never been born, that he had been assassinated before his birth, which amounts to the same thing, it seems to me (and to Beckett). Was I ever assassinated? I might have been molested before my birth and also after it because one's birth does not deprive one of the pleasures of being ill-treated, despised, laughed at, ridiculed; unfortunately, I am not a member of the Stockport County Masochist Club.

A friend of mine says he cannot read my books because I name too many names and quote authors he has never heard of: this makes him feel stupid and he does not like the feeling I know rather well because I have been a Montaigne worshipper for many years. I asked him, 'What about Montaigne? Doesn't *he* quote a lot of authors?'

'He does it on purpose,' he said.

'Do you think his only purpose in life was to quote his predecessors?'

'I like his writings,' he said.

'Why does Montaigne refer to other authors, in your opinion?' I asked.

'He's wonderful,' he said.

'Didn't he think in terms of space?' I asked.

My friend did not think in terms of space. Wholly preoccupied with time, he had no wish to devote himself to my writings where you may find Samuel Johnson and as many Johnsons as I need to

enrich my vision with the nuances essential for my tapestries and constellations. And no friend of mine, however sagacious and well-read, will ever alter this pattern of my life because, deprived of space, I would suffocate as if someone were holding a pillow over my head – not Sei Shenagon's *The Pillow Book*.

I continue to write without interruption, without turning over a new leaf, a new life; I do not wish to turn anything and no space will ever separate myself from myself; and writing for several months at a stretch may prove helpful for my eternity. If you have an afternoon break, you do not live your life fully, in accordance with the principles put forward by sages: you cannot interrupt anything and eternity might eject you if you keep breaking something, be it rules or the straight line devoted to your time in the domain of eternity. Of course you cannot have time and eternity side by side and eternity must be represented by a point, rather than a straight line. But whenever you think and dream about eternity, you may use either a point or a straight line; both have to be soft and hospitable, and the straight line should not be discarded on the grounds that it goes somewhere. You will think and dream in the domain of eternity, even if your dreams and thoughts happen to be chained to immobility instead of going on a spree within the time of which you no longer have any notion, once you are chained to the pillar of eternity.

And I cannot say I do not know the author of this essay because it is not Samuel Johnson who does the job – he is too far away in space and time and I am on the point of leaving for Belgium where Johnson never lived; at least he did not have the same cottage situated in the rue d'Angoussart. And I am fed up with identifying with the people I have nothing in common with in spite of the affinities I might have with them because of my likes and dislikes, of my love for literature and the past of which I know next to nothing, considering that I lived neither in the eighteenth nor in the seventeenth centuries. In which century *did* I live, I wonder? I am living in the twenty-first century and I have to come to terms with it; yet I do not understand its trends and motives which can be defined by the term I use more and more often: 'go-getters'. I do not go anywhere and I do not get anything. Why should I bother about anything, anywhere, anyhow, any know-how? I know no know, no how, no go-getters, and I can go on living without them, for all their allurements and know-how, how-know, whereany, howany.

Bergson says that French philosophers do not use neologisms; nor do I, to tell the truth, and I do not know if I always tell the truth or lies or anything. Actually I do not always say the same things, whether they be lies or truths, and I may occasionally say whereany instead of anywhere, which enables me to reach another dimension or dementia; and I know that the most common form of dementia is Alzheimer's disease. But there are other forms of dementia and they are called 'uncommon', if I am not mistaken; and I am often mistaken in this field and other domains as if I could not be right once in a while. I do not expect to be *always* right, but being right once in a while instead of being always *wrong* would be a change in lifestyle, as they say. And they are always right, as they say.

I have no idea what I really use because I change my identities without changing them, and I do not need to explain why I do not know anything about these matters, relying on old philosophers who tackle the problem rather brilliantly, judging from their writings and opinions. They speak about a sort of permanence – or a permanence of sorts – that we are bound to encounter whenever we think about ourselves or others, whenever we endeavour to undertake remedial work on dilapidated lives, destinies and countries. Some countries are poor and they will always remain poor, in our opinion: it is their destiny, karma and the gene of poverty, and we cannot do anything about it. The same goes for dilapidated lives and destinies: they will always be dilapidated, whatever we do to improve their ways of life and their strained smiles, obliterating at the same time these unbearable dark circles beneath their eyes.

Of course Samuel Johnson can help under the circumstances: I can count neither on Bergson nor on Heidegger whose lives do not always inspire concordance between my dance forms – or thoughts, in other words. But philosophers never help you, resolved as they are to teach you whether your identity relies on a few colours and on the world you have to face every morn that is born in your own consciousness or in that of God. He probably has no consciousness, being an omnipotent being. And omnipotent beings do not need consciousness or any other psychological things for which we are listed in encyclopaedias that might have focused on animals only, but for our minds and awareness of death.

I feel like testing Samuel Johnson's capacities to help me under the circumstances and elsewhere because, as everybody knows, there are other circumstances and presents (and futures), and those presents, wherever one may encounter them, offer one as a birthday present other obstacles, problems, disasters and deaths. I am not sure my friend I spoke about two hours ago read Boswell's account of the life I am interested in, but nothing will deter me from quoting some excerpts from this book, even if no one says to themselves, 'This is a procedure I like. I wish all other authors could quote as many old books as compatible with my likes and dislikes and also with my attitude towards life.'

I shall never read Boswell's book in its entirety because I am weary of reading books. Beckett says he mostly read books in his youth when he relied on knowledge and not on experience, on humdrum lives and what not. (*What Not* might be chosen as a title for one of his unwritten books.) But I may leaf through it and God does not seem to mind this experience of mine; and yet He seems to object to many of my tests, odds and ends. God tries to conquer human nature instead of working with it, as they say.

While leafing through the book, I may light upon a paragraph where Boswell tells his reader a love story which did not really concern his hero because he was not in love with the woman who followed him everywhere to such an extent that she used to buy houses situated opposite his flats. She looked at him all day long after having asked him not to fiddle with his curtains; he ended up removing them from his windows to allow her to follow his life day in day out except when he

ventured into the streets to drink a few pints of beer in the company of his friends. At some point he resigned himself to marrying her, for he worried she might die, if deprived of his company, but it was too late and she died like Juliet or Werther, suffering from a surplus of love which should be regulated by a set of guidelines, otherwise you may find yourself in a coffin, a tomb, a family vault. I do not know if Johnson bought a wreath to commemorate her unusual love, but he certainly went along to the funeral in order to offer his sympathies to her relatives who must have disapproved of the deceased's way of life.

My heavy curtains block out the sunlight and whatever goes with it: indiscreet eyes, inquisitive binoculars and cameras, paparazzi and stones thrown by a vindictive hand. But I have nothing against spies and if a woman decided to spy on all my movements and longings, I would remove the curtains from my windows and offer my naked body to this woman's curiosity, to her love and care, to her way of blowing kisses. I should not talk too much about women because my stories may 'push the situation away', as a friend of mine used to say when trying to impart his views on magnetism, mystical energy and the influence of waves that dominate our lives and alter them in accordance with their laws and whims. Besides, by talking about my failures I get away from Samuel Johnson in whose company I would like to spend some time, if only to prove to myself that I shall never find a substitute for my own ego, my personality, however far I may go in search of *another* personality, an alter ego.

When he was a child in petticoats, and had learnt to read, Mrs. Johnson one morning put the common prayer-book into his hands, pointed to the collect for the day, and said, 'Sam, you must get this by heart.' She went up stairs, leaving him to study it. But by the time she had reached the second floor, she heard him following her. 'What's the matter?' said she. 'I can say it,' he replied; and repeated it distinctly, though he could not have read it over more than twice.

I wonder why I tend to speak about Transcendence, *Existenz*, Unity and other ingredients of metaphysical dishes that would not appeal to my taste buds if I found them in a restaurant and not in a book where they all meet and unite – like proletarians, beggars and European leaders. It is much easier to follow in Johnson's footsteps, making derogatory remarks about someone's appearance. Making unkind remarks was one of his specialities and Boswell noted them down because he was reluctant to make metaphysical statements and fly over the Earth in search of God, Unity or Transcendence where we are bound to merge into the sky.

Let us compare two excerpts I found in my books a few hours ago while watching a Russian documentary dedicated to a singer who moved into our skyscraper in the late Sixties, if my memory serves me right. At least I do remember that she lived on the 14th floor, whereas I had to content myself with a lower rung of the same ladder: I lived on the 12th floor. It is true that, during that period, I was not on the lowest rung of the ladder, but this does not matter: I no longer live in the skyscraper where I spent a part of my childhood and the whole of my youth.

Now, Sir, in civilized society, external advantages make us more respected. A man with a good coat upon his back meets with a better reception than he who has a bad one. Sir, you may analyse this, and say what is there in it? But that will avail you nothing, for it is a part of a general system. Pound St. Paul's Church into atoms, and consider any single atom; it is, to be sure, good for nothing: but, put all these atoms together, and you have St. Paul's Church. So it is with human felicity, which is made up of many ingredients, each of which may be shewn to be very insignificant. In civilized society, personal merit will not serve you so much as money will.

The second remark I am eager to enlarge upon can be found in a book devoted to recent philosophers, judging from its title, *A Hundred Years of Philosophy*; and yet the name of the author, John Passmore, does not ring any bells with me. Actually I might have said last night, 'The name rang a bell but I couldn't remember where I had heard it before,' because I could *not* remember it and would have been at sea with it, had someone uttered it in my presence. I knew I had a book on twentieth-century philosophers; I even knew where to look for it, although it took me around three minutes to find it on one of the shelves near a huge window beyond which cars and people move away from Transcendence round the clock.

Of course such a title can refer to another century, but I was looking for Heidegger and he was *not* Kant's contemporary: even my memory is unlikely to place them side by side in the kingdom of time, in the dukedom of minutes. You do not have to remember where such and such a philosopher is situated within the principality of a book, especially if there is an index in the book you are holding in front of one of your windows which reflects the life of the world and its death rather objectively, without any glossing over. So I found Heidegger in the twinkling of an eye.

'In England Heidegger is most often referred to as a horrible example of just how meaningless metaphysics can be. Certainly such sentences as "Nihilation is neither an annihilation of what-is, nor does it spring from negation. ... Nothing annihilates itself" leave one with the impression that something has gone very wrong indeed.' I do not get this impression, even if I read the whole of *Sein und Zeit*; but the English have their views and their transcendent values which are far closer to the Earth than the flying saucers where I spend a lot of time as I put together my odds and ends, the bits of my forthcoming end. A friend of mine hates travelling by plane because he is reluctant to lose contact with the Earth where I shall be buried in the near or distant future, for I would not like being buried on another planet or on a flying saucer. So Samuel Johnson's outlook appeals to my senses – to my common sense, in particular; and I would not mind talking about coats and felicity, if given an opportunity to talk about them. But why should I talk about my old coat and the sentiment I know nothing about?

Why should we transcend any barrier or fly away from our Mother Earth, from her numerous children? Why visit her relatives: Mars, Venus? It is better to stay with Samuel Johnson, with coats

and coats of arms, with St. Paul's Church which, for all its majesty and height, does not look like the Tower of Babel and so cannot be used by any astronaut dreaming about Mars, about the so-called Red Planet.

TWO POEMS

I used to think that a good businessman was far superior to a bad poet. But poetry does not depend on those who write or read it. Besides, it is omnipresent and we often read (or write) a poem without taking notice of our efforts that are not required in the domain of poetry, as a matter of fact. Like the air we breathe or a landscape, the seashore, poetry is the texture of life and whatever we do it keeps us company as if aware of our incapacity to live on our own. I realise how omniscient a poem can be when I happen to come across a bad poem.

A month ago I was given a book where only bad poems saluted my curiosity. Nevertheless, I pursued my hunt for a treasure which, in my opinion, is hidden in every poem, however worthless it may appear at first glance. At some point the poetess chose to speak about her child who was boarding a train in a provincial town that was conspicuously absent from the list of venues for my concert tours. This child—a beautiful young lady—plays the violin and is obliged therefore to carry her instrument even on holiday. The poetess says that, for some reason, all female violinists remind her of this damsel, of her daughter. A philosophical question. The poetess is a Platonist, no doubt; her daughter is an idea encompassing all young ladies who play the violin. (Some of them are bound to be ugly, I'm afraid.) I think this beauty is unique; and yet I *am* a Platonist. No violinist reminds me of her voice, her repartee, her eyes. Am I right or wrong? In the domain of poetry no one is ever wrong.

The poetess meets her daughter almost everywhere; I miss her. I recognise her nowhere, yet I often play with Moscow orchestras. And I am certain I shall not recognise her in the future. But I do recognise her in this poem because at the end of it she carries her violin. Poetry is omnipresent.

Another bad poem, a love poem. A love letter that might have been written by a Japanese lady thirteen centuries ago—elegantly, exquisitely. The reader is kept in the dark as to the identity of the addressee, of the one-time lover. Suddenly the poetess comes into the open: 'Perhaps this black ink will remind you of our last rendezvous.' The rest is silence or nonsense; the reader investigates many clues, but they are all red herrings. Why should the reader investigate any clue? There are no clues to investigate; there is the black ink—the texture of life.

PALINODIA

If I say, 'My mother wanted me to marry you', I'll just be repeating what I heard in the film I continue to watch every night as if I could find any roots in the midst of the characters who must have died already: they were old in the Sixties. Besides, my mother was not acquainted with this young woman: she could not have said anything to the effect of our union being advantageous to our respectful lives. I cannot even say, 'I love you', as Lacan rightfully points out; and even if I write a poem on the subject of my love, I shall use the words I saw and memorised elsewhere: in English and German poems, in Leopardi's *Palinodia*:

*Or torno addietro, ed al passato un corso
Contrario imprendo, per non dubbi esempi
Chiaro oggimai ch'al secol proprio vuolsi,
Non contraddir, non repugnar, se lode
Cerchi e fama appo lui, ma fedelmente
Adulando ubbidir: così per breve
Ed agiato cammin vassi alle stele.
Ond'io, degli astri desioso, al canto
Del secolo i bisogni omai non penso
Materia far*

I have only a smattering of Italian and I read this poem with the help of a French translation. I can't say I understand every word I read out loud, but the meaning of the poem doesn't elude me – partly because I wholeheartedly agree with Leopardi who speaks with respect about the 19th century only to emphasise how different his own standpoint is from that of his contemporaries. He reaches for the stars, whereas his contemporaries view the world in terms of economy and revolutions to come as if the stars had been extinguished by a down-to-earth individual whose taste in poetry leaves a lot to be desired.

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

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

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

Yes, I continue to explore my heart where I find everything, provided I spend enough time inside it, in my basement, in my underground corridor along which I walk in search of myself, of my former and future selves, salvations and solutions. And I do not listen to our gurus who say in Italian, in English and other languages: '*Lascia i propri affetti tuoi*.' No, I shall never get rid of my sentiments, feelings, affections and infections. Didn't Nietzsche cherish his sickly constitution which, according to his biographers and his long unfinished autobiography, was the fountainhead of his inspiration? Language may let you down, but your diseases will accompany you everywhere you go to remind you of who you are and what you should do in your lifetime. Don't I say to myself from time to time, 'That illness has been a faithful companion to me for nine years, and I will miss it dearly'?

ENDINGS AND EPICS

There are writers who know how they will end their stories even before they actually begin to write them. Taking notes is their favourite pastime so that sometimes they do not feel like writing anything with the exception of those notes which accumulate and grow as if determined to supplant a future work. And if the work eventually does see the light of day, it may look and sound like a ghost of itself, a projection of what might have become a real work had the writer kept a tight rein on his propensity for taking notes. Anxious to cope with this predicament, some writers embark upon their works before they have any idea of how they will proceed with the subject matter they have opted for. Initially they may have an idea or two about what to write, but they lack any ideas about what lies in store for the ideas they have got; in other words, they are in the dark about what will happen to those initial ideas.

So they are both writers and readers: their curiosity is permanently awakened by words and pages to come, by the upper boughs of the Tree of Ignorance they water and protect from pernicious insects and birds. Suppose a writer is inclined to deal with solitude, a subject that is rather old-fashioned and does not necessarily appeal to the common reader. At least a self-imposed solitude is unlikely to boost the sales of the book on which our writer is prepared to spend some time in expectation of a well-deserved reward. But, for some reason, he sticks to this subject matter—perhaps in order to let off steam or ward off the danger of *personal* solitude. After all, there are tribes whose members draw a serpent on the ground to keep *real* serpents at bay. Anyway the protagonist should not be cooped up in his room unless he is imprisoned in it by supernatural powers, by extraterrestrial foes: gangsters are also outmoded. Sooner or later, however, our writer is bound to hit upon a better idea: Why not send the protagonist to a distant, unexplored planet? A book on popular science will help him convey any number of earthlings to wherever the action of the book has been set. Has it been set already? Well, any star will do, providing nobody lives on it except a score of fantastic, unheard-off monsters prepared to supply the writer—and his protagonist—with an unlimited number of adventures.

As a result of this cogitation, the protagonist finds himself on a distant unexplored planet and spends the first night on the branch of a tree; let us call it the Tree of Fear. At least that is what happens in Heinlein's *Tunnel in the Sky* where a group of students lands on a mysterious planet after walking through a gate designed for space journeys. At first the protagonist is on his own, but solitude was not the subject matter Heinlein had in mind when planning the novel; shortly afterwards a few people do their best to come to terms with the conditions imposed on them by the flora and fauna of the planet where they are doomed to spend a few years.

It is a pity that Heinlein did not consider writing a novel about solitude because one of the endings he had at his disposal might have made the protagonist into a hero of our times—or an anti-hero of our times, given that solitude is rather *passé*. The students he put in a hostile environment build a few houses and organise a community that lives in accordance with a constitution and common

sense, guarding against primeval, Stone-Age instincts. Boys and girls marry each other, get killed in a fight with obnoxious animals and eventually realise that the inhospitable planet to which they were conveyed is their real home. They are reluctant, therefore, to go back to their father planet where they risk getting lost in the crowd of strangers with whom they have nothing in common except a few genes. After all, they have founded neither New York nor Los Angeles. Why live in the houses you have not built with your own hands? Why obey other people's laws? Besides, the first mayor of the town where they live and prosper was killed during the only real battle they fought against rabbit-like creatures. His blood seems to bind them to the spot around which their children play in expectation of the happy future. But when a delegation from the earth intrudes upon their peaceful existence they succumb to a bout of homesickness and walk through the tunnel towards the earth. The protagonist, who is the serving mayor of the town, refuses to leave and turns in as the choir of animals salutes his decision, his 'proud solitude', as Dostoevsky might have put it. So far he has been a hero worthy of Lord Jim's fame.

Borges valued the epic aspect of Conrad's novels above their texture whose intricacy and refinement is partly due to the procedure used by the author: he owned up to translating his English prose from the French. But even in the early fifties, when *Tunnel in the Sky* came out, the notion of epic no longer included a solitary man fighting for his honour. So Heinlein did not leave his protagonist alone at the peak of his life and dragged him back to earth where he joined his former comrades-in-arms bent on conquering their planet peacefully, in a business-like manner. A great many factories and shops were to replace the landscapes strewn with the mortal remains of those students who had not passed the survival test. (This ending must have been envisaged from the very start.) The global village is an epic in its own right, but a solitary figure killing time on his own is the only dignified alternative to Achilles whose shield will never sparkle in the world of business and technocracy.

THE REAL THING

'Are those real flowers?' is a question one can ask without incurring the anger of a person to whom one speaks nonchalantly, unless this person happens to be the owner of a restaurant or a house where nothing artificial has ever been endured. But a similar question related to humans would be regarded as offensive by all those concerned, for only in haunted houses or villas do we encounter ghosts who have no objections to being called 'ghosts'. And even in this natural habitat some ghosts are likely to claim they are real—as real as those who dare intrude upon their privacy.

In English the word 'ghost' is so commonly used that it is as if the language itself was aware of how neatly our modern (or post-modern) world can be encapsulated in it. The French, on the other hand, seems blissfully unaware of our insubstantial existence, sparing us, consciously or unconsciously, the shock we might experience on learning we are nothing more than ghosts or stillborn children mooning around Paris, New York, London or Moscow. 'Ghosting' does not mean that, although 'the appearance of a faint second image next to an image on a television screen, computer screen, etc.' may partly fit the description of our plight hinted at in the previous sentence. We have indeed a lot in common with these 'faint second images' the value of which is bound to decrease unless we successfully resist the urge to compare our scientists and artists with their magnificent predecessors. Our writers are ghostwriters—'*nègres*' (niggers), in French; and yet their works have not been ghostwritten. They are 'faint second images' offering entertainment akin to what one may experience at funfair, on board of a ghost train. (A sideshow at our universal Vanity Fair.) Our towns are ghost towns; our cities are ghost cities; our countries are ghost countries. The Earth has become a ghost planet. Never mind: there are *real* things in our libraries, in our museums.

One of those real things is *The Real Thing*—a short story by Henry James. The title seems to be aware of the quality the author bestowed upon his work that deals with first and second images. In a way, the story is written in a top-down order: the first images make their appearances before the second ones. An illustrator, who belongs to neither of these categories, being something in between, welcomes a married couple. 'The gentleman, a man of fifty, very high and very straight, with a moustache slightly grizzled and a dark grey walking-coat admirably fitted, both of which I noted professionally—I don't mean as a barber or yet as a tailor—would have struck me as a celebrity if celebrities often were striking. It was a truth of which I had for some time been conscious that a figure with a good deal of frontage was, as one might say, almost never a public institution. A glance at the lady helped to remind me of this paradoxical law: she also looked too distinguished to be a "personality". Moreover one would scarcely come across two variations together.' In today's world all these variations blend so harmoniously that we are hard put to distinguish between the first images and some pale reflections as we gaze at our celebrities round the clock owing to TV's omnipresence. Their frontages are above reproach even if they endow them with a bohemian touch extolled in the times of

Henry James. In the excerpt above the word 'personality' is synonymous with 'celebrity'; nowadays this word is *always* synonymous with 'celebrity'. (A celebrity is believed to have lots of personality.)

The man hands his host a card inscribed with the words 'Major Monarch'. He left the army and lost his money. 'In fact our means are dreadfully small,' he says. He hopes his wife might become a 'lady in a book'. 'She was singularly like a bad illustration,' the protagonist points out. And then he enlarges upon his attitude towards his new models: 'I liked them—they were so simple; and I had no objection to them if they would suit. But, somehow, with all their perfections I didn't easily believe in them. After all they were amateurs, and the ruling passion of my life was the detestation of the amateur. Combined with this was another perversity—an innate preference for the represented subject over the real one; the defect of the real one was so apt to be a lack of representation. I like things that appeared; then one was sure. Whether they were or not was a subordinate and almost always a profitless question.' Nowadays things just appear—unreal things, to be sure—and whether they *are* or not is a *profitless* question. Nowadays people detest amateurs; a ghastly professional is therefore better than an amateur of genius. (That is how Bruno Walter dubbed Furtwängler—an amateur of genius.) But Walter Benjamin was an amateur; so was Ludwig Wittgenstein.

Mrs Monarch is reluctant to put on someone else's clothes, especially if they are 'in *general* use'. When the illustrator points out he is fully equipped for 'the daily mechanical grind', she resigns herself to her forthcoming loss of personality, saying, 'We only thought we might be more like *some* characters.' Losing herself is equated in her mind with the void, with ghosting. And then 'the real thing' comes to the fore: '[Her husband] stood looking at me with a dim wistfulness that was touching in so fine a man. "Wouldn't it be rather a pull sometimes to have—a—to have—?" He hung fire; he wanted me to help him by phrasing what he meant. But I couldn't—I didn't know. So he brought it out, awkwardly: "The real thing; a gentleman, you know, or a lady."'

Most people never think in these terms about themselves or their fellow citizens whom they take for granted as if the mere fact of being born was conferring upon one all the attributes of reality. Does this essay confer reality upon its author? Luckily for me, I quote at length *The Real Thing* which is real enough to smuggle me into the world of the living, into the *real* world; otherwise I might long since have joined the ghosts I am running down for the sake of my ideals, of my reality dangerously compromised by my inability to write in English, among other things. My English is too correct to be organically alive in the domain of linguistics where a writer of Henry James' calibre flirts with borderline cases, for he is quite capable of keeping his balance on the edge of a cliff, on the brink of a verbal disaster. I plant myself on firm ground as I strive to express myself in the language I began to learn at the age of twenty-two; even Joseph Conrad was luckier in this and many other respects.

So why do I talk about the unreality of my colleagues? Because I do not take my readers for a ride in a ghost train. (Anyway I have not been to a funfair for almost thirty years.) I walk with them along my spiral path on foot—up and down, from Paradise to Hell. And I plant myself squarely in front of them, wearing my own garment and contemptuously discarding any borrowed suit of woe or

joy. And I have no affinities with Miss Churm who introduces the second-image category of humans as she enters the studio with a wet umbrella. 'She looked a trifle blowsy and slightly splashed. I scarcely ever saw her come in without thinking afresh how odd it was that, being so little in herself, she should yet be so much in others. She was a meagre little Miss Churm, but she was an ample heroine of romance. She was only a freckled cockney, but she could represent everything from a fine lady to a shepherdess; she had the faculty, as she might have had a fine voice or long hair.' As to myself, I am so little in others that I cannot describe somebody whose personality (or lack of personality) is different from my own. So I always write about myself, taking photographs of my mind, of my soul, and letting no one usurp my place—neither a shepherdess nor a Prince Charming.

'Do you think she [Miss Churm] looks like a Russian princess?' Major Monarch asked, with lurking alarm.

'When I make her, yes.'

'Oh, if you have to *make* her—!' He reasoned, acutely.

'That's the most you can ask. There are so many that are not makeable.'

'Well now, *here's* a lady'—and with a persuasive smile he passed his arm into his wife's—who's already made!'

Ghosts are makeable. Out of them you can make a famous writer, a famous pianist, a famous violinist, a famous conductor, a famous painter, a famous film director, a famous actor, a famous tailor, a famous barber. But you cannot make Mrs Monarch nor her husband, for they already have been made into what they are now: their own monuments. '[Mrs Monarch] sat with great intensity, giving the whole of her mind to it, and was capable of remaining for an hour almost as motionless as if she were before a photographer's lens. I could see she had been photographed often, but somehow the very habit that made her good for that purpose unfitted her for mine. At first I was extremely pleased with her lady-like air, and it was a satisfaction, on coming to follow her lines, to see how good they were and how far they could lead the pencil. But after a few times I began to find her too insurmountably stiff; do what I would with it my drawing looked like a photograph or a copy of a photograph. Her figure had no variety of expression—she herself had no sense of variety.' I am also insurmountably stiff—to the point of being unable to change my subject matter which is unavoidably related to the state of affairs I am facing in my life. Ghost writers, ghost pianists, ghost conductors, ghost politicians. Our wars are ghost wars: they do not happen. Our Apocalypse is a real thing, but we take no notice of it: being unreal, we live in another dimension. Even our sex lives boil down to faint second images.

I used to complain about contemporary women, about their fluidity and irrelevance, making them espouse Miss Churm's creed and conduct. ('After I had drawn Mrs Monarch a dozen times I perceived more clearly than before that the value of such a model as Miss Churm resided precisely in the fact that she had no positive stamp, combined of course with the other fact that what she did have

was a curious and inexplicable talent for imitation.') But, in the streets of Moscow and Rome, I do come across those Helens of Troy who have no sense of variety, looking like their own statues, like the descriptions supplied by Homer, Goethe and Henry James. They are no ghosts. 'Meanwhile I found myself trying to invent types that approached her own, instead of making her own transform itself—in the clever way that was not impossible, for instance, to poor Miss Churm. Arrange as I would and take the precautions I would, she always, in pictures, came out too tall—landing me in the dilemma of having represented a fascinating woman as seven feet high, which, out of respect perhaps to my own very much scantier inches, was far from my idea of such a personage.' Nobody cares about *your* idea of Helen of Troy who exists on her own, triumphantly, monumentally; and not even Homer was capable of making her into somebody else—a shorter woman, an abridged version of herself, of the *Iliad*.

In the *Introduction* to the book of Henry James' short stories, Michael Swan says with gusto: 'They are all blessedly readable. He tried hard to be interesting all the time, to hold the attention and plant his surprises; he constructed excellent plots with the classical requirements of a beginning, a middle, and an end. The "figure in the carpet", the ultimate meaning of his work, may be an obscure one, but the stories can be understood and enjoyed simply as very good short stories.' They cannot. If this proverbial 'figure in the carpet' does not loom up ahead of the reader, obscurely and tantalisingly, he is sure to miss the point altogether. It is not enough to enjoy *The Real Thing* ingenuously, without asking too many questions.

What is this proverbial 'figure in the carpet' which crops up in my own writings as a homage to Henry James to whom I am grateful for what we might call in Russian the 'last push'? Indeed it is one of his stories that triggered an avalanche of first, second and third images with which I have peppered my writings for three decades. *The Figure in the Carpet*. Let me make it even more 'obscure' by calling upon my unreliable, worn-out memory; and yet the story is lying in my lap. (After all, it is also *my* figure in the carpet.) Yes, it is obscure, distant—unreachable to anyone concerned exclusively with plots and surprises. It is the stars over which Dante muses in the *Commedia*. It is a faint second image that is actually the first and only image worthy of our attention. It is a faint third image. It is a faint ninth image. But it is no ghost. It is Helen of Troy. ('When she stood erect she took naturally one of the attitudes in which court painters represent queens and princesses—.') It is Major Monarch.

'The case was worse with the Major—nothing I could do would keep *him* down, so that he became useful only for the representation of brawny giants. I adored variety and range, I cherished human accidents, the illustrative note; I wanted to characterise closely, and the thing in the world I most hated was the danger of being ridden by a type. I had quarrelled with some of my friends about it—I had parted company with them for maintaining that one had to be, and that if the type was beautiful (witness Raphael and Leonardo), the servitude was only a gain. I was neither Leonardo nor Raphael—.' You cannot keep a great writer down: no amount of deconstruction will ever touch a hair of his or her head. James haunts us throughout the story as he becomes simultaneously the real thing,

the figure in the carpet and Leonardo whose attachment to real things is a yardstick by which our joy and sorrow should be measured. Actually 'sorrow' is a second image if compared with 'melancholy'.

So James executes a self-portrait as he minutely describes Major Monarch's idiosyncrasies: the latter *is* different from what we are accustomed to. Minutely, with anatomical precision—Leonardo's yardstick. The anatomy of melancholy. He goes so far as to wash up his protagonist's crockery and put it away. (Leonardo's touch.) '—for the next ten minutes, while I worked, I heard the light clatter of china and the tinkle of spoons and glass. Mrs Monarch assisted her husband—.'

The protagonist's colleague, Jack Hawley, sneers at the illustrations shown to him. 'In the drawings you've been looking at I think my types are very handsome.'

'Oh, they won't do!'

'I've had a couple of new models.'

'I see you have. *They* won't do.'

'Are you sure of that?'

'Absolutely—they're stupid.'

Nowadays, no illustrator would even have a try at using these models.

The protagonist resolves to get rid of Major Monarch and his wife; shortly afterwards, they leave the studio forever. (Henry James and one of his most illustrious heroines.) '—my friend Hawley repeats that Major and Mrs Monarch did me a permanent harm, got me into a second-rate trick. If it be true I am content to have paid the price—for the memory.' A second-rate illustrator has become a real thing at last: 'memory' is synonymous with 'melancholy'.

UNFINISHED WORKS

How can even the completeness of a work of art, its being finished, be conceived? The completeness of everything else that is made or produced is measured by the criterion of its purpose—i.e., it is determined by the use that is to be made of it. The work is finished if it answers the purpose for which it is intended. But how is one to conceive of the criterion for measuring the completeness of a work of art? However rationally and soberly one may consider artistic 'production', much that we call art is not intended to be used, and none derives the standard of its completeness from such a purpose. Does not the work's existence, then, appear to be the breaking-off of a creative process that actually points beyond it? Perhaps in itself it cannot be completed at all?

Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, (trans. by Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall)

A number of unfinished works produced within the Austro-Hungarian Empire almost a century ago can hardly be traced to Gadamer's argument—even retrospectively: neither Hofmannsthal, nor Musil, nor Kafka thought of artistic creation in his terms. And the superiority of user over producer as asserted by Plato in the *Republic* did not bother them at all, although they might have visualised their readers from time to time. In what domain are readers superior to authors?—the question we are entitled to ask in the light of Plato's thesis. The former can read into the book whatever crosses their minds because any text is nothing but a playground where imagination is permitted to disport itself; Roland Barthes enlarges upon the subject in his famous essay *The Death of the Author*. Unleashed by the readers' frivolity, language also comes into its own and buries the author's design beneath an avalanche prompted and warranted by the history of literature. But our decadent authors gave no thought to the omnipotence of language, and one of them—Hugo von Hofmannsthal—went so far as to question the influence it is supposed to exert in everyday life. The eponymous hero of *The Lord Chandos Letter* speaks thus about his predicament: 'Words swam around; they would become eyes staring at me.' In his turn, he stared at those eyes for a while—as long as he could fight off dizziness and nausea. He knew that beyond those spinning words one might discover emptiness. So did Hofmannsthal, Musil, Kafka and Robert Walther.

The more they wrote, the emptier everything appeared as if not only words but also ideas, images—the whole paraphernalia of literary attributes were somehow linked with the emptiness discovered by Lord Chandos. In a way, their works are closed to themselves; and yet this closeness has no affinities with Eco's conception of the 'open work' angled towards a highbrow reader who is capable of reading between the lines and beyond them.

Hofmannsthal, Musil, Kafka and Robert Waltzer. They read between their own lines and beyond them, otherwise they would not have been able to write anything. But at some point they might have realised there was nothing to read, not even *within* the lines, let alone around them—in the space created by their inspiration and assiduity. This space was empty and whatever remained in it by accident was about to disappear for good, leaving no fodder for scholars and highbrow readers. No longer did words swim and spin; they looked like those humans in Van Gogh's paintings, who are rooted to the spot even if actually walking down the street or digging the ground. A man reads a newspaper as he stands in the middle of the picture surrounded by the trees which are *spinning*: Van Gogh's nature and still lives are never dead. Human figures lost in a landscape *are* dead in comparison with the stars and trees; they really seem to be lost amidst those animated landscapes.

Or was it the other way round? Did words continue to swim and spin while the authors and their characters were rooted to the spot? Waltzer's heroes seem to be motionless or slightly involved in a leisurely dance performed by those who surround them, by nature. Unwillingly their bodies yield to the waltz in the course of which everything turns out to be superfluous so that, after a while, the reader and the writer come to a standstill. The work does not answer the purpose for which it is intended; it is therefore unfinished. Or is it intended for this very purpose that everybody shuns for fear of reaching a dead end where history itself is bound to stop instead of waltzing away as it did on the eve of the First World War? Apparently this war had no cause and was brought about by an unconscious desire to stop the dance in which the whole of Europe had got involved. Something *had* to be done because even words began swimming and spinning. At the time people had no idea what might happen *beyond* this dance which, after all, was not as disastrous as the War and its aftermath. But the search for order was in the air and Schoenberg perceived it even more than those writers who relentlessly pushed their heroes, making them believe there *was* a way out of their predicaments. (Kafka's heroes *are* motionless amidst landscapes and cityscapes that waltz around them.)

Obstinately Schoenberg was looking for a strong, self-sufficient constructive basis apt to harness the disruptive forces of total chromaticism: notes swam and span before his very eyes. So he decided to endow each work with a 'serial' basis on a single note-row of all twelve chromatic notes. 'Yet logic and inspiration are different things,' writes Malcolm MacDonald. 'A compositional method, in the abstract, is valueless; its only justification lies in the specific musical outcome. Schoenberg, of all people, was unlikely to confuse this issue, since he placed an enormous premium on spontaneous inspiration—without it, he said, he was incapable of writing ten bars. But his artistic conscience demanded logic to justify the results; and a belief in the "logic" of the twelve-note method seems to have been the crucial act of creative irrationality which enabled his inspiration to flow.'

But writers were unable to provide a similar basis for their unruly words: no serial method would ever have harnessed them. (This essay is based on twelve words: unfinished, motionless, spinning, landscapes, words, waltz, war, heroes, authors, death, end, beyond.) So they wrote as long as their inspiration allowed such a feat; yet neither Musil nor Waltzer could rely on its flow.

At the end of the First World War our history itself was coming to an end, to an empty space beyond which another history was lying or whirling. Of course no one dances as beautifully as the writers and composers did in the early twentieth century.

HELL AND PARADISE

1

A born traveller spends a lot of time studying road maps and reading the brochures where short texts comment on magnificent, alluring pictures. Bent over his writing desk, he often underlines this or that word and draws a circle around a city to single them out from the mass of information he is bombarded with by travel agencies and bookshops. Some of those travellers never leave their rooms where they accommodate railways and airports, cities and landscapes, by projecting them onto the air, so to speak. Contrary to what might be expected, they do not travel in their minds which are, however, big enough to accommodate the whole world and even the Hereafter.

Sometimes a woman forsakes her couch and walks to the nearest wall where, in her opinion, a museum or a castle is situated. Shortly afterwards, she continues her journey by heading for a *bureau* and reading another paragraph from a book she had put there in anticipation of her 'viatic excitement', as Nabokov puts it in his novel *Glory*: 'From that year on Martin developed a passion for trains, distant lights, the heartrending wails of locomotives in the dark of night, and the waxworks vividness of local stations flashing by, with people never to be seen again. The slow heaving off, the grating of the rudder chain, the internal tremor of the Canadian freighter on which he and his mother left Crimea in April 1919, the stormy sea and the driving rain were not as conducive to viatic excitement as an express train, and only very gradually did Martin get penetrated with this new enchantment.' The woman who contents herself with reading this passage is not likely to share the delights of Nabokov's hero. Of course she may supplement the text by looking at some postcards where Crimea and the Black Sea are displayed in miniature; but even this addition would not make her hear the 'grating of the rudder chain' which is bound to make an *extrovert* traveller feel a shiver going down his spine.

But is she really an *introvert* traveller? Doesn't she project her dreams onto the air of her room? Doesn't she *reach* the localities she has marked out in her brochure? Let us imagine a traveller who seldom leaves his couch; at least he never projects his visions onto space, confining their glow to his mind where they enjoy a placid existence sheltered from the scorching sun and 'the driving rain'. These visions might have been inspired by descriptions and photographs some of which are indeed so conducive as to supply enough material for a month of non-stop daydreaming. But there are travellers who prefer to *invent* the countries they visit during their journeys, which liberates them from so-called organised space. (The French expression '*voyage organisé*' encompasses both space and time: you are supposed to stick to the programme imposed by your travel agency.)

Writers have invented many cities that exist neither in books nor even in the room of a solitary traveller, for all the flights of his imagination. Some of them have gone so far as to invent their own motherlands, which is a feat in itself, given that it is far more difficult to tamper with the space known to many of your fellow countrymen. Gogol describes Russia as follows (in Nabokov's translation): 'No cities with many-windowed tall palaces that have grown out of cliffs, no showy trees, no ivy that has

grown out of walls amid the roar and eternal spray of waterfalls, one does not have to throw back one's head in order to contemplate some heavenly agglomeration of great rocks towering above the land...' Nabokov points out that 'this is Gogol's private Russia, not the Russia of the Urals, the Altai, the Caucasus'. But the demure-looking Russia was the stock-in-trade of those novelists and poets who sought to bring out her *spiritual* value to the detriment of the sights conducive to 'viatic excitement'. (Tyutchev was of their number.) They did their utmost to induce the reader to scratch beneath the surface which is rather beautiful, contrary to what they seemed to insinuate: mountains are not conspicuous by their absence; nor are the eternal spray of waterfalls or ivy growing out of walls. But Gogol looked beyond waterfalls and ivy, trying to reach the realm where, according to him, a Russian Messiah was lurking in the shape of a virtuous landowner and of a maiden whose chastity was in no way inferior to the ideal we come across in medieval romances. Gogol himself was a Messiah who lived beyond Part One of *Dead Souls* and peeped out of his sanctuary whenever the reader had to be reminded of what lay in store for him: the new Russia or the new Jerusalem. Or the City of God. And the City of Gogol.

But where are they located? A mountain looms in front of a traveller who is intrepid enough to undertake a journey leading him to the Holy Grail or Holy Russia. 'The intelligent do not climb a mountain—they skirt round it,' as a Russian saying goes. So Gogol got rid of the mountains that stood in his (and the reader's) way. 'There are none of those dark archways with that tangle of vine, ivy and incalculable millions of roses, successive vistas through which one can suddenly glimpse afar the immortal outline of radiant mountains that leap into limpid silvery skies; all within you is open wilderness and level ground; your stunted towns that stick up among the plains are no more discernible than dots and signs: nothing in you can charm and seduce the eye.' Even Russian towns where corrupt officials dance with their affected wives have been reduced to dots over which one can easily step on one's way towards the vision offered (and burnt) by the author. They look like the blots of ink in an exercise book that a tyrannical teacher tears up in front of his pupils to inflict a punishment on its sloppy owner whose eyes are already filled with tears.

Gogol was by no means an introvert traveller who contents himself with pacing up and down his room, the walls of which are adorned with maps. He was always going somewhere as if to do justice to his name that seems to echo the English verb 'to go' and would resound ad infinitum, but for the consonant L. Kafka said he had appropriated the letter K. Inadvertently, Gogol did the same with the letter L that barred his way towards the other parts of *Dead Souls* and to the Russia he might have created had he borrowed from Dante the *Paradiso* and its inhabitants. In a way, he projected this letter into the future where it gave birth to Lenin—the pseudonym of Vladimir Ilich Ulyanov.

As if to make up for this inner failure, Gogol would go to Dresden, Rome and Jerusalem, switching from introvert to extrovert journeys. 'My strength is gone, I cannot endure all this torture. My head is aflame, and everything spins before my eyes. Save me, someone! Take me away. Give me three steeds, steeds as fast as the whirling wind! Seat yourself, driver, ring out, little harness bell, wing

your way up, steeds, and rush me out of this world. On and on, so that nothing be seen of it, nothing' (*Diary of a Madman*). Inwardly, he had burnt Part Two of *Dead Souls* many times before he actually put a batch of copybooks into a stove and set fire to it. Here is Gogol's last and most important extrovert journey as described by an eyewitness and transcribed by Nabokov:

February 11th 1852. That night Gogol prayed for a long time alone in his room. At 3 a.m. he called his servant boy and wanted to know whether the rooms on the other side of the house were warm. The boy answered they were not. 'Give me a cloak,' said Gogol [as if intent on going abroad in a carriage], 'and come on, I have some business there.' He went, carrying a candle, and making the sign of a cross in every room he passed through. In one of them he ordered the boy to open the flue as softly as possible so as not to awaken anybody and then asked for a certain portfolio that lay in a chest-of-drawers. When the portfolio was brought he took out a batch of copybooks tied together with a ribbon, put them into the stove and set fire to the papers by means of his candle.

How to show a nervous breakdown in a film? A convent might be a good setting, provided your heroine does not stay in it for years. She lies prostrate on the cold chapel floor while the other nuns sit in silence. Then she dies or comes back home as if nothing had happened. But how to get her out of the convent? A hospital is another place where a nervous breakdown can be cured, if only for a few months. But hospitals are associated with injections and other unpleasant procedures that a contemporary cinemagoer shuns at all cost, opting for politically correct sequences. So nowadays film directors show us a woman rushing out into the streets, stopping a taxi and shouting, 'Just drive me anywhere.' (Lars von Trier is a notable exception. *The Hospital and its Ghosts* confirms the Hollywood rule by showing us the people who do their utmost to *stay* in a hospital in spite of cinematic etiquette.)

At this point I stopped writing and did not resume the work on the following day, for all my eagerness to finish this chapter before my departure for Geneva on August 1st. Actually I did resume the work but whatever I wrote was far inferior to the hopes I had entertained when embarking on this essay which was to inaugurate a series of writings on literature. Needless to say, I did not burn the discarded material, although, in my opinion, Gogol's biographers have to insinuate themselves into the very life of the object of their study to reflect not only his mentality, his thoughts, but also the wayward movements of his body. (The same goes for *all* biographers and commentators.) I ought to have printed the pages I had sentenced to oblivion, tied them together with a ribbon and walked across my room and the adjacent corridor towards the kitchen in the middle of which stands a traditional oven. 'Gogol noticed that the fire was going out—that only the corners of the copybooks had been charred. So he took out the bundle, undid the ribbon, placed the papers in such a way as to facilitate combustion, tipped his candle again and then sat down on a chair beside the fire, waiting for the papers

to be consumed.' I might have put my cloak on and gone to a friend who has a magnificent oven in his country house. The only snag is his oven does not look like the one used by Gogol on that fateful day. Besides, my friend lives in Burgundy and not in St Petersburg. And I cannot fly to Russia at short notice: visas are issued rather grudgingly by the Russian authorities. Suffice it to say that last time I had to prove I was not sero-positive.

When performing Haydn, one is supposed to use the instruments for which his works were composed in order not to mar their immaculate purity by 'inauthenticity'. Should I interpret Gogol in the way the members of an orchestra interpret Haydn's symphonies? If I were to read *Dead Souls* in public or to record the poem for posterity, I would face the problem which is daily tackled by actors bringing back to life *King Lear* or *The Government Inspector*. My task is twofold, however: I have to account for Gogol's travels through the prism of his works. Do they take different roads, the author and his characters? Do they head for the same point in space or in time? And what about my own journey undertaken for the sole purpose of writing this essay? Do I have to follow in Gogol's footsteps? Can I *perform* Gogol?

Let us put the question otherwise: Would I *film* Gogol if I had such an opportunity? His body is lying prostrate on a cold chapel floor. A group of monks sit in silence around him. This scene never occurred in his life, as far as I know. He *was* under the influence of a priest who enjoined him to renounce literature and art in general, but nothing allows me to multiply this priest and accentuate Gogol's obedience to the point of making him take holy orders—nothing except the distorting mirrors he used so maliciously, with such gusto. So I need not go to St Petersburg in search of an appropriate oven. The whole enterprise would be all the more irrelevant since Gogol burnt Part Two of *Dead Souls* in Moscow where he was staying in the house of Count A. P. Tolstoy.

I just pressed the 'Suppr' button and my text disappeared. How many times have I pressed this button in the course of the last week? How many copybooks would I have covered with my handwriting had I still used my pen? A few fragments remain in the file 'ONLIT' as if to mirror the passages which escaped the outburst of Gogol's death instinct:

Fleeing from justice or from the live souls, Chichikov adopts the same method but for different reasons: he is sound in body and mind. If *Dead Souls* were put on by a contemporary stage director bent on updating nineteenth-century classics, Chichikov might rush out in the streets and call a taxi, shouting, 'Just drive me anywhere.' All the same, his actions would not be the outcome of a nervous breakdown. What are the reasons of his journey into the nowhere? He has no time to choose another governmental town around which many dead souls continue to live 'in the Elysium of official paperdom', as Nabokov puts it. Besides, he instinctively feels that an anonymous space is better suited to his purpose than any town, whatever letter might designate it. (In Part One of *Dead Souls*, Chichikov comes to the town of N.)

A few variants follow the above excerpt: '...because he knew he would feel safer in an anonymous area where no landmarks might betray his hiding place.' '...for different reasons. Actually, he did not appeal to reason as he summoned his servant and told him to prepare the *britzka* for an immediate departure. Guided solely by his animal nature...' This variant is interrupted, but the theme I broached turns up on the following page: 'Animal nature, animal instinct. Dogs are far more sensitive to corpses (and perhaps to dead souls) so that, whenever a person is missing, the police do not ask his relatives to look for him. Nor do they trust their own olfactory capacities.'

'Where do you live?' I asked a renowned cellist.

'In hotels,' he answered. 'Or rather, in a hotel, in one hotel. After a while, on a tour, all hotels start looking alike as if I was staying in one hotel only where, for some reason, I keep on packing and unpacking, my suitcase wide-open most of the time.'

'And what about the cities you travel to?' I asked. 'Don't they look like the same paragraph daily re-written by the same author? They must be variants of the same city.'

Like an artist on a European tour, Gogol hastily travelled from one city to another as he meditated on the sequel to *Dead Souls* which, on account of its immobility, counterbalanced his speed, his restlessness. There was only one thought in his mind, but he appended a lot of variants and vignettes to it as if to rival those passages in *Dead Souls* where something 'irrelevant' is born out of a word, out of an image:

As he drove up to the porch he noticed two faces which almost simultaneously appeared at the window: one belonged to a woman in a ribboned cap and it was as narrow and long as a cucumber; the other was man's face, and round and broad it was, like those Moldavian pumpkins, called *gorlyanki* from which in our good country *balalaykas* are made, two-stringed light *balalaykas*, the adornments and delight a nimble young rustic just out of his teens, the cock of his walk and a great one at whistling through his teeth and winking his eye at the white-bosomed and white-necked country-lasses...

At the end of his drawn-out journey Gogol was encumbered with the *balalaykas* and pumpkins he had conjured up while thinking of his noble heroes destined to portray an ideal Russia. What he needed, however, was more in the nature of a piano than a *balalayka* which was not worthy of the concert hall where his oratorio, his hymn to Russia, was to be performed. And the pumpkin was just a carriage in which his Cinderella—alias Part One of *Dead Souls*—journeyed towards glory and immortality. But her journey turned out to be as unpredictable as one of her author's digressions that deviate from their subject to the point of losing it.

Gogol's paradise was in many ways similar to that of Dante because all paradises are more or less alike, whatever their topography and population. 'All happy families are more or less alike; all unhappy ones are more or less dissimilar,' says Tolstoy at the beginning of *Anna Karenina*. Gogol's

hell is, accordingly, quite different from that of Dante whose characters blaspheme majestically as they undergo a literary punishment within their vicious circles. The sinners depicted in *Dead Souls* neither blaspheme nor really *sin* against society or God and consequently their hell is more elusive, more terrifying than the space lying beyond the famous inscription:

*Per me si va ne la città dolente,
per me si va ne l'eterno dolore,
per me si va tra la perduta gente.
Giustizia mosse il moi alto fattore;
fecemi la divina podestate,
la somma sapienza e 'l primo amore.*

Through me you enter the woeful city,
through me you enter eternal grief,
through me you enter among the lost.
Justice moved my high maker:
the divine power made me,
the supreme wisdom, and the primal love.

What power made Gogol's city, I wonder? Only the power of his genius? But hell can be created out of nothing because there is enough material for it everywhere. Nineteenth-century Russia outstripped most European countries in this respect, supplying Gogol with so many caricatures of human nature that he might have prolonged his hell well beyond the bounds of Part One, had he not been determined to take his reader on a ride through a Russian version of paradise. Ay, there was the rub, for no traveller had ever returned from that paradise to enlighten Gogol on its scenery and population. Dante's *Paradiso* was the fruit of a joint venture in which God or his representatives on earth played an important part so that often the poet had only to fill in the gaps. Gogol, on the other hand, was expected to cope with an *enormous* gap which no number of *balalaykas* and virtuous landowners could obliterate. He bombarded his friends with letters, asking them to send him bare facts on which he hoped to build a new Russia—a worthy successor to Dante's heavenly realm. But his friends would offer him just another set of *balalaykas* and another consignment of pumpkins which, moreover, were far inferior in quality to those he had already stored in his treasure house. 'And still far away is that time when with a gashing force of a different origin the formidable blizzard of inspiration will rise from my austere and blazing brow and, in a sacred tremor, humans will hearken to the sublime thunder of a different speech,' says Gogol at the end of Part One. His promise sounds like the vow Dante takes in Chapter XVIII of the *Vita Nuova*. '*E però propuosi di prendere per materia de lo mio parlare sempre mai quello che fosse loda di questa gentilissima*' (And then I resolved that thenceforward I

would choose for the theme of my writings only the praise of this most gracious being). Dante wrote not only Part Two, where he actually meets Beatrice, but also Part Three that crowns his otherworldly adventure. To carry out this enterprise he had no need to harass his friends with questions about how they ran their country estates and treated their *muzhiks*: a few books were sufficient for the purpose. In those books the form and the contents of Paradise were adumbrated to make things easier for those who might venture into its spheres on their own. It is surprising that very few people had journeyed through those spheres before Dante Alighieri whose determination was partly prompted by Beatrice's absence at his side. Would he have written the *Commedia* had she brought him coffee every morning? Would he have forgotten St Thomas and his predecessors?

Alas, the Fathers of the Church could not be quoted, either directly or indirectly, in a book on nineteenth-century Russia so that Gogol was deprived of the frame into which he might have inserted his upright landowners. And no picture endures the hardships of everyday life without a frame. Besides, no woman was to guide him through the steppes where his protagonist's *britzka* enjoyed a kind of intoxicating freedom as it coped with hills, ruts and other impediments: 'The horses perked up and had the light *britzka* speeding as if it were made of fluff. Selifan contented himself with waving his whip and emitting low guttural cries as he gently bounced up and down on his box while the *troyka* either flew up a hillock or skimmed downhill again all along the undulating and slightly sloping highway. Chichikov did nothing but smile every time he was slightly thrown up on his leathern cushion, for he was a great lover of fast driving.' Sometimes Chichikov must have bounced rather *energetically* on his cushion as if yearning to be ejected from the *britzka* together with the neglectful *kutscher*. But it was Gogol who eventually got ejected from his home-made carriage that was to carry him as far as a 'Paradise in Russia' or just Paradise.

How many *britzkas* were there on Russian roads when Gogol tried to piece together his *balalaykas*, pianos and the information he would get from his correspondents? In one of those ramshackle vehicles his protagonist was sitting on a leather cushion; in another he travelled himself. A third *britzka* was intended to convey Russia to Paradise where many readers awaited her arrival. Or rather, the readers would have awaited her in Paradise had she ever reached it: a Catch-22 situation. Actually, Gogol had his doubts about Russia's final destination, otherwise he would not have burst into such a heartrending, nostalgic song at the end of Part One: 'Rus, whither are you speeding so? Answer me. No answer. The middle bell trills out in a dream its liquid soliloquy; the roaring air is torn to pieces and becomes Wind; all things on earth fly by and other nations and states gaze askance as they step aside and give her the right of way.' Gogol had a nostalgic longing for the clime he had never visited except in his dreams and in the letters to his long-suffering correspondents. But unconsciously he knew that Russia's destination was unknown and expressed his foreboding by the pathetic cry: 'Whither are you speeding so?' Whither was *he* speeding as he boarded yet another carriage in search of his own paradise?

*Maraviglia sarebbe in te se, privo
d'impedimento, giù ti fossi assiso,
com' a terra quïete in foco vivo.*

It would be a marvel if you, being freed from hindrance, had settled down below, even as stillness would be in living fire on earth.

As a result of his poetic labours, Dante *was* freed from any hindrance as he soared into the sky assisted by Beatrice and God. But no effort could free Gogol from the hindrances he saw and felt during *his* labours which, in spite of his perseverance, could not bring him as far as Paradise. His determination did not even carry him beyond Chichikov's departure denoting the break between the author and his dream. 'For me *Dead Souls* ends with Chichikov's departure from the town of N.,' writes Nabokov whose translation I use whenever quoting Gogol's fated masterpiece. I think that *Dead Souls* ends with the line '*l'amor che move il sole e l'altre stelle*' (the Love which moves the sun and the other stars). Do all literary masterpieces end where they end? Did Gogol really burn the Second Part of *Dead Souls*?

'Wherever one lives does not count,' writes Gogol in a letter addressed to Zhukovsky. 'It is just the question of where to spend the night. Only those who give no thought to their final destination and the purpose of their journey think a lot about where to sleep and eat. But a traveller who does not avert his eyes from the aim of his journey is indifferent to creature comforts.' In Canto I of the *Paradiso*, Dante fixes his eyes on the sun as if to illustrate the difference between human sight and the one bestowed upon the elect in the Hereafter.

*Molto è licito là, che qui non lece
A le nostre virtù, mercé de loco
Fatto per proprio de l'umana spece.*

Much is granted to our faculties there that is not granted here, by virtue of the place made for humankind as its proper abode.

Dante alludes to the Garden of Eden where human sight was strong enough to bear the light of the sun. But how can an inheritor of Adam's sin achieve the same result without going blind in the process? Once again it is Beatrice who helps her platonic lover as she looks at the sun (*e riguardar nel sole*) and tacitly invites him to follow her example. Gogol had no celestial guide and even his earthly friends were reluctant to assist him in his work. So, instead of looking at the sun, he fixed his eyes on the fire where he eventually burnt the Second Part of *Dead Souls*. Anyway, Russia has always been more attuned to fires and bonfires than to the sun.

In Hell and in Paradise, Dante's characters always speak to the point as if fixing their eyes on the sun, white or black. Gogol often lets his characters speak for the sake of saying *something*, however irrelevant or futile. 'Look at that wheel there,' said a *muzhik*, fixing his eyes on a wheel of

Chichikov's carriage, which had only one affinity with the sun: the round shape. 'Now what do you think—would that wheel hold out as far as Moscow if need be, or would it not?'

'It would,' answered another *muzhik*.

'And what about Kazan—I think it would not last that far?'

'It would not,' answered the second *muzhik*.

Such idle talk lies at the root of the dilemma that Gogol had to face as he meditated upon Part Two of his masterpiece. Could he tolerate such dialogues in his paradise where everything was to have a purpose and destination; where every wheel was to reach Kazan in no time at all? (Actually an inhabitant of Paradise would not waver between Kazan and Moscow, between one star and another.) But Russia did not exist without those words which seem to moon around as if to kill time before other words join them, imparting sense to the whole utterance. Nabokov analyses the dialogue thus: 'The *muzhiks* are not interested in the question of the precise itinerary that the *britzka* will follow; what fascinates them is solely the ideal problem of fixing the imaginary instability of a wheel in terms of imaginary distances; and this problem is raised to the level of sublime abstraction by their not knowing the exact distance from N. (an imaginary point) to Moscow, Kazan or Timbuctoo—and caring less. They impersonate the remarkable creative faculty of Russians, so beautifully disclosed by Gogol's own inspiration, of working in a void.' But Gogol no longer wished to work in a void where all itineraries are blurred to the extent of making Kazan look like Moscow and vice versa. He was determined to find out the exact distance from Hell to Paradise as his own *britzka* coped with ruts and bumps, threatening to dispose of its owner. (Dante *knew* the exact distance from Hell to Paradise.)

A lot of characters we come across in *Dead Souls* may be assigned to Hell's ante-room where reside those who pursued neither good nor evil: they did not care. Those *muzhiks* care neither about the *britzka*'s itinerary nor about their own lives which just *happen* somewhere between Kazan and Moscow—in a void that nature abhors so intensely. The words they utter are not followed by other words, let alone by deeds which might justify their existence on earth. They worship neither God nor the Devil because they have no idea how far are Moscow and Kazan from the town where they live and talk; and they *talk* about Moscow and Kazan. Many people have no idea how far Moscow or Kazan are from their beds and fridges, but at least they do not talk about them. Here is a paragraph I chanced upon in Koyré's book *From the Closed World to the Infinite Universe*:

If in this immensity (which has no beginning, nor end, nor middle) somebody marched for an infinitely long [time], and traversed innumerable thousands of miles, he would, in relation to this immensity, be in the same place; and if he repeated his action and arrived ten infinities farther, he would nevertheless be in this immensity in the same way and in the same place and would not be a single step nearer to the end, or the fulfilment of his intention, because in the Immeasurable (*Immensum*) there is no relation. All relations in it are conceived in reference to ourselves or to some other created thing. Indeed this immense *locus* is truly everywhere; and

everything that has its finite *where?* (as they are wont to speak about spirits) has it as a relation to some other finite [thing]; but in relation to the Immensity it is truly nowhere.

Joseph Raphson

The infinity of worlds on which Bruno insisted with such tenacity made our world geographically unstable; our thoughts, deprived of their pedestal, began to wander from one place to another, often having a nap in a field. If we do not know exactly the distance between Kazan and the spot where we stand and look at the wheel of the carriage zooming along, we can talk neither of this wheel nor of the universe. Gogol knew the exact distance between the room occupied by Chichikov and the country estates to which he directed his attention in search of dead souls. But he was ignorant of the distance between the old Russia and the new Russia, between God and the Devil, between inspiration and duty, between good and evil. His interior dialogues might have sounded as follows:

'Look at that poem over there. Do you think it would hold out as far as Purgatory if need be, or would it not?'

'It would.'

'And what about Paradise—I think it would not last that far?'

'It would not.'

That is why his protagonist's *britzka* travels at such a speed: it must compensate for its fragility by a poetic élan obliterating ruts, rats and the rot which set in on the day when Russia was created out of nothing. 'You should have a bag of well-rotted manure and spread it on your garden,' wrote one of his friends. Gogol had no garden: at the time he stayed in a room overlooking a cliff. So he assumed his correspondent was alluding to Russia herself which was Gogol's garden, so to speak; and he aspired to turn her into the Garden of Eden. Incidentally, his friend just parodied the instructions Gogol showered on the landowners to whom he wrote his numerous letters: 'Woe to those who do not heed my word! Leave all things for a while, leave all such pleasures that tickle your fancy at idle moments. Obey me: during one year, one year only, attend to the affairs of your country estate.'

In the Immeasurable on which Raphson meditates there is neither Paradise nor Hell: these can be told apart only within a geometrical framework. In Gogol's towns they merge into an amorphous mass out of which there protrude some bodies and the voices saying: 'Let us talk about the world.' 'But where's world?' 'Under your very nose.' 'And where's my nose?' 'Under your eyes.' 'Do you know where my eyes are?' 'I don't.' 'Do you know where your own eyes are?' 'I don't.'

How does Gogol render this uncertainty brought about by the Immeasurable where Moscow meshes with Kazan? 'Rus, are you not similar in your headlong motion to one of those nimble *troykas* that none can overtake? The flying road turns into smoke under you, bridges thunder and pass, all falls back and is left behind! The witness of your course stops as if struck by some divine miracle: is this not lightning that has dropped from the sky?' His carriage travels so fast that Kazan and Moscow become one city and Paradise gets closer and closer to his copybooks despite the infinity of space. He

publishes *Selected Passages from Correspondence with Friends*, which might have been written by an inhabitant of the *Paradiso*, and gets his knuckles rapped by both his friends and foes. 'This inflated and sluttish hullabaloo of words and phrases,' wrote Belinski who, in the first half of the nineteenth century, was the mouthpiece of democratic Russia. What did Gogol reply to his critics? 'I warned you, didn't I? Didn't I enjoin you not to follow in my footsteps unless you can travel as fast as necessary to catch my meaning? Didn't I warn you about the dangers you might encounter in the realm I have been exploring for the past ten years? Didn't you read Dante's *Commedia*? You might have read the *Inferno* which has a few affinities with Part One of *Dead Souls*. You like sinners, don't you? Your ears are more accustomed to curses than to the songs I hear as I travel through my heaven. Why don't you hear my songs? Why do you have no ear for my music? What would you say about Dante and his preachers? There are many of them in the last part of the *Commedia*. You are not ready to travel with us.'

*O voi che siete in piccioletta barca,
desiderosi d'ascoltar, seguiti
dietro al mio legno che cantando varca,
tornare a riveder li vostri liti:
non vi mettete in pelago, ch   forse,
perdendo me, rimarreste smarriti.*

O you that are in your little bark, eager to hear, following behind my ship that singing makes her way, turn back to see again your shores. Do not commit yourselves to the open sea, for perchance, if you lost me, you would remain astray.

(The *Paradiso*, Canto II, trans. by Charles S. Singleton)

Gogol wrote nothing of the kind and I am not even sure he read Dante's masterpiece. Did he read only the *Inferno* which might have reminded him of *Dead Souls*?

2

'Is there not a kind of lofty and magic melody in fast driving? You seem to feel some unknown power lifting you up and placing you upon its wing, and then you are flying yourself and everything is flying by: the mileposts fly, merchants fly by on the boxes of their carriages, forests fly on both sides of the road in a dark succession of firs and pines together with the sound of hacking axes and the cries of crows...' But a computer addict does not fly as he waits for a piece of information to reach him through the abolished space. Some unknown power lifts a piece of information and places it upon its wing. As a matter of fact, information does not fly like a carriage where a writer is ensconced: there are no forests, no hacking axes, no crows, no merchants around it. There is no life around it, inside it—no life whatsoever. Even the cries of crows sound better than beeps. "Rus, whither are you speeding so?" To

points G and V, like a piece of information. At long last Gogol's question has been answered. Nowadays Russia knows where it goes because everyone heads for the same point:

*Nel suo profondo vidi che s'interna,
 legato con amore in un volume,
 ciò che per l'universo si squaderna:
 sustanze e accidenti e lor costume
 quasi conflati insieme, per tal modo
 che ciò ch' i' dico è un semplice lume.*

In its depth I saw ingathered, bound by love in one single volume, that which is dispersed in leaves throughout the universe: substances and accidents and their relations, as though fused together in such a way that what I tell is but a simple light.

'Are you alluding to the global village?' asks my publisher. 'What's wrong with it? After so many centuries of disputes and wars we seem to be on common ground, the entire world population. Do Coke machines disturb you in Japan? Do they interpose between you and temples? They're so small in comparison, aren't they? These machines are small and they provide refreshment to weary tourists. Wherever I go, I always stay at Hiltons because I hate to get disorientated. Why should a businessman waste his energy on trifles such as finding his way or struggling with taps? We've got other things to do.'

IN THE MARGIN

Postmodernists seldom fail to point out that a book is not bounded by its cover, constantly outgrowing itself in accordance with the reader's attitude towards it, which may be likened to what a physicist experiences during his quantum tests. But in this essay I am more concerned with the *material* expansion of books—with their multiplication table, so to speak, as I leave aside open-endedness and other attempts at the author's life. Those authors whose deaths were solemnly proclaimed by Roland Barthes seem to be aware of their works' fragility which may depend on the sheer number of the copies in circulation; and yet in this day and age no Plato will ever yearn for the destruction of Democritus' philosophical heritage. Of course, books are pulped and recycled; and very often they do not reach the nearest printing press as if determined to remain faithful to their authors, to the writing desks in the drawers of which they are hoarded. Motivated by his instinct for self-preservation—which means, first and foremost, the preservation of his works—a writer may have a wish to multiply his novel without re-writing it exactly as it stands. So he puts a part of it elsewhere in the hope that the separate fragment will survive the main text, inciting a distant scholar to probe into the mystery of the lost and forgotten manuscript.

In my youth I was very fond of Dostoevsky who, at Katkov's insistence, removed the chapter *At Thikhon's* from *The Possessed*. (The novel was serialised in *The Russian Herald*.) But he was free to put the chapter back again when the novel was about to appear in a book form; however, he let it lie dormant in his writing desk as if afraid of the impact that Stavrogin's confession might have on prudish readers. No wonder it was not included in the twelve-volume Soviet edition I had at my disposal in my bedroom. What is more, only a 'decorous' part of it was available in the edition I bought in Paris, hoping to avail myself of the hero's viciousness at last. Only at the age of thirty-two did I learn what his secret was about and why Dostoevsky had refused to let the cat out of the bag. (At this point I am tempted to bring in the cat I am playing with when in need of a break. Why? To multiply this essay *poetically*? To expand its abstract space so it can reach reality?) Of course Dostoevsky's motives were quite different from what I described in the previous paragraph: he was already a famous writer whose novels were unlikely to sink into oblivion. Nevertheless, he made the book outgrow itself to such a point that even a stage version of it I saw at the Odéon in Paris paid tribute to this additional space. Yury Lubimov asked some of his actors to hand out the text of Stavrogin's confession to the audience; in other words, the play outgrew the stage.

I have no room to enumerate the pleasures one may derive from reading Flaubert's and Proust's discarded drafts: margins are not very wide after all. At some point Musil refrained from following a straight line and let his novel expand sideways as he began to re-write some earlier episodes and note down odds and ends on what looked like ordinary sheets of paper—the margins in disguise. These odds and ends, which rival in size the novel proper, are published in a separate volume by Rowohlt. (Another multiplication table.) Depriving the reader of an urge to tamper with his *roman-fleuve*, he

seemed to close it as he painstakingly produced another and yet another version of what had already been said in a 'definitive' way, to use the formula that music critics are so keen upon. Instead of the author's death we thus contemplate his life which spreads around, bifurcates in all directions, taking root in parallel, perpendicular and diagonal worlds. Tolstoy's story *The Devil* also bifurcates at the end: another multiplication table, another violation of the reader's rights.

In my poems I often write about unwritten poems at which one can hint only in the margin. 'My work,' said Wittgenstein about his *Tractatus*, 'consists of two parts, the one presented here plus all that I have not written. And it is precisely this second part which is the important one.' Wordsworth could not refrain from re-writing *The Prelude*. Andrey Bely went even further: there exist as many as seven versions of his most important novel *Petersburg*. (I prefer the first one which is larger and richer than others.) These are written parts. What about unwritten ones? How many of them did Andrey Bely have in mind while working on the seventh version?

Unwritten works that poets feel and think about are material somehow; at least they do not lodge only in a semiologist's mind. The fragment that follows is material enough, although the event or the non-event unfolds in a non-material, intangible world—that of the Hereafter. The protagonist is a Soviet lawyer whose words, in the discarded draft of the book, I italicized to pass him off as a modern counterpart of Jesus Christ. *The Last Days of Eternity* is a sort of anti-Bible, for the protagonist is an Antichrist whom my shabby Christ attempts to save as he looks for him in bogs, influenced no doubt by the word '*Bog*' that means 'God' in Russian. Why did I remove this episode from the novel? Because the latter could be reconstructed on the basis of the former—like Dublin copied from *Ulysses*.

A FRAGMENT FROM *THE LAST DAYS OF ETERNITY*

I don't wish to be reminded of my motherland, and I would have forgotten it a long time ago had my clients been of a different origin. They are all Russian; I am Russian too. Why? What error did I commit in the bowels of the earth?

On Petrovsky Square, brilliantly lit with arc lamps, a squad of Soviet soldiers are kept always in readiness to receive victims from the great prison. No time is wasted. Some sailors have contracted the execution habit. They volunteer for the service and cannot sleep unless they have shot someone dead. I cannot sleep either. I hear the words and see Petrovsky Square, the arc lamps, the squad of soldiers. I never killed anyone. I defended everybody. Those whom I defended were killed. I was enjoined not to obstruct the wheels of justice.

Somebody lives here. But I don't know who it is. An executed criminal? I am sure the person living here is a man, otherwise I would already have made the acquaintance of this person. If this person were a woman, I mean. I would have ferreted this woman out. But I feel this person is a man. Men don't use the same perfumes. Is it a question of smell or sound? Sometimes I hear his footfalls. Do they progress in any direction? They do. In my direction. They get closer and closer. Out of curiosity I would already have opened a door if there had been any door to open in my area. Does he intend to kill me, avenging himself on an innocent bystander? Is it my fault that his family was not notified of his pending execution? His family was not even notified of his funeral, if any. Is it my fault? I can notify his family now, if that is what he wants me to do. Another letter or a telephone call. Will it make any difference? His family was probably executed in the same manner, in another courtyard. Was he notified of their execution?

When the number of victims became too large for the courtyard to hold, fresh victims were placed on top of the previous ones. Naked bodies, naked corpses. The dead are not ashamed of their nakedness.

I was not even a lawyer in those days. They needed no lawyers. Why didn't they shoot me in the nape of the neck? Is it my fault that I was not executed? Their motto was, 'Better execute ten innocent people than spare one who is guilty.' Perhaps I was the twelfth person on their list, in their files. And I was innocent. An innocent bystander.

I was enjoined to become Lenin's lawyer and the order has not been countermanded yet. So I am supposed to defend him to the best of my ability. By defending Lenin I shall defend myself. Against God's wrath. I will not defend myself any longer. It is a waste of time. I will defend *him*. 'Lenin was an innocent bystander. He had no idea what was going on in the Lubyanka's cells and cellars. On squares, in courtyards. In parks and gardens. In woods, on beaches. I repeat, Lenin was an innocent bystander. And I will do my utmost to prove it.' The mightier my proofs, the quicker I shall be transferred to Paradise.

Where does Lenin live? I must talk to him. I cannot devise the style of his defence without his participation and advice. He was pestering me yesterday, running like a dog by my side. Is Lenin a new incarnation of my dog? I spurned and kicked him. I would not have done so had I known for sure he was my dog. I did not need him yesterday. I mean Lenin, not my dog. I need him today. Where is he? Did he take offence and move to another area of the Hereafter? Did he find another lawyer?

He cannot be far away from where I crawl. I don't know where his prison is located, but I am sure it is not far away from my prison. Nothing is far from my prison except God.

An hour ago I saw Lenin's wife. I saw her face in the penumbra and quickened my step, eager to pump information out of her. 'Where's your husband?' I was about to ask her. 'Why have you left him alone?' She was not alone. She was walking arm in arm with a living man and I turned away, hesitant and confused. What should I do? I asked myself. I answered the question by hiding behind an oak tree. I decided to follow them and elucidate the mystery of their relationship. Was that mystery a wide-open secret, *le secret de Polichinelle*, as the French would put it? Perhaps the whole Hereafter was gossiping about Lenin's wife and her betrayals. I did not know anything. Being Lenin's lawyer I had to know everything about this love affair. Lenin was likely to murder her lover. Not out of jealousy but because her lover was a human being. Lenin cannot tolerate human beings, dead or alive. He has to remove them from his sight by killing or otherwise destroying them. I thought it would be easier to get Lenin off the hook this time on account of the nature of his murder. *Crime passionnel*, as the French define it. I began at once to rehearse my speech:

'My client has been faithful to his wife ever since he saw her in the mausoleum. He looks neither at local prostitutes nor at the lewd posters hanging in his bathroom. The photograph of his late wife, Nadezhda Krupskaya, no longer appeals to his senses. Yet he used to touch and kiss her photograph a great deal in the night, when his neighbours shouted suggestively in their room. My client is jealous. I'm not denying the truth of it. I also am jealous by nature. Why should I share with others what belongs to me alone? Why should you share with others what belongs to you alone? Why should we allow our mistresses to desire and court other men? It would be perverse, wouldn't it? And we are normal dead men, wise and dignified.'

And then I shall turn to his wife and speak to her in the presence of the jury. 'Do you mind my asking you a personal question?' I shall say to her. All questions are personal, I presume. 'Why do you prefer other men? Don't you realise whom you're married to? Why then did you walk arm and arm with a stranger, a foreigner? Is he more charming and, to use a modern word, sexy? He is younger, no doubt. He is alive, into the bargain. He's got no wrinkles either on his face or his belly. But he'll never become Lenin or Stalin. He'll never found the first socialist state in the world. He'll never kill anybody. He is a mediocre onlooker. A run-of-the-mill passer-by, an innocent bystander. All throughout his earthly existence he'll stay at the corner of a side street and passively watch a minute particle of Time, without stamping his personality on it. He has none anyway. His only achievement lies in the fact that he is still alive. No disease has got the better of him yet. He is alive. What is life,

dear members of the jury? Life is a transient state, compared in a great many poems to a bunch of roses withering in the backstage room of a famous actress. I knew quite a few actresses in my lifetime. My bathroom was covered with their photographs. They loved roses and the way I distributed them in their backstage rooms. Those rooms looked like tombs.'

Lenin is nowhere to be found. Had he been buried I would have violated his tomb and brought his body back to life in order to save it from the gallows or the electric chair or Petrovsky Square. But he was still on the loose, to use an expression rather common in the Hereafter, and I could not waste my time awaiting the arrival of gravediggers.

So I followed hard on his wife's heels, hoping she would bring me to his hut. As his wife was not alone, she went to the nearest woods and stripped to the skin, expecting her lover to take advantage of her generosity. He did and she began to howl, making the most of Hell's acoustics. Lenin did not appear on the scene of the crime. Perhaps he did not recognise his wife's voice. He heard it without a doubt but, for some reason, he did not recognise it. Perhaps he was screaming or writing yet another masterpiece; perhaps he was stamping his foot.

Where is he? Only his name is around here, in my red desert. I shout his name to attract his attention and to prove to God that I have not forgotten my duty. I also shout the name of God to prove that I have not forgotten Him and His mercy. Is it the right name I shout? The right and only name of God? How many names does God have? How many times has He been baptised? Kabbalists warn the living about the destructive power of God's secret name, but the inhabitants of Hell have nothing to lose. Like workmen and prisoners, we have nothing to lose except our chains. I have got no chains either. My hands and my feet can move without being obstructed on their way. On their way to what? To Lenin or to the Bible. It is not my fault that there is no Bible in Hell. Why this censorship? God is far more democratic than Satan, it seems. Hell is described pretty often in the Bible. 'And shall cast them into a furnace of fire; there shall be wailing and gnashing of teeth.' Lenin's wife was howling, not wailing. Besides, there is no fire in my area. It is cold in here and I would give anything to sit for two or three hours by the fire in my earthly house. All the same, God is more democratic and tolerant. He has not crossed His name off the Bible. The name of Satan, I mean. How many names does He have? Satan, the Devil, Lucifer. And so on and so forth.

What is more, God has not crossed Lenin off the Creation. And He continues to tolerate this name on earth and the body that corresponds to the name, however roughly. A nice lesson in democracy.

Should I defend this name against historians and ordinary Russian citizens? Lenin. Shall I shout it once more? Just in case. Lenin! His name is but a part of his substance. Will my partial defence release me from Satan's hold? I doubt it. I need Lenin's body to get my body out of here.

I wrote him a letter last Sunday:

I feel like talking tonight. Let us have a little chat. Let us have dinner, first. I am starving. Dinner by candlelight. Do you like foie gras and oysters? If you don't come within two hours I will partake of them myself.

Why didn't you come? Did you take offence and leave for Switzerland?

I kicked you because I thought you were my dog. I love my dog very much. But dogs should be kicked now and then, otherwise they stop obeying their owners. I am not your owner. God is our owner. I am your friend. I am going to help you. Don't trust God. He is the public prosecutor. Don't tell Him anything about your supposed crimes. We are pleading 'not guilty'. Does God visit you often in your hut? Tell Him about my torments. But don't give in to intimidation!

He did not come. Monday and Tuesday brought no relief, no salvation. Nobody even tried to bury me. I am not Lenin, am I? Why don't you bury me?

They buried me once. The dead sleep in their coffins, don't they? Why can't I sleep? Why do stars hang overhead? Are they microphones?

God did not come either. God is not a gravedigger, is He? Is He a body snatcher? He comes to our cemeteries and brings us back to life. He performed a similar feat many years ago. That man, by the name of Lazarus, served as a guinea pig. And now an army of Lazaruses walk around the earth, tripping over Time. But for God, I would have slept and dreamt. But for Lenin, I would not have become a Soviet lawyer. I continued my letter:

I have a book for you. Not for Satan, not for God. For you. Lenin. Is it your name or have you changed it once more? Have you taken another pseudonym? Do you fear that God will find you and torture you in His Hell? Do you think God needs your name to find you and pin you down? Do you think God uses directories?

I have a book for you. It is no directory. It is entitled, *Conditions of the Working Class in England*. Do you want to read it? Come here. I have other books in my bushes: *The Destiny of Capitalism in Russia*, *An Outline of Our Post-Reform Social Economy*. Amidst my bushes you will study the theoretical side of peasant husbandry. In my valleys and meadows you will test your conclusions by practical experience, by direct contact with peasant life, by conversing with peasants themselves. And I shall listen to your conversations and record them in my notebooks. I might need these notes during the forthcoming trials. Do come and pay me a visit! I promise to tell you something about your wife, about the way she spends her leisure hours outdoors. I am collecting as much information as I can on your wife's behaviour in my woods. Do you think she walks there alone? Do you think she walks there in my company, talking about you and your achievements? Do you think she walks there in the company of a nun, looking for the white mushrooms you were so fond of in your youth?

Come quickly! You will solve all my problems and push me over to the dinner table. You are strong, aren't you? I should have oiled the wheels a few years ago. Am I supposed to get as far as Paradise in this rusty wheelchair? And what about the roots and ruins?

Did they put me in Lenin's wheelchair? There is no writing desk before me. Was his chair driven away from his desk by a gust of wind? Did the same wind propel him to the confines of the Hereafter? Out of my reach? Or was it another wind, another force, another devil? Did Lenin die at last, bequeathing me his wheelchair and misery? How shall I liberate my soul from slavery without Lenin's trials? You don't save a corpse from death, do you? You should save it from life.

THE FIRST DAY OF ETERNITY

Should I adopt Proust's method? His doppelgänger goes to a party – I wish *I* could go to a party right now – and meets eternal recurrence on the way – not in the street but in the court of the Prince de Guermantes' residence – *In the Court of the Crimson King* I would have written, had I been talking about my past forever lost in the Soviet Union. I listened to this recording on the eve of my final departure from Moscow, from the skyscraper where I had lived for 20 years – in the Fifties, in the Sixties. *His* doppelgänger stepped back as if setting off for the past and 'struck my foot against some unevenly cut flagstones leading to a carriage house. In recovering my balance, I put my foot on a stone that was a little lower than the one next to it; immediately all my discouragement vanished before a feeling of happiness which I had experienced at different moments of my life, at the sight of trees I thought I recognised when driving around Balbec, or the church spires of Martinville, or the savour of a *madeleine*, dipped in herb tea –'

I am prepared to strike my feet and hands against flagstones, ordinary stones, walls, the wall immortalised by Pink Floyd, rocks, trees, flying saucers – against *anything* one can find in the universe and beyond its bounds. Well, I might bang my writing desk with a spoon, hoping to recall an episode from my childhood in the course of which I often used knives, forks and spoons to attract my parents' attention to my needs and caprices. My mother usually kissed me in those moments, for it was the only way to stop my concrete music and I might recall one of these kisses to vie with Proust for the pedestal on which the word 'tenderness' is engraved. 'I banged the dining table with the spoon and suddenly a feeling of happiness –'

This stratagem does not seem to work in spite of the number of spoons I have used ever since I hit upon the idea of coming to terms with my happiness, whatever it is, and also with whatever is related to the past I am supposed to recapture in order to reach the kingdom of eternity or the court of the Crimson King – eternal recurrence, in other words. Of course the *madeleine* about which so many pages have been written in the 20th century seems to suggest another way of dealing with the code I have to crack so as to read the secret message of God related to eternity and its whereabouts. I ate a lot in the course of my Soviet life – in spite of the food shortages about which no journalist dared to write in Soviet newspapers where one could find only five-year plans and bumper maize crops. I ate sausages and eggs, black puddings – they were actually brown – and bread. But even if I dip a slice of brown bread into a cup of tea, I shall not experience the feeling of happiness minutely described in the final volume of Proust's gargantuan *roman-fleuve*.

Just as when I had tasted the *madeleine*, all anxiety as to the future, all intellectual doubt was dispelled. The misgivings that had been harassing me a moment before concerning the reality of my literary gifts, and even of literature itself, were suddenly banished as if by magic. But this

time I made a firm resolve that I would not be satisfied to leave the question unanswered (as I did the day I tasted of a Madeline dipped in herb tea) as to why, without my having worked out any new line of reasoning or found any decisive argument, the difficulties that had seemed insoluble a short time before had now lost all their importance.

For the life of me I cannot see why Proust's intellectual doubts and the anxiety he feels whenever he gets in touch with his future submerged in a sort of icy river – I, for one, shiver with cold at the approach of the future – and even his fear of death disappear as he dips his numerous *madeleines* in a huge samovar in which there is enough hot water for a dozen feelings of happiness. All right, you find the sensation you have been looking for and you even feel the happiness which seemed to have gone forever, leaving you high and dry in both the present and future, in a no-happiness, death-permeated land. So what? It is not the *madeleine* the taste of which you enjoyed many years ago. And your aunt is no longer there: you cannot count on her tenderness and kisses, on the softness of her hands. And the feeling itself is too impalpable to guarantee you top-quality service in Paradise: it is not even the ticket brandished by Ivan Karamazov during his discussion with Alyosha.

I honestly think that this procedure has more than its fair share of frustrations because the people involved in the episode you have painstakingly recalled are no longer capable of making things easier for you through their physical, tangible presence. You await their kisses and hands, but only your writing desk stands in front of your demands and yearnings. You end up stroking – or striking out of sheer desperation – the three-century-old wood which is not likely to react and stroke you in its turn: inanimate objects have no souls. You end up calling it names instead of uttering your mother's melodious name which, within the bounds of your brain, is identical to the name of God; and yet you are not permitted to utter the latter's sacred name whenever you are in need of a pick-me-up – even if your happiness and life depend on it.

Of course you are allowed to find solace in the bottle or interior monologues. 'Good afternoon, Mother. I'm delighted you've agreed to pay me a visit. Do you remember our pastries, our parties? I haven't forgotten them. Whenever I dip an opera in my coffee, I recall your smile, your tenderness, your love and even the breast I sucked throughout my babyhood – at least for one year. I don't remember exactly when I began to get accustomed to industrial milk – I might have been weaned at five weeks of age, like a calf. I know calves better than humans, I'm sorry to say. Actually I've never been able to put up with factory farming and even organic food can't hold a candle to your milk, to any mother's milk. Nevertheless, I remember you when pouring some milk into a cup destined for the tea I buy in the *Palais des Thés*. The tea in question is called "Margaret's Hope DJ 3 'Pure AV2'".'

If the pain in your soul does not subside, your mother answers you: she used to console you with boxes of chocolates and words. 'Why don't you drink herb tea instead?' your mother says to you.

'Because I'm not Marcel Proust.'

'Who *are* you? Are you my son?'

‘Of course I am. Don’t you recognise me, Mother?’

‘Of course I do, but my memory is not what it used to be. Do you remember my memory?’

‘I’m sorry – I’ve forgotten your memory.’

‘I’m supposed to offer you a few words of consolation. Here they are – you’re brilliant, eternal and your works are eternal too.’

‘Thank you, Mother.’

‘Goodbye. You don’t need me any more. Mission accomplished.’

‘I need you, I need you, I need you,’ you shout. Alas, your mother no longer hears you. You are unable to find solace in the course of such encounters because you need your mother not only when you drink a cup of tea and eat a pastry you buy in Versailles, but also when you eat a goat’s cheese salad. You expect your mother to say, ‘Toss the salad with a vinaigrette dressing’ and hear only your thoughts that say to you over and over again, ‘Toss the salad with a vinaigrette dressing’ or ‘Would you like oil and vinegar on your salad?’

After such an encounter you are likely to talk to yourself for hours because your frustration and disappointment do not vanish into thin air as you reflect upon what you lived through many years ago when you did not have to trip over stones in order to feel happy. You just *lived* such and such a moment and your mother or aunt were by your side, not in their tombs, in Australia, in New Zealand; in other words, you didn’t have to rise and go somewhere – to Australia, to the centre of the Earth – to relish the touch of the hands you were in love with for the simple reason that you had always known them. And now you drink your tea and sometimes an image comes out of the blue or from your heart to keep you company for a while, but you cannot rely on fleeting images, for they float in the air or fly to Mars, fleeing from your love and expectations. You cannot stop them, for all your efforts: they have no tails and your fingers will never pull them towards you, trying to tame them forever and keep them under lock and key. No keys, no locks are duty bound to control these unruly images. They know that perfectly well and continue their flight, taking the shuttle from the vale of tears to the Hereafter; and you repeat the word shuttle with a smile because the American space shuttle can be used many times to put payloads into space. So you hope you will see your aunts and Venice in the near future on condition that you take the trouble to trip over cables and rugs as often as necessary for the encounters you might avail yourself of in your room or in some courtyard.

But your smile disappears – do smiles also vanish into thin air? – as you realise there is a discrepancy between a sensation, which has a rather volatile temper, and the real world where people can sit down by your side and even empty your cup of tea. If you are in despair on account of your memory that is unable to obliterate a painful episode, letting it fly to Mars or Venus, your friends say to you, ‘Don’t think about it any more.’

‘But I can’t forget it.’

‘You should, otherwise you’ll forget your life.’

‘I wish I could forget my life because her death is inside it.’

‘Go out, take a stroll in the woods situated outside your life, your past. Go to a distant park you’ve never been to so far. Do you remember Paul? Apparently he’s turned over a new leaf and he’s not smoking any more. To forget someone’s death is easier than to stop smoking.’

You do not smoke so you cannot compare your present state of mind and heart to the procedure suggested by doctors and friends who send you to some clinic where they may cure you from your addictions by making you vomit and curse tobacco, drugs and alcohol every two hours. You cannot compare your pain to anything you see in the world where you have no wish to live because you are haunted by your memories and the impossibility of bringing them back without tripping over rugs and dead bodies. And even if you fall instead of vomiting, your dead relatives and feelings will not come back forever, however long you might wait for them on benches, in your armchairs and on Jacob’s ladder which usually gives you access to Paradise where your paradisiacal sensations seem to have been stored along with their sources.

‘Human error has been blamed for the air crash.’ You are likely to come across such a piece of information when reading any newspaper, not necessarily the *Herald Tribune* or *Le Figaro*. But the disappearance you have to deal with in order to recapture time cannot and should not involve humans and their numerous errors because no one killed your aunts, your mother and your grandmother: they died in their beds. Your grandmother died a natural death as if dying was natural, lawful, approved by the multitude and the government’s edict against life. If you accept death, you deny life, as a sage put it many centuries ago. I, for one, do not accept death and I blame time for its inhuman errors on account of which we lose our aunts, sensations, feelings, love-hate relationships, and many other things; without them, life has no meaning, no content, no depth. But for time, we would never have been born and there is no death without life. Time is an interfering old busybody and consequently it cannot keep its nose out of our business, out of our existence where Venice is always silhouetted on the horizon. But even Venice may die some day, for apparently it continues to sink into the soft ground.

I continue to trip over time and suddenly the poem I have been trying to remember for two months at least makes its appearance in my brain, creating the feeling of happiness that I might compare to what Marcel Proust experienced three or four times in the course of his novel fraught with memory lapses and gaps. (Why not entitle it *Bridging the Gaps*?)

The innocent and the beautiful
Have no enemy but time;
Arise and bid me strike a match
And strike another till time catch

You continue to think about time and you blame it for practically every mistake you make because you would not have made a mistake had you remained forever in your mother’s womb. Anything that

goes wrong in the office is blamed on time; no wonder you are tempted to get rid of it either by striking a match or by picking up an axe. Why not repeat Raskolnikov's crime which can also be blamed on time? Indeed, he would not have committed it had he remained in his bed and stopped walking around Petersburg. You take a walk and think about axes, money, Napoleon and so on. Walking helps you to develop your thoughts. You say to yourself, 'It took several years for her ideas to mature' as you recall your former girlfriend. You also say to yourself that girls are believed to mature faster than boys. You are not a girl, needless to say: you are likely to mature *slower* than your former girlfriend. But you continue to walk and you walk faster and faster to make your ideas mature and get to the end of the road in the twinkling of an eye. You reach the end of the road, retrace your steps, go home, pick up an axe and murder time once and for all.

Suppose you stay at home. You are lying on your bed and have no intention of going out and walking around St Petersburg or any other city where there are many old women dripping with gold, jewels and other precious things. But time pays no attention to them and to you. You stay in your bed and your ideas are still at an embryonic stage: they do not mature either fast or slowly. 'We can't mature,' they say to you. 'Why don't you look at us?' they say to time. 'You should tickle us. You should spur us to faster growth.'

'If I allow you to grow, you'll kill me,' says time.

'We won't. Sometimes you simply have to trust in the goodness of human nature. We'll just murder a few old women.'

'I can't trust humans because they always do things by the rules. And I know all the rules of their game. They're determined to defeat death and the only way to defeat it –'

'We won't murder you,' repeat the ideas. 'Anyway we're just platonic ideas so we cannot act. We're in heaven, far from the Earth.'

'Like God?'

'Yes,' say the ideas.

'God has always wished to murder me and my cronies – my minutes, hours and what not. Don't you remember the Flood? Besides, you're always talking about the end of the world. I didn't exist before the Creation. I wouldn't exist after the end of the world.'

According to a scientist whose name I do not know, life is a group of forces that fight against death. The outcome of this struggle is a foregone conclusion, but as long as one lasts and eats, there are ingredients that form a sort of force one cannot discount, for a so-called new lease of life is due to these forces struggling with conservatives and their retrograde steps – with the second law of thermodynamics, in other words.

You eat a morsel of food and a sort of force penetrates your body where it comes across another force symbolised by the aforementioned law which, however, is not the only law reigning in your body: there has to be some give and take in any healthy organism. With the morsel about to enter the fray, the fighting looks set to continue and it does continue as it prevents your death from carrying

your body away at once or in the near future. Some material leaves your body; another comes in and your soul counts arrivals and departures upon which your life and the structure of your body depend. And you are in the dark about the numbers known only to your soul and God: you have no idea when you will die unless your doctor tells you the absolute truth – assuming that he knows it himself.

At first there is an order provided and taken care of by your mother, by her womb and breasts; then an infection sets in and you begin to rot as you go down the road guiding you to the end of the road, to the real end of the world, because your end means the end of the world: there is no world beyond your representation. And you cannot represent any world while lying in your coffin. Actually you no longer need any world, although you are rather cramped for space: even pharaohs are cramped in their pyramids. So it is better to represent the Hereafter while living in this vale of tears which, according to some philosophers, does not need our representations, being on its own in the universe where there are many inhabited planets, many Christs and Crosses. The more you picture to yourself the Hereafter, the better. After all, the Hereafter is likely to get used to your obsequious representation and reward you for your loyalty and flattery.

Food and fresh air constantly build new structures within your body, but factory farming and pollution destroy them as they endeavour to overthrow your government, alias your soul, and take over responsibility for your project, to use their language. They seem to believe that human bodies have never belonged to the category of ‘solid objects’: they are just scientific research *projects*, thrown down from heaven for the sake of universal science. And whenever you speak to them about God, they answer, ‘Has He had any experience of managing large projects?’ At least they seem to think that humanity is a *large* project, not a mere pawn in a cosmic political dispute.

You undergo a constant metamorphosis as you continue to live and look at yourself in a mirror which does not contradict the hypothesis that you are still the same person. Your face is familiar to many colleagues of yours, otherwise they would not recognise you in the streets or in the office. But inside your body you continuously turn into somebody else, for your cells forsake you as they yield up their land to the occupying forces; and other cells replace them, determined to change you utterly and say to you and others, ‘A terrible beauty is born.’ You cannot see this beauty, but you know you are not the same, whatever your looking glass can say to you, bent on reassuring your anxiety which drives you mad whenever you think about cells and their fragility, their disloyalty.

There are cells of noble stock and apparently these cells do not change, keeping their original shape and contents because they must be prepared to help you if you encounter an insurmountable difficulty as you plod through the mud described in so many books – in *The Possessed*, for instance. Thanks to these cells, a fly can swap its antenna for a wing and you can have two heads instead of one, for the Russians say, ‘Two heads are better than one,’ meaning that if two people meet and talk, they are likely to take a wise decision – far superior and wiser than the one taken by one head, especially if this head belongs to a dunce. But I, for one, do not need another head because one headache is better

than two, whatever they say about the number of thoughts one can handle if one has two heads instead of one.

So a multitude of cells either come or go and they do not speak about Michelangelo, contrary to what may be supposed by well-read individuals; and you do not count these cells, being weary of your own metamorphoses. Some of these cells outstay their welcome and rot on the spot, sprinkling your inner organs with poison that is duty bound to make things easier for your death; and yet death needs no assistants, no exterior help because he is omnipotent. Many theologians wonder who would become number one if death and God met each other on the tennis court. Two rackets, one ball; and this ball is humanity.

Whatever we say about cells is related to the genuine end of the world. But there are many ends and many worlds, and we do not need Giordano Bruno to unearth fresh evidence of this truth thanks to which we might realise that whatever we do is bound to come to an end. At another end – the false end of the world, just another fake – we find the Siberians who kneel on the snow in the middle of Siberian woods and sing, ‘God, illuminate our souls with your light, warm up our souls.’ And obediently, submissively, God comes with a torch and an electric heater; He plugs the heater into the right-hand socket – the Siberians know where it is located – and says to the Siberians, ‘You’re so cold – come and warm your hands by the fire.’ The Siberians know that both the torch and heater are the only symbols of fire, and they go to these symbols and feel happy; yet this feeling of happiness has nothing in common with what Proust describes at the end of his novel or life.

An issue of *Newsweek* devotes a few pages to Siberian Christs who wear white robes and traditionally emerge at the top of some hill or other to bless their followers and speak to them once again about the apocalypse they have predicted many times since their births in this world of tears and phony smiles. Their followers live in the Abode of Dawn City and this Abode features a few villages where many people can pray and kneel down either in front of altars or near Christs who say to them round the clock, ‘It was prophesied that I would return to finish what I started.’

‘What did you start and where?’ ask the followers.

‘In days of yore, in Israel.’

‘Are you a Jew? We don’t like the Jews.’

‘I am a Russian Christ.’

‘Do you know our Russian Confucius?’ say other followers.

‘I know only my apostles.’

‘We worship a deity called the Queen of Copper Mountain in the remote Ural Mountain forests.’

‘The Siberian goddess Anastasia?’ asks Christ.

‘No, not at all. Please, don’t confuse these goddesses. Anastasia is a naked blonde deity. Our Queen is a brunette.’

‘We prefer Anastasia to your Queen,’ say other followers.

‘Why?’

‘Over the past three years, the Anastasia legend has inspired thousands of disillusioned Russians to join a new-age exodus to the woods and countryside across the nation.’

‘Do you represent the “Anastasia Back-to-Land Movement”?’ asks Christ.

‘Yes.’

‘Do you meditate naked under these trees?’

‘Yes. We escaped from big cities to create new social models, as the state systems have been destroyed by liars and outrageously corrupt managers. We are exhausted by decades of corruption, terrorism, ethnic violence and fading morality in Russia.’

‘They may put you under arrest,’ says the Antichrist.

‘We go deep into the taiga and worship bears – nobody can forbid us from doing that,’ say other followers.

‘It is time to settle in the Ark,’ says Christ and his followers go to the Ark inside which they play games with their computers while listening to the Sermon on the Mount.

‘We are allowed to play with our computers,’ say the followers, ‘but we don’t use make-up, shampoo, animal food, weapons and cars.’

‘How do you manage to survive?’ asks a journalist.

‘We survive on what we grow in our gardens,’ say the followers.

Christ does not talk of any particular date for Doomsday, but He talks a lot all the same because His followers should be reminded that ‘there’s no free time in the School of Life where you’ve come to study,’ as He puts it. He talks to them through their computers and they play with His words, linking them to numbers and symbols. He says to them, ‘You should mobilise all life potentials on the brink of a precipice’ and they play with the precipice he talks about, turning it into Hell or Paradise. Their mice provide them with a ladder and they climb up and down, plucking forbidden fruit and singing Soviet songs. ‘Precipice means salvation,’ they say to each other and their mice agree with them as they draw the outline of the Ark and then colour it in.

Instead of going to Siberia, which might have allowed him to join this group of followers and help them finish the Ark, Proust sticks to his art, hoping it might recapture time and pave the way to eternity where all his impressions and sensations have been stored since the Big Bang. ‘What we call reality is a certain relationship between sensations and memories which surround us at the same time.’ Actually I do not care about reality as such; I care about immortality or eternity and I keep wondering if they are real or not. ‘Now, if at the moment of this resurrection – the uneven stones again; or the *madeleine* – instead of obliterating the present we can continue to be aware of it: if we can retain the sense of our own identity, and at the same time live fully in that moment which we had for long believed to be no more, then, and only then, we are at last in full possession of lost time.’

You recall an episode from your past – some believe you can recall the future – and you continue to live *fully* as if there was only the present in your life; you are reluctant to tear yourself

away from it because you have to focus all your thoughts and energy upon the present if you really wish to live it fully. If the past distracts your attention from the luminous point of the present, you will lose both the present and the past and no Proustian effort will ever enable you to recapture anything except your wayward thoughts and crazy ideas. But you agree with Proust and you say to yourself you cannot do otherwise because you like his prose, and your likes and dislikes play an important role in your life: you base your independence and freedom upon these idiosyncratic aspects of your personality.

And Proust seems to impart to me and others that you should not choose any episode from the past, for you cannot tame – it is not Shakespeare's shrews, as I pointed out earlier – a thing in itself that is entitled to choose whatever it pleases in order to please or infuriate your body and mind. All right, I shall read and re-read Proust's instructions that impart to me the truth about which I was unaware in my childhood for the simple reason that I did not read Proust's novel in my childhood – either in the original or in Russian; otherwise I would not have behaved like a neophyte, picking and choosing appropriate memories. Memories are not toys and they are not scattered on your floor in expectation of your train of thought being focused upon their qualities, beauties and sentimental, almost nostalgic aspects. It is they that rule the waves and particles, and you have no say in the matter unless you are bent on spoiling everything, including the fun you may profit from, if you let your memories come out of the blue, of the past, of the future, of the Hereafter.

'I must try to interpret the sensations as the indication of corresponding laws and ideas; I must try to think, that is to say, bring out of the obscurity what I had felt, and convert it into a spiritual equivalent.' What could I bring out of the obscurity that Proust illuminates as he tries to piece eternity together from fragments? Nothing, not even my aunt Angelina whose *mundstuck* or cigarette holder I still remember as I try to piece my life together, failing pitifully, I am sorry to say, because my aunt smoked her cigarettes instead of offering me a dozen *madeleines*: if you do not remember anything upon visualising the eternal cigarette holder, you can rely on this pastry – or whatever it is – to bring you up to speed with eternity that does not budge from where it stands, lies, sleeps and relaxes.

I think I retain the sense of my own identity insofar as I am capable of such an exploit, without becoming someone else in the process – Samuel Johnson, for instance. My body undergoes a metamorphosis and apparently – not *apparently*, I am afraid – the cells I welcome every day and every night during which I am born to misery once and for all weigh 80 kilos and my own weight never exceeds 80 kilos; at least I have some affinities with my newborn cells, with their weight and might. I can see neither their weight nor their might, but I listen to yet another CD which sheds light on what happens within my body and probably on the stars I look at every night, for I wish I could reach them after my death in my endeavour to find another body and identity, another incarnation and fruition. Coming to fruition; searching for lost time. Aren't they identical twins? Aren't we *all* identical twins? No, no, no. No way.

I cannot see the cells and yet they play their games inside my body as if they had no other playground at their disposal – why not use formal expressions that always bridge the gaps? – and I am watching their lances and rifles from afar – from the Hereafter where you are bound to learn everything about your life, cancers and achievements because the Hereafter's purpose in life is to scan the faces of the human beings who decay and die, hoping to land up in Paradise. 'You have a look of utter devastation on your face,' says the Hereafter or St Peter. What does it matter who says or thinks your face is devastated? What counts is the *source* of this devastation. Did you identify with Stravinsky's opera *The Rake's Progress*? Are you a Christian martyr? If you are, you go to Paradise; otherwise you land up in Purgatory: Stravinsky's hero repents at the end of the opera, in the middle of his life. And where's the end of the opera of life? Where is its middle?

I no longer remember anything about art and its history, but I am curious to know what will happen next inside my body and soul where there are a multitude of cells, I suppose, and some of these cells are brimming with sins and bugs. It is said that if your gene which is in charge of development and the cerebral cortex falls ill, you can *literally* lose your head. Suppose that your chief gene's cells metastasise as you walk down the street, looking at a series of windows beyond which there are many bugs, microbes, cancers and what not. All of a sudden your head says goodbye to your neck and falls down – because your gene fell ill last Saturday, during your meeting with a woman you have been in love with for many years. You should not forget that neither your genes nor your past and future cancers respect your feelings and steer clear of your body whenever it lies in bed with an object of its desire and erotic dreams. Actually they often choose this stretch of time for their invasion of your most powerful gene and it finally succumbs after being pounded with heavy artillery for more than three days. But popes, priests and ordinary citizens continue to speak to us about love as if this wonderful, God-sanctioned feeling could protect us from those armies and their viruses, their ferocious paws, claws and cannonballs.

And Proust speaks about art as if it was a sort of panacea thanks to which we could travel to the past and find exactly what we lost many years ago when we were able to eat pastries without taking notice of the forthcoming diabetes and its consequences. In those days we dipped whatever we could in our cups: sugar, chocolate, ice cream, cookies and many other products which are not usually associated with tea – either Ceylon tea or Darjeeling. Now we can also dip in our tea a lot of cakes and boxes of chocolate, but we are not allowed to *eat* them. Our memory continues to die, unassisted by *madeleines* and herbs; and so does our soul that relies a lot on the feeling of love we experienced in our youth when we loved many more people, being blind to mankind's inherent evil.

The grandeur or real art, on the contrary,...is to rediscover, grasp again and lay before us that reality from which we live so far removed and from which we become more and more separated as the formal knowledge which we substitute for it grows in thickness and imperviousness – that

reality which there is grave danger we might die without ever having known and yet which is simply our life, life as it really is, life disclosed at last and made clear...

As you read Proust's novel it becomes clear that an experience he writes about with gusto cannot return to him (and to us) in its original form, and what we all get instead amounts only to a few sheets of paper on which a clear description of the past murders and buries the protagonist as well as his aunts and dear friends. By writing about our youth, we do not even extract all these people from their tombs and no police officer will ever charge us with violating the eternal rest of corpses. Writers are *not* body snatchers, whatever they write about and however much they may love their subject matters and protagonists who continue to eat, drink and wait for their mothers in their beds. They just say to the reader, 'Here's the past. That's what I experienced many years ago. I've just recaptured it because I still have enough energy to boil water and pour this water into a teapot where a lot of tea leaves await it impatiently. Actually I shouldn't really *boil* the water I'm prepared to sacrifice for the sake of my tea and remembrance. Water boils at 212° Fahrenheit or 100° Centigrade, but this temperature is liable to destroy the elegance of our tea, its manifold bouquet and fragrance. What we should do has nothing to do with this temperature, with boiling water and its pernicious influence, its destructive character. What we should aim at is the harmony that can be achieved only if we restrain our boiler's ambitions and ask it to become more realistic and stop working when our water's temperature reaches 90°. Then we'll be able to recapture the past all the more easily since our aunt would never allow us to pour boiling water into our cup of tea. Our darling Darjeeling. Dear reader, let me introduce you to my aunt, my tea and my memory. In a way, my memory is a thing of the past: it can be treated and described along with the dead who are unlikely to come back and salute us, even if we devote more than a thousand pages to their lives and deaths. Their shadows come back to us unexpectedly, but they'll never rise from the dead because death is their lot and no one – not even God – can do anything about it.'

In Siberia they have a knack of coming up with the ideas that have been known to humanity from time immemorial, for they are eager to invent something – a *perpetuum mobile*, for instance; and they do not know it is pointless to spend one's time on such inventions. Their wheels turn for a while and then come to a standstill, unable to go on, and they construct other wheels, other ropes which you have to pull at first – once and for all, as they assure you upon reading a lot of scepticism in your eyes. You pull the ropes, the strings and whatever you can pull so as not to contradict and oppose them, otherwise you might attend yet another performance of their hysterics for which their neighbours are trying to find 'the final remedy', as they put it. It is true that you are itching to pull some trigger or other, but you continue to comply with their wishes until everything stops, their hysterics included: they just sit quietly for hours staring into the distance, thinking of what might have been.

One of the men I know and meet whenever I go to Moscow goes on trying to build a time-machine, inspired by both H. G. Wells and Marcel Proust, which is scarcely surprising, given that he is both an inventor and a novelist. 'Do you know that Proust's characters walk on stilts?' he said.

'You mean, he speaks about stilts at the end of the novel?'

'Yes. His characters occupy in time a place far more considerable than that allotted to them in space. So they walk on stilts, touching simultaneously various epochs of their lives. They plunge to the bottom of time, in other words. And on their way to its bottom, they explore their past – and their former lives, come to think of it. Proust recaptures the past, but I go one better and grasp their former lives, their journeys to Atlantis.'

'So why don't you buy a pair of stilts?' I said.

'I do have a pair of stilts at home,' he said. 'I don't use them any more, I'm sorry to say.'

'Why?'

'I fall too often.'

'Do you fall to the bottom of time?'

'I know I can't recover anything through an intellectual effort, choosing an episode from the past for scrutiny,' he said. 'This episode must come to me on its own, unaided, on its own initiative. I shouldn't always have to tell you what to do – use your initiative. That's how I talk to the past, but it doesn't listen to me. Do you remember what Michurin said about this predicament? "We can't wait for nature's gifts. We should wrench them from her." How to wrench life from the past?'

'Your pair of stilts is not really a time-machine,' I said. 'You should construct it.'

'Do you think Proust constructs it whenever he describes a landscape, a face, a feeling?' And he launched into a lengthy quotation from his favourite novel:

At a bend in the road I experienced, suddenly, that special pleasure, which bore no resemblance to any other, when I caught sight of the twin steeples of Martinville, on which the setting sun was plying, while the movement of the carriage and the windings of the road seemed to keep them continually changing their position; and then of a third steeple, that of Vieuxvicq, which although separated from them by a hill and a valley, and rising from rather higher ground in the distance, appeared none the less to be standing by their side.

'You see,' he went on, 'I regard this carriage as a time machine – *another* time machine, as a matter of fact, because there are many of them in the novel, many time machines. The first and best time machine is Proust's style, the way he adjusts words, sentences, a turn of phrase and his turn of mind to whatever he sees and recalls while he goes along such and such stretch of time – or while he drives in his carriage, exploring both time and space. He adjusts a turn of phrase to a road that is full of twists and turns. At some point these turns coincide and build up the everlasting present. Doesn't Marcus Aurelius talk about this in *his* book?'

‘Many others talk about it as well – you, for instance,’ I said. ‘But why not call a spade a spade? The past is the past and it is a thing of the past. And whatever you write, it will never become a slice of the present. A few days ago I bought *Newsweek* and read the following description of a religious ceremony: “Cupping candles in their hands, wrapped in white silk and knit robes, nearly 3,000 people knelt on the snow in the middle of the Siberian woods. Tall pine trees served as the walls of their church; the stage for their chorus was carved out of ice. Fluffy snowflakes landed on their heads as they sang their prayers.” Of course you can recapture this particular slice of time by going to Siberia, by meeting these fanatics and attending their ceremonies. But for all that you won’t be able to recapture the past because you’ll see only 2,800 people.’

‘Why? What happened to the others? Did they bury themselves in the snow? Did anybody kill them?’

‘The snow must have melted,’ I said. ‘It’s May Day today.’

A DISCARDED POEM

It was then that a tall young man who had remained standing perfectly still within a carriage gateway, two houses lower down, stepped out into the street and walking up rapidly flung another bomb over the heads of the crowd. It actually struck the Minister-President on the shoulder as he stooped over his dying servant, then falling between his feet exploded with a terrific concentrated violence, striking him dead to the ground, finishing the wounded man, and practically annihilating the empty sledge in the twinkling of an eye.

Joseph Conrad, *Under Western Eyes*

A CRISIS IN RUSSIA

Riots, rifles, fires.
I'm watching a live broadcast.
You're looking out of the window.
You are in Moscow, I am in Versailles.

All I can do is reach you on the phone
And say a few words: 'Don't go out!'
'Don't go onto the balcony!'

It's a question of life and death.
Once again the question is asked,
Not the first time, not the last time.
Russia is keen on this question—
So keen that she's never attempted
To answer it.

I've answered it many times.
What's the use?
Thoughts, thoughts, thoughts.
Even you don't hear my answer.
Only my voice.

And you don't feel my hand.

I wrote this poem in 1993, probably on the day when a number of tanks closed in upon the so-called White House into which some rebels—I remember neither their names nor their creed—had barricaded themselves. Their unconditional surrender did not, however, result in a prolonged term of incarceration and so, after a while, the whole affair paled into insignificance beside the fear I had been prey to while watching the CNN broadcast. Of course I was sure my beloved would stay at home: though a cat in her own right, she was unlikely to display much curiosity on this particular occasion. Nevertheless, I was genuinely worried—to the point of letting a straightforward line conclude my poetical report: 'And you don't feel my hand.' Such a remark might be dropped during a stroll along a Moscow boulevard where everything—trees, bushes, benches, chess players—seems to concur with any declaration of love. Actually you need not say anything because you have two hands at your disposal, the warmth of which can be enjoyed by another pair of hands, providing a pair of gloves does not attenuate the effect of the human touch.

Never once did I attempt to remove this poem from the book entitled *Outside Chance*; and yet even on a Moscow boulevard I am not eager to utter such words or indeed offer my hand to anyone, be it a beautiful woman or a long-standing friend: I am not a touchy-feely person. Now I cannot help feeling amazed at this atypical outburst of romanticism which is all the more meaningless as the lady in question is no longer by my side. Nor do I ever call her on the phone. The poem was written well before our breaking-off. Why should it become retrospectively affected by her cruelty and my scorn, by my genuine indifference? (At present there is another cat-woman in my life.) I might let this line and indeed the whole poem stand, but for the third stanza beginning with the verse, 'It's a question of life and death' which has proven to be as inconstant as my former mistress. In the same way, Joseph Conrad's introduction to *Under Western Eyes*, especially its last sentence, betrayed its author—almost a century after being written: 'The oppressors and the oppressed are all Russians together; and the world is brought once more face to face with the truth of the saying that the tiger cannot change his stripes nor the leopard his spots.'

Like many other writers and ordinary people, Conrad yielded to the urge to put a nation into a straitjacket of the opinion he had about it and its history, disregarding the moods of time to which even genetic codes pay their tribute. According to recent research, our genetic code does not stick to the rules imposed by the doctrine of determinism which, if brought to its logical conclusion, makes us follow the itinerary settled upon right after the big bang (Leibniz). Interfering with the pattern that pursues us all the way up our genealogical tree, our grandmother's caprice may wreak havoc on our and the world's destinies: after all, a hero plays the part of an alien gene in the universal genetic code. And every child is a potential hero. (Not any more.) In a way, Lenin was Russia's (and the world's) capricious grandmother; but for him, the Russian Revolution would not have shaken the history of the twentieth century. The wheels set into motion by Gorbachev's reforms belong perhaps to the train

depicted in the epilogue to *War and Peace*—the train of history moving on its own. A train, however, may be shunted to another track; sometimes it derails and plunges into a river.

Be that as it may, Russia is not what it used to be in Lenin's and Conrad's times. 'The obligation of absolute fairness,' writes the latter, 'was imposed on me historically and hereditarily, by the peculiar experience of race and family, in addition to my primary conviction that truth alone is the justification of any fiction—.' What Conrad means by truth excludes any meddling, not only that of grandmothers and heroes. Even God seems to be powerless against its eternity symbolised by the inexorable straightforward movement of history. Actually Conrad's train is in a railway siding as if history had come to a standstill half-a-century before Fukuyama's birth. The train of history *might* have come to a standstill in a railway siding, for all I know, which makes things easier for those who yearn to plunder it: no horses are needed. The New Russians' favourite occupation. They plunder Russian history, Russian soil and the proverbial soul for the sake of which so many people have sacrificed their lives. They remove from the Russian soul ideals and generosity, leaving in peace or rather in turmoil only whatever is associated with gypsy songs: vodka, caviar, sleepless nights, young ladies, jewellery. Are they heroes? Is any one of them prepared to sacrifice his life for the sake of a *noble* ideal? They do get killed now and then, but settling a score with a thief does not amount to much and certainly is no match for the following declaration made by one of Conrad's heroes: 'You suppose that I am a terrorist, now—a destructor of what is. But consider that the true destroyers are they who destroy the spirit of progress and truth, not the avengers who merely kill the bodies of the persecutors of human dignity...Men like me leave no posterity, but their souls are not lost. No man's soul is ever lost. It works for itself—or else where would be the sense of self-sacrifice, of martyrdom, of conviction, of faith—the labours of the soul? What will become of my soul when I die in the way I must die—soon—very soon perhaps? It shall not perish.'

It *is* a question of life and death. In those times Russia was keen on this question to which an answer was supplied by Haldin and many other terrorists who did not hesitate to sacrifice their lives—and those of other people—for a noble cause. The point is, their answer brought in its wake the same question the growth of which seemed to depend on the number of victims. The terrorists would assassinate their oppressors only to become oppressors in their turn, giving thereby a new lease of life to the question—to that Tower of Babel which finally collapsed in the early nineties. The rebels I touched upon at the beginning of this essay were probably the last bricklayers in the history of Russia. Now only miniature towers of Babel enliven Russian cities and landscapes: for some reason, the New Russians are fond of turrets and tower-like shapes in general. 'The spirit of progress and truth', 'human dignity', 'self-sacrifice', 'martyrdom', 'conviction', 'faith', 'the labours of the soul'. Though these words can still be found in our dictionaries and books, we use them only with regard to Muslim suicide bombers—ironically, mockingly, with fear and trembling. Are they alive? Are their trains of history on the move? Are we dead? It *is* a question of life and death. With a few exceptions, no Western eye will ever watch a terrorist attack approvingly: a number of bodies carried on stretches, the tears of

relatives, a grimace of pain or horror. Needless to say, I have no desire to condone such a deed—not only because I am a right-minded Westerner. But I do ask myself the same question to make sure I belong to the same species as Tolstoy and Dante, Wittgenstein and Socrates.

The drops of terrorist blood I carry in my veins have been diluted to the point of mutilating only my opponents' ideas. They goad me, however, into accepting Haldin on his own terms, especially when he says, 'What do you think I am? A being in revolt? No. It's your workers who are in everlasting revolt. I am one of the resigned. When the necessity of this heavy work came to me and I understood that it had to be done—what did I do? Did I exult? Did I take pride in my purpose? Did I try to weigh its worth and consequences? No! I was resigned. I thought "God's will be done."'

NABOKOV

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

I never used the bicycle as an ideal vehicle for increased cooperation between men and women, to put it mildly. In other words, I never rode to a remote corner of the Earth to meet a woman I had set my heart – and the rest of my body – on because I mistrusted my ability to handle it properly and I had no wish to land up in *another* remote corner of the Earth or in a remote corner of *another* planet. It is better to land up in a ditch near your country house or your private house of the dead where you are permitted to entertain Musil, Plato and other heroes one cannot call *objects*. Is Plato *the object p*? He was a symbol I could rely upon in my childhood and even now I sojourn in his caverns and other underground spots in order to understand what awaits me in the universe, far above our planet and right below the stars I shall always see around me, whatever vehicle I have at my disposal.

I might have chosen Nabokov as *the object n* of my youth and even of my whole life, had I been asked to make my choice in this domain in the Eighties, in the Nineties. Sure enough, I read and re-read his books in both Russian and English when I began to write novels, when I needed a shoulder to cry on. I wrote so many pages in Russian and I still have them in my archives as if they could lead my readers to the core of my brain, being the prelude to my contribution to literature. Even his first novel, *Mary*, spent some time on my writing desk and I said to one of my Belgian friends while looking at the Russian original, 'I wish my first novel would live up to these standards.' Do I really think my first novel is far superior to *Mary*? At least Nabokov's bicycle seems to have left more vestiges in the domain of literature than mine; the same goes for Nabokov's life, if I am not mistaken. I mean, his bicycle *was* important, whereas mine was just resting against the wall.

Straight out of the bright country house, he would plunge into the black, bubbling darkness and ignite the soft flame of his bicycle lamp; and now, when he inhaled that smell of carbide, it brought back everything at once: the wet grasses whipping against his moving leg and wheel spokes; the disk of milky light that imbibed and dissolved the obscurity; the different objects that emerged from it – now a wrinkled puddle, or a glistening pebble, then the bridge plants carpeted with horse dung, then, finally the turnstile of the wicket, through which he pushed, with the rain-drenched pea-tree hedge yielding to the sweep of his shoulder.

Nabokov, *Mary*

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

I recall the smell of carbide that remains the most repulsive smell I have ever come across, although there might be other repulsive smells in the universe, given that the universe is almost infinite and continues to expand as if to welcome other repulsive smells into its bosom. I no longer admire this description of the ride that Nabokov seems to have enjoyed in spite of his relative solitude: the bicycle lamp would not have enabled him to read Kant or Spinoza in the course of this journey into darkness.

On my third trip to Paris, I met a bookseller who said he had a few books by Sirin – Nabokov’s Russian penname – and when I finally purchased these books I realised I had in my possession the first editions of *The Camera Obscura*, and *The Despair*. I no longer worship Nabokov, but I have no intention of putting these books up for sale. And I do not think I shall sell this house of mine, in spite of my wish to get the tax office off my back that, within the French borders and even outside them, is renowned for its ferocity.

As Ganin looked up at the skeletal roof in the ethereal sky he realised with merciless clarity that his affair with Mary was ended forever. I had lasted no more than four days – four days which were perhaps the happiest days of his life. But now he had exhausted his memories, was sated by them, and the image of Mary, together with that of the old dying poet, now remained in the house of ghosts, which itself was already a memory.

TARAS BULBA

Nabokov shows a dismissive attitude towards Gogol's early efforts in the domain of literature and I partly agree with him, especially if I try to compare these efforts with *The Dead Souls* whose impact on my literary taste was as significant as that of the dead in general: Plato, Dante, Michelangelo, Leopardi, Nietzsche, Hölderlin. Of course their souls are not dead and they are even more alive than any living creature – that is what they used to say about Lenin in the Soviet Union. Yet they belong to the kingdom of the dead and I cannot say I pity their *condition humaine*, contrary to what Malraux must have thought when writing his book. Actually he spoke of the quick, I suppose, although I am not allowed to affirm it categorically: I have never taken the trouble to read *La condition humaine*. I do not even know if the title is *La condition humaine* or *Condition humaine*, and I am too lazy to embark on a short trip to the Encyclopaedia Britannica inside which so many books took shelter in 1974.

'*Taras Bulba*. A melodramatic account of the adventures of quite fictitious Cossacks – something like the *Cid* of Corneille and his Spaniards (or Hemingway's Spaniards, for that matter) in a Ukrainian disguise.' That is what Nabokov has to say about the novel upon which the film I bought in Paris was based in the early Sixties. And even if they make a new film entitled *Taras Bulba*, they are sure to base it on Gogol's work that I am reluctant to call a masterpiece in the light of what Nabokov says about it. And yet, as I pointed out earlier, I have been moving further and further away from Nabokov's writings and standpoints – from his views on today's world and yesterday's literature. Actually I do not care about the authenticity of Corneille's and Hemingway's Spaniards because I am not accustomed to looking for this kind of authenticity in the domain of fiction which may keep its fictitious character as long as it likes: for once there is no harm in lying and spinning yarns, suspending beliefs and disbeliefs. But I yawn when hopelessly attempting to read Hemingway's works; and Corneille is equated in my diary with the following short entry, 'I am in transports of delight.'

'When I want a good nightmare I imagine Gogol penning in Little Russian dialect volume after volume of *Dikanka* and *Mirgorod* stuff about ghosts haunting the banks of the Dnepr, burlesque Jews and dashing Cossacks.' In the film based on *Taras Bulba* a young man says to his brother, 'Women should be forgotten – we have more important things to do than play with them in bed.' And his brother says to him and cinemagoers: 'You're right. So is my father. You take women and you throw them away because they're dispensable like Soviet soldiers. I mean, Stalin and Zhukov regarded them as dispensable. "Victory's more important than soldiers," they used to say and think. Women *may* be dispensable, but if you find *your* woman, you're unlikely to forget her, whatever you do. You may ask your father to flog you or lock you in an attic or a bedroom. You'll never forget the woman you're in love with unless you don't really love her. If you just desire her body, you'll find another body sooner or later.'

The woman he fell in love with is rather beautiful; yet I do not think I would have forgotten my work and peace of mind for the sake of *her* mind, body and soul. The protagonist's son forgot his motherland and his father killed him saying, 'I gave you life and I'm the one who should take it away from you.' *Ya tebya porodil, ya tebya i ubiu*, as Gogol put it in Russian. 'I conceived you, I'll kill you.' As if no one else was allowed to do it even more successfully than Taras Bulba who just shot his son dead, eschewing violence: he did not cut his son's body into pieces. On the eve of death, his son or his son's heart – a piece of his body – says to the beautiful lady: 'You're my motherland', as if one's motherland could be confined to *one* human body. And not to that of one's mother, mind you!

'You should fight your enemies,' says his beloved.

'You're not my enemy,' says her beloved.

'But your motherland comes first, doesn't it?'

'It doesn't, I'm sorry to say.'

'Don't say it then.'

'Then he put his arm round my shoulder and gave me a kiss,' writes the Polish beauty in her diary. On the next page she adds a few words to this description of her bliss: 'A long, lingering kiss.' Her lover also kept a diary, but his father burned it because he could not bear the sight of it – the sight of his son's handwriting. A few days ago, I should have watched a programme devoted to handwriting and lie detectors, but I go to bed rather early nowadays. I missed the programme, saying to myself, 'I won't use lie detectors when writing my last books.' And what about handwriting? What would the criminal's handwriting say to his father, had he taken the trouble to read his son's confessions? 'I love a Polish woman and she is dearer to me than all the pearls of my tribe, my father and mother included. She is both my mother and my father. She is also my brother and my sister. Never again will I say to my mother, "What a pity I don't have a sister!"'

At the end of the film, the Cossacks triumph over their enemies and Taras says to his miniscule army: 'Now Dubno is a Cossack city. We will not ravage or plunder. There will be no more killing.' Taras is alive and kicking and he doesn't seem to live in the vale of *tears* in spite of his son's untimely death: a real hero shouldn't waste his tears on traitors, even if all these traitors happen to be his sons, his own flesh and blood. In the book Taras bends down so as to recover his snuffbox and is immediately set upon by a multitude of enemies whom he does not manage to get rid of with a shrug – contrary to his standard practice. 'I'm too old,' he says to himself, shrugging. 'He shrugged his shoulders as if to say that there was nothing he could do about it,' writes Gogol in his notebook. But Taras was mistaken: middle age can be the prime of life if you have the right attitude – and Taras *had* the right attitude, as Gogol's readers have known for many years. I have known this for at least 58 years because I still recall Taras' death – his body at the stake, the smoke painted by an illustrator – and so I knew at once that something was wrong with the ending of the Hollywood film. Anna Karenina does not fling her body under a train. Instead, she divorces Karenin and marries Vronsky who forgets everybody and everything down to his motherland: my Hollywood-inspired nightmare.

‘You’re my motherland, dear Anna. You’re my Princess Sorokin.’ Or she marries a young coxcomb, resolved to avenge herself on both her husband and Vronsky. In the twinkling of an eye Count Vronsky recalls his motherland and volunteers for the army.

Is this really a happy ending? Shouldn’t the President of the United States say to the entire universe, ‘There will be no more killing’? And he should add, ‘We shall feed all the people of our world.’

GOD

One can talk to one's guardian angel for hours without getting a single piece of information one can rely upon when thinking about death and life, when fearing that all this is just a moment and nothing else awaits anyone beyond this moment because time *may* die, leaving nothing behind, not even a slice of eternity. I know that all depends on time and its struggle with eternity or with its own death, or deaths, however numerous they might be, which meet at one point, the meeting point, and I cannot tell them apart. I am bound to die along with my time and any other time: there are no other times, other deaths. In *The Possessed* Dostoevsky tries to convey this truth through a dialogue from which you learn that you can vanquish both time and death, provided you do not shun publicity linked to suicides, to the way some people finish their lives without realising that their lives do not really belong to them, being God's presents and proofs of His eternal bounty. And other people talk about these reckless individuals in the wake of the latter's departures from what may be called 'our common life': life is also in a class of its own and cannot be multiplied, whatever God may say on the subject in the Bible and elsewhere. There is only *one* life and whenever someone commits suicide, we all die at the same moment as if we were attached and chained to the same Tree of Life which one individual cuts down to satisfy his insatiable curiosity. (Let us keep women out of this dirty business.) 'Is there anything beyond this Tree of Life?' he may ask himself. To answer this difficult question, he kills himself and I, for one, cannot go any further because I do not know what he may see beyond the tree to which I am attached both physically and psychologically.

If I remember rightly, Kirilov says to Stavrogin that if he kills himself, he will become God because only God can give you life and death, and if you usurp His basic privilege, you become God yourself and in this way God can be supplanted in the church-goers' affections by a mere mortal, by his audacious, high-spirited act. There is no denying that you missed an opportunity to offer life to your own body and soul, but you may make up for your negligence by aiming a revolver at your heart – that is what Kirilov did, by the way, unless I confuse his heart with one of his temples. Never mind – he killed himself, becoming both God and a free man who controls his own life and allows neither God nor the police to tamper with it in the streets, in prisons, in concentration camps and elsewhere.

Kirilov says to Stavrogin in *The Possessed* or in *The Demons*: 'Everything is beautiful.'

'What about the death of a child?' asks Stavrogin.

'It is also beautiful because the gods do not die. They're neither born nor fade away. Don't forget – they're the gods and not just soldiers. They're the gods and not children.'

'Do you reach the kingdom of freedom if you kill yourself?'

'Yes,' says Kirilov.

'When do you become free? Before or after your death? At the moment when you make up your mind?'

'When you pull the trigger.'

‘Your freedom is short-lived then. It lasts only a second, a tiny fraction of the total number of seconds we’re supposed to deal with in the course of our lives.’

‘There’s only one life, one second, one moment we can share on condition that we are free. A revolver can liberate us from the dictator.’

‘God?’

‘Yes. There’s only the present, symbolised by the revolver you press against one of your temples or against your heart. And the bullet can be found in between your heart and the revolver. If it is in between, you enjoy an intoxicating thought that may be translated as follows, “I am free. I am no longer God’s slave. And I’ll never be His slave again.”’

What does Marcus Aurelius say on the subject? ‘Though the years of your life numbered three thousand, or ten times three thousand, remember that none can lose another life than that he lives now, nor live another than that he loses. The lengthiest and briefest periods are equal. The present belongs to all; to die is to lose the present, which is the briefest of lapses. No one loses the past or the future, because no man can be deprived of what he does not have.’ Let us compare his statement with that of Kirilov. You can lose neither the future nor the past; nor can you lose the present because you have nothing to lose, as Kirilov might have put it. But you can gain respectability if you become a free man, saying to Stavrogin and others, ‘I am the master of my own destiny. This bullet you can see in between my revolver and chest supplies both the future and the past because it suspends judgement on whatever is going on: neither time nor God knows what will happen next. If the bullet strikes you, you become the future and the past. If it doesn’t, you become the eternal present. That’s what eternity looks like – a bullet suspended in mid-air.’

The present belongs to all; in other words, we share the same life and no one can commit suicide because I have no intention of leaving this world too soon, before the witching hour. What you encounter in the Hereafter is not eternity, contrary to what you may hope for, but the witching hour, the witching moment that lasts forever. ‘Remember that all things turn and turn again in the same orbits, and for the spectator it is the same to watch for a century or for two or infinitely.’ You watch Kirilov’s suicide and the mythical bullet. He dies and he does not as he apes Schrödinger’s cat. He is a cat and a human, an ape and a woman; he has been everything and everybody. He is everything and everybody: you and I, a cat and a mouse, a flower and a cloud, a drop of rain and a drop of cognac, nuclear waste and a cornucopia of good ideas. It amounts to the same thing and it does not amount to much.

I do not expect anybody, but Kirilov comes in and says, ‘Sorry to descend on you like this, but I had no time to phone. Anyway you must know that it’s a phenomenon linked to eternal recurrence, to circular time. As you know, time goes in circles: I’m bound to come sooner or later. This time I came sooner because I had arrived at this present with five minutes to spare. These five minutes are yours.’ Everybody talks to Kirilov.

My youth comes back as I recall *The Possessed* which I read at the age of 16, if I am not mistaken. I was sitting on my divan and today I have no alternative but to sit down on my new divan and open the same novel; and yet I no longer have the same copy of this novel. You sit down on another divan as you realise it is a divan and not an armchair. You read the same novel, but the book you hold was published in Germany and not in the Soviet Union. Is that what eternal recurrence is about? There is some discrepancy between the two accounts. Some discrepancy. Is that the solution to the biggest enigma one can come across? Does the same go for life and afterlife? *Some* discrepancy? You no longer have your body or the woman you are in love with. But there is another woman, another body. Why should you have your *own* body? Was it so beautiful? And the woman you hold in your arms is as beautiful as the one you lost on Earth. The latter was a tall brunette; the woman you kiss on the lips plays the part of a sexy blonde waitress. Dyed blonde hair is a bit common, isn't it?

THE ANTICHRIST

People often talk about those they meet and this propensity confirms Pascal's well-known affirmation that no one is capable of staying in their room for a long stretch of time without getting the fidgets. And the fidgets in question come into their own not only within bodies but also amidst brainwaves where they play appalling havoc with regular, down-to-earth ideas. In a way, these talkative individuals leave the earth for the sake of some space odyssey during which they encounter all sorts of 'interesting' extra-terrestrials. Encounters of the third kind, encounters of the fourth kind. Actually the encounters of this kind happen on earth, which downgrades the actors taking part in a theatrical play pigeonholed by our forefathers as 'figments of one's imagination'.

The other day I came across an antichrist. What kind of encounter is this? An old-fashioned type mostly associated with Dostoevsky and those who ponder over *The Grand Inquisitor*—the centrepiece of his last novel. Or should I say the Antichrist? How many antichrists are to visit us in the course of the twenty-first century? I shall not meet some of them; the encounters of the zero kind.

Dostoevsky does not go so far as to offer this apocalyptic name to his hero who is just the Grand Inquisitor—a ninety-year-old clergyman unconditionally obeyed by the multitude. But the feelings he gives vent to in his legend unmistakably refer to someone about whom one might say without hesitation, 'Christ and this individual are poles apart.' And the opposite of what Christ stood for leads one to a linguistic and logical conclusion: the individual in question is an *antichrist*. Vladimir Solovyov, a Russian philosopher of note, followed the idea through and, in *The Short Tale about the Antichrist*—a final episode of *The Three Conversations*—partly modelled the protagonist on Dostoevsky's Grand Inquisitor. The former is much younger, though, which enables him to incarnate the Hollywood-glorified superman and even borrow a few traits from Nietzsche's favourite hero. Handsome and magnanimous, he is moreover endowed with a literary gift; no wonder his book entitled *The Open Road to the Worldwide Peace and Prosperity* becomes an international bestseller and furthers his ascension to the throne from which he showers his favours on all and sundry. 'Magnanimity' is a keyword in both *The Grand Inquisitor* and *The Short Tale about the Antichrist*. Christ brought us a sword; the Antichrist hands out bread to the hungry who abandon the very notion of freedom for the sake of this daily boon bestowed upon them by the benefactor of humankind. Both the Grand Inquisitor and Solovyov's Antichrist do not omit to entertain their subjects, supplying the second constituent of the time-sanctified formula that excludes from human life spirituality and mystery. Do we really need only bread and circuses?

Dostoevsky's Inquisitor talks of mystery (*tayna*) which is a keyword in his ambitious, paradise-on-earth-oriented programme. I fail to grasp the importance of this item, especially in relation to our world where mystery is tolerated and even longed-for only within the realm of art—on condition that the author lays his cards on the table in the last chapter or sequence. It is noteworthy that Dostoevsky,

who was a prophet in his own right, did not realise that humanity needs no additional space in the world where one cannot cope even with two-dimensional images, with their astronomical number.

In the long run we have reduced our life to screens, to sheets of paper, beyond which nothing happens, nothing abides—no God, no mystery. Even beauty has been stripped naked to the point where it looks available, gift-wrapped, obscene. Deprived of the mystery-space, it loses all significance, becoming a product one can store in a basement or eat at lunch along with other beautiful products. Democracy has a knack of destroying castles—the afterlife where human beings used to hide their lives instead of disclosing them in reality TV. And the way to democracy must necessarily lead through the glasnost-stage during which high officials indulge in taking the wraps off whatever their predecessors tried to keep under wraps.

Stalin's slaves knew next to nothing about how their sovereign enjoyed himself; we are hourly put in the picture of what the American President does in the nooks and crannies of the White House. The history of humanity is a drawn-out striptease—with back-and-forth switches—that Dostoevsky did his best to camouflage through the Christ-inspired mystery on the importance of which he insists in the legend under discussion. In a book devoted to it, Vasily Rozanov—a writer of note—associates this mystery with Redemption as if hoping that impotent, two-dimensional humanity might take into account such a hoary notion imposed on it by Christ the superstar. But why should a superstar bother about hoary, intricate notions and rituals?

Born-again Christians have *their* Christ—a pal to whom they talk in an hour of need or just out of boredom when there are no other pals around. 'To be born again,' writes Barbara Victor, 'or to profess to having committed one's life to Jesus must include an acknowledgement of having fallen short of the truth and moral precepts found in the Bible. Having a personal encounter with the Lord is part of that process and, in fact, having a "born-again" experience means having a visitation from Jesus Christ during which the person visited makes the decision to live according to His word as written in Scripture.' May we call this set-up Redemption? Isn't it just a statuette one may put on top of an upright piano?

Where is *my* antichrist lurking? Right in the midst of the statuettes. He redeems you by saying you are a worthy member of his community, and you receive a violin or even a grand piano—as a token of his affection. The way he gratifies his urge for magnanimity does not remain under wraps: his secretaries talk about them to the paparazzi and television crews. Sometimes he does it himself, showing a telegram from a young genius to whom he dispatched a loaf of bread she needed to exercise her profession. And he might save the same girl from death by conveying her to a Swiss hospital through the foundations he set up to cure cripples, paralytics, epileptics, and so on. Oh, he does not pass himself off as Jesus Christ—God forbid! He is just His messenger. Whatever he says does not seem to come from him, a *superman*, otherwise you would be entitled to bring him down a peg or two. Or ten, or thirty. (The difference between God and a human.) But his tone of voice implies he has been sent by the highest authority to deliver a message you must pay attention to for fear of being

ostracised. No point in arguing with him. Why discuss with a postman the letters he slips into letterboxes?

In this case, however, it is a recorded delivery letter you receive from his own hands. 'That's what you're supposed to do,' he says noncommittally. 'It's up to you to make your choice, but if you don't follow these instructions to the letter, the consequences might be disastrous. You're free of course, but don't you want the Almighty to deprive you of your freedom? What do you need it for anyway? Here is a letter you can trust because, I presume, you don't question the Almighty's precepts; unless you're a freethinker and agnostic. You don't put your trust in the letters I've brought you. Don't you believe in God's messengers? Actually God never confides in humans with the exception of prophets who are his messengers—his postmen, if you prefer. So I'd read the letter if I were you. Or do you want me to recite it?'

A smile. Not a broad one, contrary to what might be expected from the Grand Inquisitor. Not an ironic, omnipotent smile. An ordinary smile exhibited by your benefactor who wishes you good. A welfare agency operating throughout the universe. Actually our antichrist is not always in the know about what goes on in this agency that showers *his* favours on the young, the old and the composers who are no longer in the land of the living. Once a friend of mine called him to say she was grateful for a favour bestowed on her mother—a luxurious old people's home. 'I'm sorry,' he said, hanging up on her. He had no idea what she was talking about: her mother had just been an inhabitant of the earth. (And yet he used to rub shoulders with this violinist at the Moscow Conservatoire.) How many earthlings live on *their* planet? And what about old people's homes? And young people's homes? How many of those castles has his omnivorous agency taken under its wing?

Dostoevsky's protagonist believed the world should be founded on three words (or whales): miracle, mystery and authority. Unlike miracles, my antichrist's rewards do not come out of the blue; they do not tamper with the space allotted to down-to-earth human beings who are afraid of whatever is beyond—of the space lying in the distance. ('Agoraphobia' is the keyword of their lives.) They are born in this world, in reality or in the shows one can avail oneself of while watching television. Why should they have any intercourse with the Hereafter save on computer screens and in books that cater to their twilight-zone disposition?

Miracles are superfluous anyway: everything can be found in the kingdom of computer games and in virtual worlds that do not come out of the blue unless your screen is blue at the outset of your daily ritual. Besides, miracles might be instrumental in giving birth to an additional space where something is born from time to time: a star, a hope, Helen of Troy. But no one requires Helen of Troy today, making Faust a laughing stock of born-again humanity that appreciates more a handy woman unlikely to unleash a disagreeable conflict. (A *pretty* woman.)

There are no mysteries to speak of except those which some paparazzi will unearth sooner or later, relying on complacent heroes and heroines—the understudies of Achilles and Helen of Troy.

Nor are there any miracles to write home about. There is an authority—a man or a woman you bow to because you are eager to follow the open road that leads to yet another loaf of bread.

The mystery on which the Grand Inquisitor enlarges at length comes down to his retrospective bond with the devil who spoke to Jesus Christ in the wilderness: 'If thou be the Son of God, command that these stones be made bread....If thou be the Son of God, cast thyself down: for it is written, He shall give his angels charge concerning thee: and in their hands they shall bear thee up, lest at any time thou dash thy foot against a stone.' (On two occasions my antichrist cast himself down, but high officials bore him up.) Spurned by his would-be victim, the devil takes Jesus up 'into an exceeding high mountain, and sheweth him all the kingdoms of the world, and the glory of them...."All these things will I give thee, if thou wilt fall down and worship me." Then saith Jesus unto him, Get thee hence, Satan: for it is written, Thou shalt worship the Lord thy God, and him only shalt thou serve.'

The Grand Inquisitor devotes his life to putting the devil's proposals into practice: he hands out the aforementioned loaves of bread, displaying his magnanimity in the name of God he does not worship. He just utters His name as if doing justice to the ritual he himself abolished by turning the tables on Christ who did not accept the devil's offers. What remains of the ritual is the name pronounced with no emotion, affection or reverence. My antichrist may also utter this name, if need be—after a concert, in some cathedral or other. How many rituals did *he* abolish during his media-supported reign? Or should we turn the spotlight on Space, on the Hereafter that loses the capital letter when spoken of by my antichrist and his likes? 'From the top of the hill I could see my dacha and the woods *beyond*.' 'These artists cannot see *beyond* immediate profits'—now and then he permits himself to run down his fellow conductors.

His concerts are performed for the sake of a final flourish, a striking posture: the maestro stands on the podium, his arms outstretched, his face wreathed in smiles. After a Beethoven symphony, after Mozart's *Requiem*.

Why should you worry? This *Requiem* was not written for you, was it? Didn't you receive my loaf of bread this afternoon? And my letter? Did you ponder over it? Did you discuss it with your wife and children? Didn't I help you get rid of your freedom—in the name of God the Almighty? There's no alternative. So much the better. Haven't things changed for the better since I came to power? Well, I'm not as powerful as all that. First and foremost I'm a musician. Didn't you admire me tonight? And this afternoon? You must have eaten my loaf of bread. There's nothing beyond it except my Beethoven symphonies. They're mine, aren't they? Beethoven wouldn't become a household name, but for the orchestra I conduct and underwrite. There's nothing beyond my performances. Why should you look for other conductors? Is there anything beyond? Nothing, I can assure you. Nothing at all.

Tsvetaeva declares that a great work of art produces a space around it, beyond it, so that from *Faust* we proceed to Goethe and from Goethe to God. By abolishing Space my antichrist gets rid of God and Beethoven who would not have allowed him to appropriate music so easily, with such impunity. So we just proceed to him where we are likely to remain forever: he is rooted to his throne.

The final years of the millennium witnessed a display of exuberant self-adulation that may even have surpassed its none-too-glorious predecessors, with awed acclaim for the leaders of an 'idealistic new world bent on ending inhumanity,' dedicated to 'principles and values' for the first time in history. An era of enlightenment and benevolence was upon us, in which the civilised nations, led by the United States, then 'at the height of its glory', acted out of 'altruism' and 'moral fervour' in pursuit of exalted ideals.

Noam Chomsky, *America's Quest for Global Dominance*

Dostoevsky talks about the lack of freedom from which the future generations might profit or suffer, considering that freedom is an obstacle on the road to happiness. The open road to happiness; no free will, no alternatives. Everything is clear-cut, available and pocket-size: you can carry the entire universe in your pocket. Only free market and a free-for-all. Wherever tyranny, oppression and brutality threaten the free world antichrists opt for the triumph of good over evil. 'Little children, it is the last time; and as ye have heard that antichrist shall come, even now are there many antichrists: whereby we know that it is the last time.'

How to spot antichrists in the crowd? Peter Ustinov said in an interview that he had not worked for military intelligence during the war because he was unable to melt into the background: he always took centre stage. The point is a true antichrist may be hired even as a secret agent despite his inveterate proclivity to take centre stage even during a heart-to-heart talk: he wears plain clothes from time to time. My protagonist may look solemn, especially while making a speech larded with quotations from Plato or Pushkin, but he is also jocular and never misses an opportunity to give you a big bear hug. Generous to a fault, he invites you to deluxe restaurants where a ritual gesture invariably interrupts your attempt at going Dutch. In comparison with him, the Grand Inquisitor cuts a sorry figure on account of his perpetual aloofness. My model antichrist, on the other hand, has some affinities with his counterpart depicted by Solovyov. It is true that his enemies do not drop dead on the spot, in the very act of opposing him; they just disappear from the market and consequently from our world.

My tale is much shorter than that of Solovyov who enables Jesus Christ to triumph over the impostor. Sure enough, it is easier to challenge one individual—Saddam Hussein, for example—than a multitude of demons whose masquerade beguiles both patriarchs and popes into believing they are angels incarnate.

After ages during which the earth produced harmless trilobites and butterflies, evolution progressed to the point at which it has generated Neros, Genghis Khans, and Hitlers (and a legion of antichrists). This, however, I believe is a passing nightmare; in time the earth will become again incapable of supporting life, and peace will return.

Bertrand Russell

THE OLD COMMANDANT

Let me invite you to a place where 'characterful' persons may become 'characterless', 'unnameable', 'unmentionable'. I'm alluding to gay baths which—as the policeman living on the third floor of our 'tower' informed me—are tolerated not because of laxity on the part of the police and God-fearing, right-thinking organisations but because, being lumped together in out-of-the-way enclosed spaces, gays have less time for making a nuisance of themselves in more open areas. Why not allow our kids to let off steam in out-of-the-way rooms—taking apart their toys, painting landscapes on the furniture—provided they don't butt in and mar the effect produced by the flawlessness of our cocktail party?

My aim is a modest one: I want you to see from the inside yet another Aids-space. To see it? How? How can you see it? Why should I see it? Because of my assignment? Okay. Let me perish for the glory of journalism, but do keep away from that bath. Think of your children and of your children's children!

Why invite you to a place where death himself salutes you in the doorway, where life and prosperity become a mere illusion, a mirage in the desert of death? Do roses grow in deserts?

I worked the text above into my second novel written in the days when Aids made its appearance and was very much in the news. I did not burn the novel, putting it to death along with its protagonist—not only Flaubert is permitted to share the destiny of his golems—but this particular chapter disappeared from it owing to my more austere disposition: I concentrated chiefly on physical degradation, loss of memory, inability to express one's thoughts. What appeals to me in this chapter now is the enclosed space where something is going on—something unknown to the world at large swarming with the curious and journalists whose job consists in catering to the mass-market. But idle curiosity is sometimes offset by a genuine spirit of adventure inciting some people to explore the inaccessible slope of a mountain or cross the border of a country the laws of which happen to differ from what our so-called civilised society venerates and adheres to: freedom of speech and all other freedoms listed in our constitutions.

Kafka's story features a traveller who ventures into a country that might be compared to the Soviet Union where I was born, brought up and educated. From the outside, the country of my birth looked like a gigantic machine rather similar to the one depicted by Kafka—the apparatus designed for the sole purpose of writing sentences on the bodies and in the minds of prisoners. And, in a way, there were only prisoners and prison guards in the Soviet Union—at least according to Western journalists, some of whom did not hesitate to undertake a perilous journey in order to find out what was really going on inside the Bolshevik nest. Actually there are journalists who limit their excursions into the unknown to 'professional principles' which compel them to write articles without however exposing their bodies and souls to multiple dangers. My protagonist is of their number: he limits *his* excursion

into the unknown to reading books on the subject of gay baths and homosexuality in general. His visit to the gay bath is just a figment of his imagination which does not differ much from what some journalists might have seen on that memorable day when a number of tanks were rolling towards the Russian Parliament. They took refuge on a far-off balcony from where even the tanks must have looked like toys, let alone the contenders for the Russian throne. Understandably enough, they were reluctant to risk their lives for the sake of what might seem to them a useless piece of information: Russia is no longer a superpower. Anyway, there is nothing one should risk one's life for—such is the key motto of our civilisation. However, there was a journalist—a young Italian, if I remember rightly—who forced his way into the building, which had come under fire from the government-guided tanks, and interviewed one of the insurgents, braving bullets and other dangers.

In the early eighties I might have shared the fate of Nabokov's hero—he *is* a hero because the Russian title of the novel is not *Glory* but *Podvig (Exploit)*—who, driven by a sense of guilt and nostalgia, journeys to Russia illegally. I was sentenced to seven years' imprisonment and would have been bundled off to the Gulag, had I tried to set my foot on Russian territory without a visa—by taking a Finish coach bound for St Petersburg (the feat accomplished by one of my fellow exiles). Now I travel to Russia like Kafka's hero; he is not a hero, actually, being on the safe side like a regular tourist who limits his or her excursion into the unknown to a sightseeing animated by a gleeful guide. He feels rather comfortable as he listens to what an officer in charge imparts to him about the machine that is on the point of ill-treating the body of a man indicted for disobeying his superior. Of course the traveller (or the explorer) sides with the partisans of democratic regimes—a right-minded individual who never deviates from the politically-correct code of behaviour. As a matter of fact he does not really feel comfortable on account of the torture he is about to witness, for he does not know how to intervene on behalf of the would-be victim whose clothes have already been taken off. 'The explorer thought to himself: It's always a ticklish matter to intervene decisively in other people's affairs. He was neither a member of the penal colony nor a citizen of the state to which it belonged. Were he to denounce this execution or actually try to stop it, they could say to him: You are a foreigner, mind your own business... Yet here he found himself strongly tempted. The injustice of the procedure and the inhumanity of the execution were undeniable.'

As a Soviet citizen I was appalled by those travellers—Romain Roland, H. G. Wells and Yves Montand, to name but a few—who admired the 'exploits' of our workmen, architects and musicians to the point of disregarding the glaring drawbacks of communism. 'The injustice of the procedure and the inhumanity of the execution were undeniable.' I would have repeated this sentence over and over again had I been writing about the Soviet Union, about *every* aspect of the Soviet life that was unjust and abominable. Was it?

I was born in the wrong place—
The Soviet Union.

Perhaps the place was right,
But the time was definitely wrong.

Now the time is wrong everywhere.
And it's hard to emigrate from it.
How long do I have to live?

How much easier it is
To rent a house in a foreign land,
To buy a few books and invite
A few strangers to dinner. Some of them
May become your friends. There are
Beautiful cities in the world
And you can walk around those cities,
Hoping to alleviate the pain of nostalgia.

Or you can exchange
One beauty for another:
All beautiful things
Have a common source;
They all stem
From one harmony.

You cannot leave Time.
Nor can you obliterate it
By looking at the Doges' Palace,
By reading Shakespeare.
Friends are of no help
Either.

Even immortality is
No guarantee of happiness.

I wrote this poem in 1996. The time was already wrong everywhere and I almost ceased to avail myself of my hard-earned freedom of movement: I knew I would find the same global village in Asia, in Africa, no matter how far I could travel out of curiosity, out of necessity. In a village, in the midst of villagers, even the Doges' Palace loses its magic. Cooped up in the Soviet Union, I used to endow

Space with the supernatural powers I partly depicted in this poem, doing justice to my one-time infatuation with whatever lay outside Soviet frontiers—*zagranitza*, in common parlance. But all my newly-discovered lands belong to the same village: I am not Columbus. Who am I? An officer, a traveller or a prisoner.

At some point I resolved to write a theatrical play based on this story that is too straightforward in my opinion—compared with those stories by Kafka where victory hangs in the balance; where there is no victory to speak of. The explorer is right; the officer wrong. The explorer wins hands down because he represents the new world order hailed by Bush the Senior and Fukuyama; the officer is a Soviet official with this difference that he undergoes the ritual himself—at the end of the story.

I wrote this play in Russian; I lost it in Russia. Logical, isn't it? I lost another manuscript in Moscow—a translation of my second novel where the episode I quoted at the outset of this essay could be found. I lost a great many thing in Russia that continues to appropriate my present after having destroyed my past: two flats, several pianos, a number of antiques and curios.

A friend of mine believes that novelists are incapable of writing for the theatre. Tolstoy seems to corroborate this hypothesis, although my admiration for this 'novelist' knows no bounds: the more I read him, the further Dostoevsky recedes, for all the love I bore *him* in my youth. (The Russians are supposed to opt either for Tolstoy or Dostoevsky.) My play was even more straightforward than Kafka's story: a theatregoer has no time to 're-read' the text he listens to while his eyes are riveted to the stage where the officer executes the prisoner and himself. To enjoy Shakespeare's poetry one has to listen to it rather carefully, all the more so since whatever one heard in the Globe was more akin to poetry than to theatre. But exceptionally Kafka's story is not poetical: his Desdemona is too white and his Othello is too black. Is he? Is the officer too black? "'BE JUST!" is what is written there, said the officer once more.' Then he climbed into the machine and exposed his self to the assiduity of the Harrow which was to engrave this sentence on his body. 'Be just!' '*Sei gerecht!*'

In the Soviet Union people were executed along the same lines: the written word played an important part in the procedure. (Now I contemplate this history from the vantage point located in the twenty-first century, in Versailles—on a far-off balcony, as it were.) Prisoners mouthed the scripts prepared for trials; no surprises, no *deus ex machina*. There was a machine, a harrow. 'HONOUR THY SUPERIORS.' 'BE LOYAL TO YOUR MOTHERLAND.' 'BE LOYAL TO LENIN'S LEGACY.' Lenin, legacy—sounds nice in English and awful in Russian. So much depends on languages, especially if one's body is concerned. 'Nice' in English, 'awful' in Russian. Even in English this word would not *feel* nice if engraved on your body by Kafka's apparatus.

In the Penal Colony can be told in a few words—a bad sign. A tourist visits a foreign land where he encounters a ritual to which he cannot subscribe. A man in charge realises his error—he is not attuned to the new world order—and executes himself; a *podvig* unheard-off in communist countries. Actually a writer of sorts—the President of the Writers' Union—did commit suicide in the

early fifties, but I am not sure he was driven by the same motive, by the same words: *SEI GERECHT!* Perhaps his mistress was not loyal to his legacy, to his words, to his body.

In the Penal Colony can be told in a few words—and in one body, so to speak. (The number of victims is reduced to a minimum—only the officer dies at the end of the story; Soviet officials were far more efficacious.) But there is a coda to this story, a postscript, an epitaph. And our life means nothing without an epitaph, without a coda, without a poem.

Every minute is a test
 And a lesson. We are never
 On holiday. Our elders and betters
 Beat us. Most of the day
 We stand in corners, repeating:
 'Crime doesn't pay.'
 'It doesn't pay to tell lies.'

We seek advice
 From various authorities.
 'Off with their heads!' they cry.
 'The government's policies'—
 Announce newspapers.

So our heads
 Roll on pavements.

Garbage collectors
 Pick them up
 And dump them in a corner.
 A solitary mourner
 Cries for a while.

We lie together.
 We get to know
 Each other.

That is how we lived in the Soviet Union: we lay together. (On a cot, in a prison.) *Together*. And, logically enough, we got to know each other. And we would *help* each other. 'In East Germany people

are more humane because they had to help each other'—the remark I often hear in West Germany. The same goes for Russia and other countries of the Eastern block.

We lay together and the machine wrote on our bodies, 'WE ARE HAPPY', 'LIFE IS WONDERFUL', 'EVERYTHING IS ALL RIGHT'.

We *lied* together; a lie, a lied. We might have been singing *Winterreise*, for all I know. Snow, Moscow—another rhyme, a lame rhyme, the right rhyme, the wrong rhyme. There was no snow in Moscow on the 31st of December, 2006. New Year's Eve. No machine guns, no tanks, no officers determined to die for the sake of justice. I was a traveller to whom no one showed (snowed) the streets where Pushkin, Tolstoy and Tsvetaeva walked.

I returned to Russia in 1990 after spending more than fifteen years abroad. I did not recognise the Russians. They used the same word in a different context: 'You might perish in a train crash.' 'We lost a lot of money in the Stock Market crash.'

I wrote a play where the Commandant spoke at length of his rituals that are only touched upon in Kafka's story. 'This procedure and method of execution, which you are now having the opportunity to admire, has at the moment no longer any open adherents in our colony. I am its sole advocate, and at the same time the sole advocate of the old Commandant's tradition. I can no longer reckon on any further extension of the method, it takes all my energy to maintain it as it is. During the old Commandant's lifetime the colony was full of his adherents—.' The officer highlights the major problems he has to deal with after the old Commandant's death, referring to his predecessor as Jesus does on the Cross and during his sermons; and yet even the Bible does not shed light on how God ran the universe in days of yore. The Law might have been engraved on 600,000 children of Israel who were present at Mount Sinai.

What does *my* Commandant talk about in my play? Of course he says that a fool votes for a fool because he can vote only for a fool: he is delighted to see a fool on the throne—in the White House, in the Black House, in the Rose House; he is loath to see someone different either on his doorstep or elsewhere. So my Commandant educates his subjects by having poems engraved in their minds and also on their bodies, for even in the days of Spinoza the body was sitting on the throne along with the mind—in spite of Platonism and Christianity.

In the Penal Colony was often staged as a homosexual romance. There are four men on the stage. What else could they indulge in? Torture and love. Even if this love is short-lived.

In Kafka's works love *is* short-lived and spasmodic. "'Here's the key of the door, come whenever you like,'" were her last words, and as he took his leave a final aimless kiss landed on his shoulder. When he stepped out on to the pavement a light rain was falling; he was making for the middle of the street so as perhaps to catch a last glimpse of Leni at her window, but a car which was waiting before the house and which in his distraction he had never noticed suddenly emitted his uncle—.'

"'Yes,'" said Frieda, gazing sadly in front of her, "you should have let me stay there. I'm not good enough for you to live with. If you were rid of me, perhaps you would be able to achieve all that

you want.' I might have achieved a lot if you were standing on a *far-off* balcony. Negative vibes. Our love was not Kafkaesque. Let it become Kafkaesque—a love with no consequence. In one of my essays I speak of a poet whose beloved is a dark lady pursued or rather hunted by scholars. Let them pursue *your* shadow, my darling; your name.

I know a lot of names
 But I can't put faces to them.
 So these names
 Just float around my house
 All day long.
 They can neither sit down,
 Nor walk, nor work.
 They just float around,
 Doing nothing.

What can a name do?
 A word can do a lot.
 But what about a name?

The name of Christ did a lot
 In the course of history.
 A lot has been done
 In the name of God.

The name of Stalin
 Was also important.
 So was Lenin's name.
 (Even his patronymic was important.)
 Their names were guilty too.

But the names floating into my mind,
 Across my mind and out of it,
 Are not important.

I'm on first-name terms
 With many of their owners
 So they're mostly Christian names:

Peter, John, Paul, Maria.

They float around my life
Like sailing ships
Which have nothing except names:
No masts, no sails, no anchors.

These names are innocent.
Yet their owners
Might have committed a lot of crimes
Since I saw them last.

And the name of God is ineffable.

Does the name of God *crop* up at the end of Kafka's story? The *coda*, the *code*. The Commandant. The secret name of God? Command. Commandment. The command performance is over at last.

As the explorer, with the soldier and the condemned man behind him, reached the first houses of the colony the soldier pointed to one of them and said: 'There is the teahouse.'

In the ground floor of the house was a deep, low, cavernous space, its walls and ceiling blackened with smoke. It was open to the road all along its length. Although this teahouse was very little different from the other houses of the colony, which were all very dilapidated, even up to the Commandant's palatial headquarters, it made on the explorer the impression of a historic tradition of some kind, and he felt the power of past days.

We used to read a lot in the Soviet Union. We read mostly at night and whatever we read was engraved in our minds, on our bodies; we knew we would have no other opportunity to read what we *had* read. The number of poems we committed to memory in order to relish them during our walks along the Moscva River, along the Boulevard Ring, along Nevsky Avenue! We had no alternative but to take heed of our Ten Commandments: to read, to memorise, to analyse, to listen, to contemplate, to meditate, *memento mori*, to hold out, to live, to outlive. And you are bound to outlive yourself if you have no alternative. The freedom of Eternity—our constitution. Actually my Commandant says at the end of his torture-punctuated soliloquy: 'What we engrave on the prisoner's body is Eternity.'

'—it made on the explorer the impression of a historic tradition of some kind, and he felt the power of past days.' At the outset of Kafka's story one cannot help feeling that the Commandant and the officer are in the wrong, for they seem to carry out some medieval rite repudiated by our global-democracy orientation. But even the common reader is bound to realise that our cosy village pales into

insignificance besides the City of God erected by the Commandant. The explorer reads this egalitarian insignificance into the faces of the dock labourers he comes across at the teahouse. And he keeps the soldier and the prisoner at bay as he is about to return to his freedom-intoxicated fatherland.

The early 1990s saw the spread of democracy in Eastern Europe; all this might have originated in the coda of Kafka's horror tale, where the explorer visits the Commandant's tomb.

They [the dock labourers] pushed one of the tables aside, and under it there was really a gravestone. It was a simple stone, low enough to be covered by a table. There was an inscription on it in very small letters, the explorer had to kneel down to read it. This was what it said: 'Here rests the old Commandant. His adherents, who now must be nameless, have dug this grave and set up this stone. There is a prophecy that after a certain number of years the Commandant will rise again and lead his adherents from this house to recover the colony. Have faith and wait!' When the explorer had read this and risen to his feet he saw all the bystanders around him smiling, as if they too had read the inscription, had found it ridiculous, and were expecting him to agree with them.

The Commandant will not rise again—no point in waiting for his resurrection, for his second coming; the spread of democracy is irreversible. In my version of the surrealist tale the apparatus is replaced by a piano on which I perform a piece by Morton Feldman. At the end the piano rises from a makeshift tomb to a vertical position—a Statue of Liberty, a Statue of Eternity.

So many literary heroes
Are gifted and so few
Accomplish anything.

They're eloquent and courageous.
And they draw their swords so often.
But a sword of Damocles hangs over them,
Shielding their sworn enemies.

They cut nothing to pieces but the air.
No wonder, they're all short of breath.
'What you really need is the air,'
Says Svidrigailov to Raskolnikov.

I've given many interviews in Russia.
'Glossy, sleek, varnished.

A slick-surfaced commercial product.'
Thus I described contemporary art.

And I deplored
The systematic use of new-oak barrels
In modern wine-making, which substitutes
The uniform vanilla bouquet
For natural, Earth-born, Sun-inspired idiosyncrasies.

And I talked about non-local connections
To account for the common fate
Of disparate phenomena.

And I said, 'The *Divina Commedia* is a yardstick
By which everything should be measured.
Not only literature but everything!'

My words cut the air into pieces.
My words smashed it to smithereens.
My words reduced it to a mass of rubble.

My words have been reduced
To a fistful of roubles.

And I still live in my Purgatory.

This essay was written by the old Commandant.

A TURNING POINT

The intellect of man is forced to choose
 Perfection of the life, or of the work,
 And if it take the second must refuse
 A heavenly mansion, raging in the dark.

When all that story's finished, what's the news?
 In luck or out the toil has left its mark;
 That old perplexity an empty purse,
 Or the day's vanity, the night's remorse.

W. B. Yeats, *The Choice*

What bliss it is to know you do not have to finish a piece of writing you have embarked upon in the hope of making your name resound through the centuries: you have already written everything you are capable of writing and thinking up. What remains is life or death that you should not mar by an effort you might make in order to go on with your masterpiece which is designed to convey a few atoms of your brain to the future, to the people who know nothing about you or literature. Let them remain ignorant of you and indeed of Horace and Pushkin who used to talk about monuments they had erected to themselves. Why should you bother about monuments and poetry? Your body is neither poetical nor monumental and it is your body you should direct your attention to—your body, not your mind. Let your mind and your body take care only of female beauty celebrated by those poets whose monuments are scattered throughout Europe and Asia, America and Australia. Why should you *sing* this beauty instead of *enjoying* it? Why should you join those poets and not those women? Actually you have already joined those poets by writing about the women you might have caught a glimpse of in the streets, in a restaurant, on a train. Some of them are just the figments of your imagination. Let your imagination sit on its laurels: enough is enough!

How to get rid of literature? When asked about his plans Thomas Bernhard announced he would do his utmost to forget poetry by taking the edge off his creative urge.

NOTES TO A TURNING POINT

Thomas Bernhard had one year to live. He knew he was on the brink of death. And death takes the edge off one's creative urge rather easily. What's more, he destroys this urge altogether. I've got other means at my disposal. Why should I count on death? He may not come so soon. A woman, a real life. Another essay on Henry James. I have already dealt with *The Real Thing*. *The Lesson of the Master*. The master talks to an unfledged writer about how to become a master. What for? To write masterpieces? He (the master) has not written any—in his opinion. Why does he say so? (Getting rid

of literature by stages.) Because he has more than his fair share of 'real life'. And real life is incompatible with real literature. Only real poetry is compatible with real literature. He *might* have become a great writer, though. The last temptation? It is not too late. Why not renounce his real life, his real wife? His wife is to blame. (The second stage.) But when his wife dies he heaps praise on her. (The third stage: he *couldn't* have become a great writer.) The temptation is gone. Why? There is a woman in his life, but St George does not invite eternal strife because the temptation is gone. (The fourth and last stage.) Literature is a thing of the past, the unreal thing. Let others waste their time on writing. Henry James, for instance. Or Paul, the unfledged, promising writer.

I do invite eternal strife by speaking to her on the phone, by inviting her to my place. Should I renounce literature? I may become a great writer yet! It is not too late. She has stayed for a month. The last attempt. Damned to poetry. I wrote a dozen poems about her. Over the phone she sounds unreal. I won't call her any longer. Her illness. I thought she would give up the ghost. 40, 6°C. Yet she does not live up to Violetta Valery's standards. Good riddance. Back to Henry James. There will be another woman, the real thing. Another way out of the situation. Literature, labyrinth, Borges. 'The sad, labyrinthine Henry James.' And death *may* be counted upon.

TO QUOTE:

'I've got everything in fact but the great thing.'

'The great thing?' Paul kept echoing.

'The sense of having done the best—the sense which is the real life of the artist and the absence of which is his death, of having drawn from his intellectual instrument the finest music that nature had hidden in it, of having played it as it should be played. He either does that or he doesn't—and if he doesn't he isn't worth speaking of.'

'They've given me subjects without number, if that's what you mean; but they've taken away at the same time the power to use them. I've touched a thousand things, but which one of them have I turned into gold? The artist has to do only with that—he knows nothing of any baser metal. I've led the life of the world, with my wife and my progeny; the clumsy conventional expensive materialised vulgarised brutalised life of London. We've got everything handsome, even a carriage—we're perfect Philistines and prosperous hospitable eminent people. But, my dear fellow, don't try to stultify yourself and pretend you don't know what we *haven't* got. It's bigger than all the rest.'

'Ah my young friend, his relation to women, and especially to the one he's most intimately concerned with, is at the mercy of the damning fact that whereas he can in the nature of things have but one standard, they have about fifty. That's what makes them so superior,' St George amusingly added. 'Fancy an artist with a change of standards as you'd have a change of shirts or of dinner-plates. To *do*

it—to do it and make it divine—is the only thing he has to think about. "Is it done or not?" Is his only question. Not "Is it done as well as a proper solicitude for my dear little family will allow?" He has nothing to do with the relative—he has only to do with the absolute; and a dear little family may represent a dozen relatives.'

'What a false position, what a condemnation of the artist, that he's a mere disfranchised monk and can produce his effect only by giving up personal happiness. What an arraignment of art!' Paul went on with a trembling voice.

'Ah you don't imagine by chance that I'm defending art? "Arraignment"—I should think so! Happy the societies in which it hasn't made its appearance, for from the moment it comes they have a consuming ache, they have an incurable corruption, in their breast. Most assuredly is the artist in a false position!'

(Art is a disease. Another stage. Which one?)

Their long nocturnal talk came back to him in every detail, but this was no bar to an expression of proper sympathy with the head of the profession, for hadn't that very talk made it clear that the late accomplished lady was the influence that ruled his life? What catastrophe could be more cruel than the extinction of such an influence? This was to be exactly the tone taken by St George in answering his young friend upwards of a month later. He spoke of his wife as frankly and generously as if he had quite forgotten that occasion, and the feeling of deep bereavement was visible in his words. 'She took everything off my hands—of my mind. She carried on our life with the greatest art, the rarest devotion, and I was free, as few men can have been, to drive my pen, to shut myself up with my trade. This was a rare service—the highest she could have rendered me. Would I could have acknowledged it more fully!'

(Paul courts a young, beautiful woman. St George talks him out of his intent to marry her because one's eternal devotion to literature is incompatible with conjugal life, with love for a woman. Paul goes abroad and comes back two years later. He talks to his former fiancée's father.)

'Oh yes—with Henry St George. I remember very well. Before his poor wife—' General Fancourt paused a moment, smiling a little less. 'I dare say you know.'

'About Mrs St George's death? Certainly—I heard at the time.'

'Oh no, I mean—I mean he's to be married.'

'Ah I've not heard that!' But just as Paul was about to add 'To whom?' the General crossed his intention.

'When did you come back? I know you've been away—by my daughter...Perhaps then you haven't heard she's to be married.'

Paul gaped again. 'To be married?'

'To Mr St George—it has just been settled. Odd marriage isn't it?'

TO D.

1

Your photograph is real. You are
Not. The real thing,
Helen of Troy. You come
To my room and look like yourself.
You're more than your-
Self. You're everyone's self, our
History's self: Ancient Greece,
Ancient Egypt. All is unreal
Save your face in the photograph,
The unreal photograph.

2

A noise beyond the window, in my room,
In *your* room. I'm staying at your place: the noise is
Yours. You're not at home.

Your photographs
Are keeping me company. Shall I count your smiles,
Your eyes, your arms, your bodies, my loves?

Love is always in the plural; so is your voice, your body, your
Eyes. You're an Indian divinity. Are you Chinese?
You're Jewish, Tartar, Russian, Ukrainian.

I am your origin, your gender,
Your passport number: 1, 2, 3, 4,
5, 6, 7, 8, 9.

You'll come back
Tomorrow around 6 p.m. Your flight
May be delayed. 7 p.m. 7.25.

3

Some thoughts just crawl across my brain.
 Their presence is revealed
 Through their bodies brushing against my skull
 As they head for a thing I know
 Nothing about. Why should I know anything
 About it? I know everything: your image. No
 Images. It's *you* I see and hear and
 Touch. What's the difference between you and your
 Image? This poem isn't different from
 What I wrote yesterday. And yesterday, last night,
 I spoke to you on the phone. That's what I
 Said: 'There's something outside.'
 Outside *us*? Outside myself. The sounds
 I can't hear. These sounds.

4

This story will never end, for it's not
 A story, not even a love story—an orchestra
 And a choir I cannot hear,
 A stone I'll never touch. Yet
 I hear and touch them: our *Missa*
Solemnis, our Florentine monument.

5

I've often spoken of endings: the end
 Of a love affair, the end of a hope.
 I've lived through those endings. Now there's only
 A beginning. I can't spell your name. Yet
 You're not God. A goddess, one of them? But they're not
 Anonymous: Diana, Athena. Your name is as secret as
 Your beginning.

6

Writing this poem is a luxury:
 You're in my room, by the window. Why
 Should I write a poem about our

Happiness? Joy is self-sufficient. Anyway
 Life keeps a balance between good luck and
 Bad luck, between you and my
 Tribulations. How much do I have to endure
 To deserve your smile,
 One of your smiles? Your laugh.
 Your eyes filled with tears: you're crying
 For joy. My future suffering? Or is your love a reward
 For my quirky past, for all I've gone through
 Since my birth in a Moscow suburb?

You're too generous: I *have* been happy
 Once in a while.

7

I don't care about eternal
 Recurrence. (The repetition of joy.
 The joy of repetition.) Let it happen once
 Or twice or an infinite number
 Of times. It's enough to come back
 To you. Homecoming.

I'm back. I may leave once more
 In order to return. No, this game is
 Over. My home is large enough
 To enable me to leave
 Without leaving it.

8

How to live without your gaiety
 And sadness, without
 Your body? I look for you everywhere: in
 My bed, in my life. Nothing is 'in' except the 'in' I put
 At the end of the previous verse.

They're far

Behind: the verse and the 'in'. You are

Out, outside, outdoors. I am in.
I am yang.

9

What will they say about us? Nothing. Or
They might say I was in the doldrums,
Writing nonsense. Suddenly—a cycle of poems
Dedicated to one woman, not to a myriad of women.

No one has ever written such love letters.
No one speaks and laughs like you. They won't
Speak of your laugh. They'll just say
Beauty is only skin deep. Of course. But
Our birth depends on it. So does
Our death, the Hereafter.

I won't say that. Let *them* speak!
Let the future speak of your beauty.

Even their silence will speak of it.

10

I'll carry you towards the Moon,
Towards Jupiter: the future
May lie on its orbit, on its bed.

11

I'm not a poet. My eternity doesn't
Depend on letters. I forgot L. last
Winter. A letter.

Another woman.
A kitten, not a letter. I'll never
Forget *her*.

Only the rancorous
Don't forget anyone.

Love is a word, a feeling. Why
Should I trust my senses,
My dictionary?

I trust this phone call: I dial
Your number and hear
Your voice.

Neither W. nor K.

12
Neither a woman nor a kitten.

You don't
Exist. You're the time I spend in my own
Company. Yet you're a creature of
Flesh and blood.

Outdoors, outside.
Out of *Sein*.

Pursuing me
Like a pack of hounds.

Neither a dog nor the living
Dead.

A woman.

A melody.

13
A few years to live. I thought of them
In my youth. I'm thinking of them now, of the years
I'll spend in this room or elsewhere. I hope
I'll spend them elsewhere. I hope I won't write

Anything, letting a woman
Take care of my life.

In Russia they say '*zh dite*', meaning
You'll have to wait for your relative's death.
Russian doctors say that. They come to your flat,
Feel your mother's pulse and say you'll have
To wait. A circle of relatives
Waiting for an old woman's death.

No one
Will wait for my death. A consolation prize. Even I
Won't wait for it. You'll take my hand, the hand
They might have shaken so many times.

I'll speak to you—not to my cat, not
To God. I'll speak to you.

I won't. I'll just touch you.

God will forgive me.

PAMIATNIK

Why do I care about posthumous fame, about the eternity praised and advocated by Spinoza? Suppose someone says: 'In his beloved Russia I mean first to raise for him a tomb fairer than any poet has had.' So what? Anyway my tomb will not be as magnificent as the monument about which Alexander Sergeevich Pushkin speaks in one of his last poems:

*I've set up to myself a monument
not wrought by hands. The public path to it
will not grow weedy. Its unyielding head
soars higher than the Alexandrine Column.*

The monument I know and cherish doesn't soar higher than the Alexandrine Column, but it is majestic enough and many lovers choose it as their meeting point because they rely on Pushkin's good influence, on his ability to arrange long-term meetings of minds. My former fellow countrymen will never erect such a monument to my poor self, but at least I might hope for a spiritual link depicted in the following stanza:

*No, I'll not wholly die. My soul in the sacred lyre
is to survive my dust and flee decay;
and I'll be famed while there remains alive
in the sublunar world at least one poet.*

Suppose I buy a house in Belgium and bequeath it to one of my admirers. 'Please make sure,' I say to her on my deathbed, 'that the path leading to the front door doesn't grow weedy. You should find a professional gardener whose skill and experience will ensure that tourism develops in harmony with the environment.'

'Do you mean to say you want me to keep your furniture and books intact?'

'Yes.'

'For the sake of future generations?'

'Yes.'

'Is that what you call "*dom musey*" in Russia?'

'Yes.'

'House museum?'

'Yes.'

'Do we really need a gardener? Your admirers' feet will do the job.'

Of course this dialogue is more or less eternal, for it can be continued in the Hereafter which conveys its thoughts and emotions to those who go on suffering in *this* vale of tears or *that* vale of tears: no one knows exactly how many vales can be found in the universe. So I talk to my admirer from where I live in the Hereafter, in my personal vale of tears or laughter. 'Do you welcome many visitors?' I ask her.

'No.'

'Are you planning to sell the house?'

'Yes, I am.'

‘Make sure you sell it to a social climber.’

‘Why?’

‘Because every social climber has an active social life. I trust the public path to this house won’t grow weedy.’

But Pushkin says the monument he has in mind hasn’t been set up by means of manual labour; in other words, no hands should be involved in creating this kind of monument which must be more spiritual than material. Oddly enough, in one of his short poems, Pushkin speaks of his hand that reaches for a quill pen; in its turn, the quill touches a sheet of paper because Pushkin’s hand doesn’t drop it. His hand is neither too weary nor shaky. So any poet’s hands take part in the process unless our poet dictates the fruit of his inspiration to his secretary or an admirer.

The public path is thus situated not on Pushkin Square or in Petersburg where there are several monuments to Pushkin to which a multitude of paths lead his admirers through the snow – contrary to what might be presumed by materialists and *their* admirers. The path the poet has in mind is also spiritual by its nature and seems to be akin to what the Buddhists speak about in their sutras.

THEATRE

A LETTER

Dear Jan Fabre,

For many years, ever since the Adelaide performance of *Le pouvoir des folies théâtrales*, I've been your fervent and loyal admirer.

The physical presence of your company oversteps the boundaries of stages and theatres – it becomes part of one's life because, if a slice of human meat is flung at you (or almost), you become this slice of meat, of life, of death and of whatever can come after it. And in the course of these 24 hours I've also become your artists' bodies (and souls, hopefully).

Your company is in a class of its own and I wonder how you've managed to find so many of your *semblables*, *frères et soeurs*, and to talk them into fighting for your cause, for the cause of all true artists.

Your choreography is elegant, intense to the utmost and, what is even more important, is part and parcel of the whole performance. Your dances, either solo or collective, are not variety-show-like numbers. (Pina Bauch seemed to be rather fond of *variété* as a genre. At least I got this feeling whenever I heard, 'One day Pina told me –') They are actions, poems and movements that talk about Ancient Greece so authentically that I experienced Ajax's wrath which I read in three translations for the first time this morning.

And I'll never forget, among other things, the supine bodies at the end of the wrestling-loving episode – sculptures (your sculptures) in their own right.

I cried several times – not because I think our tears are the best response to our emotions. I just couldn't help it. Anyway, tears are an adequate response to your masterpiece that sets a new benchmark for artists throughout the world.

Spasibo, as the Russians say. Thank you very much indeed for the greatest theatrical performance I've ever attended.

Kindest regards

KING LEAR

Suppose I watch a performance of *King Lear*. I am an old man and I am tempted to identify if not with old people, at least with the age they have to bear on their backs and shoulders, otherwise King Lear would not say he wishes to unburden himself and crawl towards death. Actually if you unburden yourself, you try and free yourself of something that is worrying you – by talking about it to someone. Well, Lear does talk to the audience and also to Cornwall, Albany, Goneril, Regan, Cordelia and the attendants; and I suppose he partly unburdens himself as he does so because talking is a sort of therapy to which many people who are not capable of talking to themselves traditionally resort.

Jung speaks a lot about trees that must belong to human mythologies and symbols on which we build our happiness and unhappiness, our future and former lives. Suppose I am both a tree and a young boy whose dream must come true with the passing of the years, otherwise he will go mad like King Lear in spite of his age and entourage. The boy climbs into the apple tree and shakes the branches; the fruit fall down.

I am too old to climb into apple trees, even in my prime I never did it because there were enough apples on our dinner table and my mother knew the saying ‘An apple a day keeps the doctor away’. So the apple tree, the boy and the fruit are part of the illusion to which I must do justice for fear of getting entangled in the net, as some Beckett character puts it. King Lear is an illusion too, needless to say; so are his misfortunes and madness-stimulated speeches.

Howl, howl, howl! O! You are men of stones;
Had I your tongues and eyes, I'd use them so
That heaven's vault should crack. She's gone for ever.

She is not. Why should I howl? Theatregoers are made of stone. Yet they have tongues and eyes, and so they say to each other: ‘This man is really mad.’

‘He doesn't know that death doesn't exist.’
‘Nor does this play – just an illusion, nothing more.’
‘Shakespeare didn't exist either.’
‘Who did?’
‘Why should heaven's vault crack?’
‘Heaven's vault or heaven's fault?’
‘Do we need another meteor shower?’
‘Did you sleep last night?’
‘No.’
‘Do you know that the sudden flash of light in the sky was caused by a meteoric fireball?’
‘No.’

I know when one is dead, and when one lives;
She's dead as earth. Lend me a looking-glass;
If that her breath will mist or stain the stone,

Why, then she lives.

‘He doesn’t know the first thing about death.’

‘The Earth isn’t dead, is it?’

‘Of course not. In the spring you almost feel you can smell the earth.’

‘I like to get my hands in the earth when I’m gardening. But I don’t like corpses. If I became an anatomy student I’d have to put my hands in corpses and I wouldn’t do that for all the world.’

‘Why don’t they lend him a looking-glass?’

‘Because any looking-glass is an illusion.’

‘Even if you pick it up in the wings, backstage?’

‘Of course.’

‘Shall we go backstage after the show?’

‘What for?’

‘To meet the actors.’

‘To meet the illusions?’

‘Do you think their breaths will stain my precious stones?’

This feather stirs; she lives! if it be so,

It is a chance which does redeem all sorrows

That ever I have felt.

‘This doesn’t redeem *my* sorrows.’

‘This doesn’t redeem anything.’

‘He has never felt anything.’

‘Neither have I.’

‘Don’t identify with him!’

‘I identify with myself.’

‘Your self is an illusion.’

‘The feather doesn’t stir.’

‘What feather?’

‘What are you talking about?’

‘I’m not talking.’

DON CARLOS

Verdi's *Don Carlos* tells a story in which the forbidden fruit is the centrepiece of a palace designed for kings, queens, infantes and the pleasures they can receive from their lives, provided they do not fall in love with the wrong people. If you love your father's wife, you do not necessarily have an incestuous relationship with her: she may turn out to be your father's second or third wife from whose blood your genes are more or less excluded. But your father cannot tolerate such a relationship, even if Lévi-Strauss has no wish to forbid it on the grounds that it does not contradict the ideas he expressed in his books. The incest taboo forces the kin group to make alliances with strangers, thereby creating a community based on ties that are other than those dictated by nature. Well and good. Philip II's wife is destined for Don Carlos and she does not seem to disregard the fact, for she asks a stranger she meets in the woods: 'Will the Infante love me?' The Infante is holding her hands, but she thinks he is just a courteous stranger on whom she may rely during her wanderings in the woods and even in the course of her journey to Spain.

Don Carlos listens to the call of nature; he is not used to thinking about life in terms of incestuous relationships which seem to lie in wait for us at the end of the roads we take in our endeavour to live another day and another month. We think we may fall in love with a King's daughter because she is neither our mother nor sister. Lévi-Strauss would agree to our union all the more enthusiastically since we obey his rule and are about to make alliances with strangers. But then the King's daughter becomes our mother and another tragedy comes to the fore as if we were doomed never to spend our life in the midst of comedies, dancing and joking until dawn, until another breakfast.

'L'heure fatale, l'heure fatale.' A multitude of courtiers come to the woods and talk to each other as they look for the King's daughter. 'I don't want to be the one to break the news to her.'

'Why? That's the best piece of news I've heard for a long time!'

'But she's already in love with the Infante.'

'Is she?'

'She is – I overheard their conversation.'

'Did you? What did she say?'

'She said: "I love you, I love you, I love you."'

'In French or Italian?'

'I listened to the French version of *Don Carlos*. Actually it sounds better in French – we're reminded of Corneille and Racine.'

'Are we?'

'We are. Anyway she'll become the Queen of Spain.'

'Queen of spades?'

The future queen holds Don Carlos in her arms and the kiss she plants on Carlos' lips is just the next step in her progress towards their marriage – the forbidden fruit I chose as the centrepiece of their lives. Actually I have no hand in it: Schiller wrote a tragedy and Verdi singled out this tragedy for the special treatment known as 'opera' in all the languages I have learnt in the course of *my* life unsullied by incestuous relationships. And then the queen-to-be realises she is surrounded by a number of courtiers who smile and congratulate her as if they had been told about her forthcoming marriage. She is right of course: they *are* longing to speak to her about it, but she does not know it is just a case of mistaken identity and also the forbidden fruit I have spoken of on many occasions.

'Come on, what happened? Break it to me gently.'

'Hail, Queen, wife of Philip II.'

'That's an old joke – I've heard it about a thousand times.'

'Have you?'

'I mean I'm promised to the Infante and this is no joke.'

'You're Philip II's wife.'

I know a man who laughs twice whenever a joke is told in his presence. The first time he joins his friends because he is reluctant to become the black sheep of the club. After a while he gets the joke and laughs again, being unable to hold back his laughter that literally pushes its way towards the outside world where the members of the club are talking about wars and natural disasters. To Don Carlos the news is a natural disaster for which he does not seem to be prepared: even in the 21st century we cannot predict earthquakes and tsunamis on a regular basis. 'The fatal hour has struck,' says the King's daughter and she is right for once. Of course no one can predict when an epidemic or the fatal hour will strike again, but when this does happen, one is mute with horror and the only words one can say pertain to local issues, to the fatal hour.

When I was in Spain, I paid a visit to Philip II or rather to one of his portraits I saw, and I did not know the portrait had been painted by Sir Anthony More. Never mind – what counts is the portrait itself or rather the King I have always admired because I like austerity and Verdi's opera in which every huge fan of opera is doomed to witness many examples of the King's cruelty. I do not think I admire cruelty as such, but I am fond of iron hands and Philip II's body was made of iron: iron legs, iron shoulder blades, iron hair, iron genitals. His palace is made of various materials; nevertheless, one gets the feeling it is made of iron. Even paintings and tapestries are made of iron: appearances can be deceptive.

The Main Cloister galleries around the Courtyard of the Evangelists are decorated with 54 frescoes depicting the *Story of the Redemption* from the birth of the Virgin until the Last Judgement. The Last Judgement is made of iron: I do not need Philip II and his palace to find out what kind of material the Last Judgement is made of and how one feels inside the court where our trial is bound to unfold. But what about the Virgin? Is she also made of iron? The Last Judgement's core is a hot, molten mix of iron and nickel. And the Virgin is our mother in whose arms we spend the greater part

of our life despite the natural disasters I talked about an hour ago. A velvet glove – that is what I feel in her presence, in her arms, on her lap.

I recall the room where Philip II was dying and praying for many days and nights; the monotony of his agony enabled him to enumerate all his sins, crimes and misdemeanours. There was a window in this room of his and beyond the window there stood a church which would remind him of God and His mercy, of angels and their wings. He looked at the church and prayed – if I remember rightly. I am sure he was praying day and night, but I wonder what really prompted him to seek God's help and advice. Was it a church, a monastery or just another part of his palace? What is beyond the window I saw during my visit to El Escorial? Some courtiers thought that Philip II was God and so he did not really have to look at God Himself: all he had to do was look inside and find his own heart, soul and whatever goes with them. In other words, he could have spoken to himself instead of looking at churches and praying day and night – or talking to the Marquis de Posa, come to think of it.

He says to Posa that his palace is a sort of gas chamber in which he is subjected to torture inflicted by his son, his son's treason and virtual incest. This confession rounds off their conversation during which the Marquis de Posa does his best to talk the King into allowing his subjects much more freedom. He says the empire is teetering on the brink of civil war; for once the King believes what he is told and even utters the word 'truth'. 'Whose arm has ever held up the march of mankind?' asks Posa.

'Mine,' says the King and Posa bursts into laughter. He thinks that the King's arm cannot even hold up the march of his son who walks towards the queen with a view to carrying out the ritual defined as 'sexual harassment'. The law can now protect people from harassment, but in the days of Philip II even the Grand Inquisitor was unable to prevent the mother and her son from indulging in the sin condemned by many primitive tribes and savages in general.

I do not think I could hold up the march of mankind; and yet it is a funeral march and something should be done in this respect because funeral marches are in the right place when a person must find their tomb and eternal peace. A group of people can also be buried during the performance of a funeral march, especially if we are dealing with those who must be buried with full military honours. But burying mankind is another kettle of fish and one should think twice before asking a pianist to play Chopin's march on this occasion – assuming that there remain a few pianists and music lovers. Where? In the land of the living and suffering.

What I am doing now may stop one or two readers from buying bestsellers and reading them on trains, planes and beaches. Of course no reader can resist such a temptation, but guards are posted at all the doors and therefore potential readers cannot leave their houses to head for the nearest bookshop. They must have *some* books at home: Shakespeare, Keats, Dickens. Didn't they study these books at school and elsewhere? Didn't life teach them about these books? Aren't they tempted to compare their present thoughts with the contents of the books one is likely to find in many houses – even if their inhabitants are illiterate and stupid?

I am tempted to speak to the teenagers who see neither nature nor human faces because their eyes are riveted on Facebook, on the mirrors of the world, on the looking-glasses they will never walk through, being indifferent to other sides. Even aerobic exercises no longer excite their minds and consequently their bodies seem to belong to old, lazy men who never go mountain climbing. Philip II might have killed them to demonstrate his aversion to those who do not serve their country and their King; and you cannot serve your King if your eyes are riveted on a mobile phone.

‘This is a dream,’ says the Marquis de Posa when the King opens his heart to him and to the rebels who obey their champion – alias the Marquis de Posa – and toe the party line. Eboli also has a dream; so do I, by the way. I hope that, instead of the end of the world, in December 2012 we reached a turning point beyond which there are no shades of grey, no fake codes. In this dream, teenagers and old men read my favourite writers whose sentences open up perspectives, other sides and parallel worlds where one can meet Leonardo, Musil and Peter Konwitschny – the stage director I appreciate more and more as I watch his production of *Don Carlos*. Naturally enough, we are conveyed to Philip II’s palace where the Queen and the Infante walk in the opposite directions only to find they are locked up in a gigantic hall from which there is no escape, contrary to what one might presume: after all, we are in a palace and not in prison. When walking through this palace, however, I was under the impression I had been imprisoned in a sort of Paradise, for there are paradises that look like hells and vice versa.

‘Philip II suffers from a feeling of isolation,’ says the author of the booklet appended to the recording. Apparently this feeling is intensified by the Queen’s lack of love and the fact that Don Carlos is still on the threshold of a new (or old) era called ‘incestuous relationship’. ‘Even the Grand Inquisitor is ultimately a prisoner of his own system of power. At first the only apparent way to leave this airtight room is in a dream: the obligatory ballet that Verdi wrote for Act III is transformed in Konwitschny’s hands into a slapstick pantomime in which, under the title “Eboli’s Dream”, the princess’s inmost desires are acted out by the main characters of the opera.’

I would not mind leading this petit-bourgeois existence on condition that I am married to a young, beautiful woman whose purity is above suspicion – like that of Philip II’s wife. I have no idea how old Elisabeth was when she married him, but I am pretty sure he was much older than his fiancée; he was probably older than her father, the King of France who does not appear in the opera as if his appearance might cast doubts on Philip II’s virility. How old was he when he married Elisabeth and talked to her father about her journey to Spain, which she invariably refers to as her ‘exile’? ‘I went into exile because of the political situation,’ she says to her entourage.

‘How do you mean?’

‘The war would have destroyed our countries, if I had refused to marry my husband.’

‘Really?’

‘Our subjects asked me to leave the country and settle down in Spain.’

‘Were you a subject of your subjects?’

‘Of course. Even kings and queens are supposed to serve their countries.’

‘Why don’t you serve *our* country? It is *your* country now.’

‘I did a lot to improve conditions for factory workers.’

‘And what about Flanders?’

‘Flanders is not in my line of business.’

‘Do you mean to say that Flanders is not your pigeon?’

‘That’s right. Posa is taking care of her.’

‘Do you know what he writes in his notebook?’

‘I haven’t the remotest idea.’

‘You poor thing, you poor thing.’

‘And yesterday he wrote, “Unfortunately, Flanders is poor in natural resources.”’

I do not enjoy parties where I have to make small talk with complete strangers, but I would not mind speaking like that to my beautiful wife, provided I could enjoy a three-course meal around 8 p.m. Every day! The Princess Eboli dances with a chicken; I would rather have a lamb because every chicken reminds me of McDonalds. I have never been to what is called KFC or Kentucky Fried Chicken and therefore I cannot be reminded of *that* chicken, of *that* horror. And I have never been to Kentucky.

I come home and my wife tells me with a smile: ‘I’ve bought a shoulder of lamb for Sunday lunch.’

‘What about today?’

‘I bought a side of lamb from the butcher’s shop. I’ll roast the lamb on a spit.’

‘Why don’t you cook a lamb casserole instead?’

‘All right.’

We dance a waltz and enjoy the lamb casserole washed down with Mission Haut Brion 1982. The King and the Queen pay us a visit and we drink a lot of champagne as we dance around the room where one can find a pram, among other things. I follow in Don Carlos’ footsteps and sit down in the pram to give the King an opportunity to push my vehicle around the room and also down the street: I feel like going out for a breath of fresh air. As soon as we appear outdoors, our subjects begin to salute us, shouting: ‘This happy day is filled with joy! Honour to the mightiest of kings! Honour to the mightiest of infantes! The world pays homage to them! The world bows before their laws!’

When I go back to Russia, I do not expect to be given the red carpet treatment: no one reads me either in Moscow or in Petersburg, let alone in provincial towns. No one reads me anywhere and I know that there is no world elsewhere; there are no other sides either. And even if there are a lot of dark and bright sides, their inhabitants have not the remotest idea of what I am writing about; nor do they read my poems. And many writers talk on television about their projects and even identify with Karmazinov who ceremoniously bows out in Dostoevsky’s novel. ‘I’ll never write anything again,’ says Philip Roth. ‘And even if you ask me to write another novel, I won’t comply with your wish. I’ve

grown weary of your applause and praises. I know I've written many masterpieces, but your voices and words jar the silence. Your squeaky voices are beginning to jar on me. Shut up and leave me alone in my castle!'

Claude Lévi-Strauss talks about a bachelor he saw in one of the villages inhabited by savages or intellectuals: the right word depends on your point of view, on your attitude towards your half-naked brothers. In those villages – I have seen them only on TV – all men get married and bachelors are frowned upon because they flout both convention and tradition. 'It is exchange, always exchange, that emerges as the fundamental and common basis of all modalities of the institution of marriage. You look at the women who belong to your group. They're beautiful, aren't they? But you should recognise that these same women are also desired by men from other groups. Let's just say you have "problems", if you get my meaning. I mean that the women I'm talking about are a means of securing alliances with other tribes. Are you a warmonger? Your tribes have been at war for the last five years. Why? Because you're a bachelor. You don't seem to realise that marital alliances between groups take the classic form of a gift-exchange relationship and that the most important gifts exchanged are women. But you reject those women's advances. Why? Because you consider yourself as one of life's rejects. You've got a huge mirror on your terrace. Go and look at yourself, at your clothes. You have a decidedly down-at-heel appearance. And you don't eat the lamb you're so fond of, judging from what you're writing about. You don't even eat chicken because you're unable to wrap a chicken in foil and cook it for two hours.'

'I've been feeling much healthier since I became a vegetarian,' I say to Lévi-Strauss.

'You're a terrible cook,' says Lévi-Strauss. 'Nothing you try to make turns out the way it's supposed to. Don't cook vegetables for too long – they'll lose all their goodness.'

My Princess Eboli. My former mistress is in love with a percussionist, and this percussionist does not look like Don Carlos: he is neither handsome nor young. She is still in love with me, my Princess Eboli, and the latter does not love Philip II, although she continues to sleep with him – according to Peter Konwitschny. My former mistress is faithful to her percussionist and she does not permit me to kiss her in my bed. And yet she never tires of saying the same old thing every day: 'I love you, I love you, I love you.' She says that on the phone, in her emails and after the concerts I attend for her sake: she is a violinist. She is in love with two men; the situation reminds me of a woman who used to sit down between her lovers. 'This is your half,' she would say looking at one lover. 'And this half is yours,' she would round off looking at the other lover.

Georges Bataille says that a man in love always identifies with the object of his love and consequently loses himself, his identity and all the egos listed in Sigmund Freud's works. But he may become the object of his own desire, turning his attention to himself, if the *real* sex symbol is out of his reach. It takes quite a reach of the imagination to believe a man who says he is as sexy as a woman he fell in love with a few months before, and if one does believe him, one cannot help thinking about

self-abuse or other methods of self-satisfaction. I concentrate on my work, on my mind; I do not have to identify with a beauty-queen or a beauty-king to satisfy my innermost desires.

My mistress is much better now because she does not induce me to share her sexual life, which used to bring about the fits of jealousy I suffered from for more than five years. I mean I suffered from *her* jealousy, from *her* suspicions, *her* prying into my life. She did not need to hire a private detective to find out if I was having an affair or several affairs. And she regularly unearthed some fresh evidence of my betrayals, which entitled her to slap my face several times in a row; that is what she thought and she was loath to discuss the subject with her victim. I wonder why I have never compared her to Philip II and his absolutism from which the characters one meets in Verdi's opera consistently suffer.

Now she showers me with presents I hardly deserve: she does not take advantage of my hospitality and stays in my house for a few hours only. Why should she bring me perfume and shower gel? She listens to my complaints as if determined to compete with Eboli who sleeps in Philip II's room and listens to his celebrated aria. 'Her heart is closed to me,' says the King. I might have said the same to the violinist from whose jealousy I suffered for five years; I would have suffered from it much longer, had I married her. Much longer? Am I to die of old age?

'Sweet sleep has fled forever from my eyelids.' Shakespeare's kings speak about insomnia far more eloquently, but I am in no mood for quoting *Henry IV* because I have my life, my own worries I should deal with promptly to guard against nervous breakdowns and death. I had better quote my own life throughout this essay devoted to my life, not to Shakespeare or Peter Konwitschny. But my life is inextricably intertwined with theirs and I am under the impression that my body and soul are scattered all over the world, underworld and time. Why don't they say, 'He has created an intriguing story by skilfully interweaving fictional and historical events, kings and his own life'?

'I shall sleep in my royal mantle when the last hour has struck for me.' One young woman thinks I intend to pass myself off as a king on the strength of my mother's advice: 'You should conduct yourself like a king, my son.' Alas, some parents have unrealistic expectations of their children. My mother lived long enough to realise I would never live up to *all* her expectations: there were too many of them and even the superman might have fallen short of my mother's ambitions. Ambitions, expectations. At my age one had better not use these words for fear of being treated as a laughing stock of humanity. 'If royalty but gave us the power to read to the depths of hearts, where God alone can see all!'

Don Carlos loves the Queen and is loved in return; but he cannot take advantage of the Queen's love because of the walls that separate them wherever they go and try to find each other. So they have no alternative but to lose themselves and thereby fulfil Georges Bataille's prophecy that is in the habit of linking love to what may be termed 'loss of identity'. Don Carlos is no longer the Infante; the Queen is no longer the Queen. Don Carlos fails to fulfil his duties as an infante. It is surely the duty of the stronger members in a society to help those who are weak and Don Carlos is much stronger than the inhabitants of Flanders persecuted by the King. But he does nothing for the oppressed because he

is in love with the Queen (or his mother) and consequently his behaviour and moods drive the Marquis de Posa mad. And Eboli keeps saying to herself, 'Moping about the house all day, moping about the house all day.'

Why become a king or an infant? They are unable to read to the depths of hearts, otherwise they would neither mope nor murder their subjects and friends. Nor would they imperil their lives by words and gestures that may be regarded as wholly inappropriate for the situations they create through their ignorance. Let us take Don Carlos and his ignorance about Princess Eboli's feelings and the inscriptions that adorn the surface of her heart. Don Carlos has received a note inviting him to a secret assignation in the garden of the palace. There he finds a veiled lady whom he takes for the Queen. He is therefore aghast to recognise Princess Eboli: she cannot wear her veil eternally. Of course he does not say to her: 'Is it you? I thought you were the Queen. What a pity you are not.'

'Why?' asks Princess Eboli.

'Because I'm in love with the Queen and not with you.'

He does not say anything of the sort, needless to say, but Eboli is shrewd enough to realise she is not loved in return. What is more, she discovers that the object of her desire is having an affair with his mother. She fails to repress a sudden desire for vengeance and this desire begins to grow in her heart on which the Almighty reads: 'I'll take vengeance on Carlos.' And Carlos hears the following remark: 'I read to the depth of your heart. Your sentence is pronounced.'

'You're not God,' says Carlos.

'I'm a goddess,' says Eboli.

'But a goddess is not allowed to read to the depth of one's heart.'

'A woman in love can do it brilliantly,' says Eboli.

'Have you anything further to add to the discussion?' asks Carlos.

'Ah! The lioness is wounded at heart,' says Eboli.

'Are you a lioness or a goddess?'

'I am both. I can put a magic spell on the goddess and turn her into a lioness.'

'Then you're a witch, not a goddess.'

'Every goddess is a witch to some extent. Fear a slighted woman!'

'Are you a woman, a goddess, a witch or a lioness?'

'Fear a slighted goddess! Fear a slighted lioness!'

'Fear to provoke almighty God, protector of the innocent,' says Carlos.

Don Carlos pleaded his innocence, but no one believed him except Charles V who managed to save the Infante in the nick of time – at the very end of the opera which might have ended differently. Indeed it might have ended by the Infante's death: after all, he deserved it in the light of the incidents that had occurred during his date with the Queen. Since I no longer trust my memory, I push the fast-forward button and find myself in the middle of the act in which Don Carlos loses his head once again. In Konwitschny's production he plants a kiss on his mother's lips instead of studying the notebook he

inherited from the Marquis de Posa. He sends the notebook flying and Flanders sinks into deep despair.

Here is the dialogue I am very fond of:

‘The peace of the world is worth the blood of a rebel son.’

‘Can I offer my son for the peace of the world?’

‘God, to save us all, sacrificed His son.’

‘Can you impose everywhere so harsh a faith?’

‘Wherever the Christian follows the faith of Calvary.’

I wish I could modify it thus: ‘The dignity of the world is worth the blood of many traitors.’

‘Can I offer some zealous members of consumer society for the dignity of the world?’

‘God, to save us all, sacrificed the rich who can’t cross the border between the Earth and Paradise.’

‘Can you impose everywhere so harsh a faith?’

‘Wherever the Christian follows the faith of Calvary.’

I am not likely to side with those who forget about the sword granted to humanity by Jesus Christ and by God Himself Who are anxious to remind us of the wounds we receive every day, even if we stay at home and do not venture outdoors for fear of being wounded or murdered. We have several nasty open wounds and we do not notice them, which denotes a rebellious streak, an un-Christian attitude we are likely to adopt towards our existence and the world in general. The Christian should follow the faith of Calvary, otherwise he or she does not deserve the status to which everybody should aspire, given that we are part of the Christian world. (The Muslims are part of the Muslim world – it goes without saying.) Aren’t we supposed to imitate Christ?

As the Grand Inquisitor (Thomas à Kempis) put it: ‘Jesus has many who love His Kingdom in Heaven, but few who bear His Cross. He has many who desire comfort, but few who desire suffering. He finds many to share His feast, but few His fasting. All desire to rejoice with Him, but few are willing to suffer for His sake. Many follow Jesus to the breaking of Bread, but few to the drinking of the Cup of His Passion. Many admire his miracles, but few follow Him in the humiliation of His Cross.’

I do not have very much to feel joyful about at the moment, but as a child I had a lovely nature: everyone liked me, not only my parents and relatives. And whenever people say, ‘He has a lovely nature’, they do not mean the man who stands or lies in front of them behaves like Don Carlos: he does not mope about the house all day. At least they do not say to him, ‘There’s no point in sitting at home and moping – get out there and find yourself another man or woman!’ But they *might* say to a hedonist, ‘Don’t you remember Christ? What are you drinking right now? The Cup of His Passion or La Tache? Do you think the Cup of His Passion was filled with Romanée Conti? Are you going to a funfair? You should follow Christ in the humiliation of His Cross. Take His Cross and follow Him. Aren’t you eager to take the place of our Saviour on the Cross you’re bearing?’

Or they say: 'I didn't ignore you intentionally – I just didn't recognize you.' Or they say nothing; they just take no notice of you.

Don Carlos could not be replaced and even his father, Philip II, was powerless in the presence of his wife whose thoughts were constantly focused upon another body, another face that she might have kissed in Fontainebleau, in the very first scene of the opera – of the French version of *Don Carlos*. So it was a French kiss and Elisabeth waited for the king to kiss her in the same manner, but he was fond of Spanish kisses only. So they did not hit it off in spite of money, power and history overburdened with Philip II's influence. And even if they had gone on a shopping trip to France, Elisabeth would not have forgotten Don Carlos, for love depends only on the inner space provided by our soul, body and genes. The aging process may be defined as follows: the mixture hardens as it cools.

I noted down a few words I heard when watching *Don Carlos* on TV which shows me a lot of love adventures, a lot of happy endings and kisses I can recall if I scour my youth or what remains of it in my memory and on my writing desk. Let us forget about kisses: no point in talking about them unless you can renew the experience on the spot, on the spur of the moment, at any moment, in any country house or palace. But the words remain and I repeat them; and yet I do not always know what they mean and to whom Don Carlos used to address them in the course of his life. 'From my closed tomb, from eternal rest you snatch me.' Suppose my room is my tomb and I close it to allow my body to take advantage of the eternal rest about which Don Carlos speaks with gusto, all the more so as someone – Elisabeth, presumably – is about to snatch him from it. Apparently she is too keen on his body to allow it to enjoy peace, quiet and immobility guaranteed and suggested by tombs, mummies and crypts.

No one will ever snatch me from *my* tomb. I open my doors and go out on my own initiative: as long as my legs carry me down the street I shall not need any exterior help, be it a woman's arm or God's sunbeam.

'Why, cruel God?' asks Carlos. Why indeed? God allows him to kiss Elisabeth once more and the kiss he performs belongs to the French variety of kisses despite the distance lying between France and the garden where the two lovers kiss each other with passion and desperate energy. On the brink of death Elisabeth does not want to do anything to displease her would-be lover, but God gives no promises and Don Carlos complains about His cruelty because, instead of painting a black picture of the situation, at the crack of dawn God promised him eternal happiness: the world was painted a subtle shade of pink. 'Oh, lost blessing! Treasure beyond price! My share of joy in life! My soul dreams of Paradise.'

‘All bows and is silent when the faith speaks.’ It is the Grand Inquisitor who speaks like that to Philip II and the latter bows as if the faith itself were speaking to him in private, in his palace situated in Spain, not in Fontainebleau. But Philip is not silent: he continues to bombard the Inquisitor with questions about his son and the murders he must commit to preserve the environment, the character of his country, the Church, the faith advocated by the Grand Inquisitor and his own sanity: he is afraid he might go mad if his son does not give up hope of overcoming Elisabeth’s resistance. ‘To endure these trying times in which we find ourselves, I sought in my court, that vast desert of men –’ He just talks for the sake of talking and the Grand Inquisitor shakes his head.

‘Did you really hope to find yourself and peace in your court?’ he asks.

‘I did.’

‘It was a little naive of you to think that your son would listen to your suggestions.’

‘My suggestions?’

‘Didn’t you suggest he should leave your wife in peace? Didn’t you know no one could find peace in your palace? Not even your wife?’

‘I didn’t.’

‘A Church, a kindly mother, can still welcome a sincere repentance,’ says the Grand Inquisitor as he leaves the King in peace in the palace where betrayals and incestuous relationships are tolerated and encouraged, even though they are frowned upon by the Church and the King.

Should I repent of my sins? I have no idea what sins I am talking about, but I am sure there are sins in everyone’s life. I cannot be exempt from the duty through which we are united in the world where one cannot help sinning, however much one can despise both sins and sinners. Well, I repent and humbly ask whoever is in charge to welcome my sincere and timely repentance aimed at the authorities in whose power I wish to spend the rest of my life, provided they do not put me in jail or in the middle of a crowd.

Don Carlos plants a kiss on Elisabeth’s lips and talks to her about the Marquis de Posa who died in the previous act, leaving the inhabitants of Flanders high and dry, as a famous critic put it. Does the Marquis care for posthumous fame, for the Spinozian eternity he failed to conquer in his lifetime marred by the King’s inappropriate intervention and his everlasting incomprehension? Do the dead care about *anything*? They are believed to pray for the living, but there are no proofs of their solicitude unless we get into the habit of always attributing any recovery to their meetings with God and His archangels.

‘The flowers of Paradise will gladden his spirit,’ says Elisabeth as she pictures to herself the Marquis who waters plants and picks flowers in his celestial estate where neither Flanders nor kings can divert his attention from ecology. ‘High petrol taxes can be defended on ecological grounds,’ he says to spiritualists who turn their tables and listen to his voice, anxious to know what ecological

catastrophes are scheduled for 2013. 'You were warned of the ecological catastrophe to come,' he says to them now and then.

JACQUES LACAN

Words, sentences, paragraphs; leaves, twigs, trunks. What else do you need? 'A word,' says Lacan, 'does not reveal its meaning so simply. Rather, it leads on to other words in a linguistic chain, just like one meaning itself leads to others.' One birth leads to another birth, another life. Why not pick that up from Lacan? I do pick it up as I walk through my house, looking at the floor where many books await me with impatience, for they know that sooner or later they will weave their ways into my books. This time I choose this psychoanalyst's life, and Paris may be regarded as the decisive factor that is likely to determine the outcome of my existence and the rest of the problems I must tackle in this parallel world. I still have no idea to what this world is parallel, but I am sure to find out its whereabouts and contents as I follow Lacan's biography step by step, sentence by sentence.

Lacan was an outstanding pupil; he excelled in religious studies and Latin. *Wunderbar!* Thanks to Lacan's biography, I might learn Latin and Greek, let alone German, Italian, Spanish and other languages known and spoken in our global village: after all, he was an *outstanding* pupil. How many languages does every outstanding pupil know? A good pupil speaks his mother tongue and English. A very good pupil has a smattering of French. An excellent pupil reads Voltaire and Rousseau. An outstanding pupil reads and recites poems by Mallarmé, W. B. Yeats, Stefan George, Paul Celan, Pushkin, Lermontov, Horace, Ovid, Homer and Leopardi.

As a teenager, Jacques Lacan developed a passion for philosophy, adorning the walls of his bedroom with a plan of the structure of Spinoza's *Ethics*. I did not read Spinoza as a teenager; yet some of his books might have been available in Moscow where one could find a few old books published before the Revolution which abolished the history of philosophy, leaving in peace only Marx, Engels, Lenin, Hegel and Plato. Peacefully they waited for us on the shelves from which Schopenhauer and Nietzsche had been banished forever – or until the next revolution that finally took place in the Eighties; I was already far away, in Versailles. Does Versailles still recall the French Revolution?

'Everything which is, is either in itself or in another.' I am either in myself or in another – in Lacan, for instance. I think, I feel, I eat, I drink water and wine – therefore I am and this truth is so unquestionable I am reluctant to probe into its mysteries once more; and even if, now and then, I speak of my presence on this Earth or another earth, I think I am present here and there – and everywhere, come to think of it. Am I in myself or in another? So far Lacan's biography has suited my disposition and I feel like going on with this experiment which may lead me if not to eternity, at least to that time-niche where I can sleep peacefully – like a book in a provincial library.

'That which cannot be conceived through another must be conceived through itself.' I do not yet know whether I *can* be conceived through Lacan or not, and only time will show how right I was when setting my heart upon this psychoanalyst born in Paris where my mother and also my father would certainly have spent their lives, but for the trap into which the Russians fell in October 1917. The Bolsheviks set a trap and the Russians walked right into it. Some Russians were happy because they

thought the fall of the Russian Empire had marked the dawn of a new era in European history. Others began to plot the overthrow of the government, and when they failed, their train of thought went abroad and sometimes this train was followed by bodies and jewels thanks to which a lot of Russian aristocrats managed to survive in Paris, Berlin and London. My father and mother got stuck in Arkhangelsk – a pretty town with a picturesque harbour and well-preserved buildings. Neither my father nor my mother really cared about the architecture they might have admired, had they come to Arkhangelsk as tourists and not as the fugitives fleeing from the war-torn country. My father wrote in his diary: ‘War, famine and oppression have forced the Russians to flee from their homes. We are still waiting for my father-in-law, for his ship. We cannot leave without him.’ This entry is followed by a poem that begins as follows: ‘The ship sank slowly to the depths of the ocean.’ My father was wrong: one day the ship made its appearance in the harbour, but it was too late to flee the country either with the jewels or without them.

Lacan was active in the busy Parisian world of the writers, artists and intellectuals who made up the Surrealist movement. He frequented Adrienne Monnier’s bookshop on the Left Bank, along with the likes of André Gide and Paul Claudel and, at the age of 17, met James Joyce. Had I met Joyce at the age of 21, I would have been happy: in the late Sixties, I read the opening chapters of *Ulysses* and was extremely impressed by Joyce’s modernism because, in those days, I appreciated books that had novelty value. The novelty of these books soon wore off and I became bored with them; yet Joyce still figures on the list of my favourite writers where, however, he has been eclipsed by Proust, Musil and Platonov. Never mind – it is better to talk to Joyce than to rot in the Soviet Union, within its borders guarded by barbed wire, machine guns, cannons and ferocious dogs.

Lacan pokes fun at those who still believe in communication and its virtues, but I wonder if anything can exist on its own without reaching for something or somebody else so as to understand what goes on in the universe and elsewhere. I am really used to the word ‘elsewhere’ – to the detriment of the here and now.

Lacan says that if we are bold enough to ask a question, we already know the answer, otherwise we would not rummage in the right drawer in search of our question. All right, I already know the only answer to the question: ‘What do you have in common with today’s writers, poets and essayists?’ I write for Jupiterians with whom I have a lot in common, whatever they say. Who? Earthlings and Jupiterians.

‘Confronted with this failure of words to designate our being, what we are, the subject invokes the one object which he thinks escapes the alienating circuits of speech, *the object a*, the remainder from the operation of becoming a speaking being.’ What is the identity of *the object a*? Don’t I have too many objects and subjects already? How to deal with them all and with *the object a* about which I know next to nothing? What *do* I know about it? I know that this object is just a figment of Lacan’s imagination and I wonder if I have enough time for exploring such figments that seem to be as illusory

as Brecht's acclaimed and celebrated works. Does this object have anything to do with mirrors and our manifold reflections?

There are several objects, I suppose, and only *the object a* is the remainder of our struggle with the language our mother acquaints us with at our birth and even before it, as we know already, thanks to those who maintain that we hear whatever our mother and our father say before our actual birthday – the day when at last we see the light of day. *The object b* is therefore unreliable; so is *the object c*. Suppose your mother says as she gives you a tablecloth, 'Leave the cloth to steep in the dye overnight,' and you obey your mother because you are not used to disobeying her orders. The same goes for the language your mother speaks, although she does not ask you to put it anywhere, not even inside your body and mind. She does not say, 'This is your language, your most precious tool. Put it in your heart so you can use it whenever you need it. And you'll always need it. Your mother tongue will always come in handy, if you're patient and obedient.' She does not say that one's mother tongue is one's best prison guard and tyrant whose doings can be compared to those of Stalin, Lenin and Hitler. Didn't Roland Barthes declare, 'Language is a fascist dictator'? Or was he speaking of the Nazis in this context, within the framework of language?

'In fantasy the child finds a kind of fixity or stability by invoking one of these objects as real.' Which object does he invoke? *The object a*, *the object b* or *the object c*? 'A left-over scrap of the whole operation of entering the symbolic.' Well, we grow up and eventually are allowed to enter the symbolic, which means that everything acquires a meaning, two meanings or even three meanings and we spend hours and years reasoning out the solution to the puzzle: every symbol is a puzzle, as our symbolists put it. The maternal phallus is one of these symbols, for many symbols are conspicuous by their absence and the only way to recognise their symbolic value is to realise they are non-existent. The phallus is not the same thing as the penis: it is the penis plus the idea of lack. Or minus the penis, in other words. So when the word 'phallus' is applied to our mother, we realise that it is just a word and nothing else. In other words, it is not the penis we are looking for.

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

And what about Pushkin's poems? Aren't they the symbols I am looking for as I rummage in my body's drawers, paying homage to Dali's famous picture? Of course they are and they do not let me down, contrary to what I experience when studying the maternal phallus, its non-existence and stillborn aspect. But apparently its absence affects almost every aspect of the child's life, provided the child is taught the science of symbols and knows how to enjoy the absence of phalluses. 'This woman has no phallus, it seems to me,' says a child. 'I therefore can't have a homosexual relationship with

her. So much the better!’ And the child gives himself over to heterosexual sex, saying to Lacan, ‘We had a whale of a time on holiday.’

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

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

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

I assume the insignia of my surroundings and predators take no notice of me because they think I am a morsel of nature; and they do not feel like swallowing this morsel, saying, ‘A tough and indigestible piece of steak.’ How does the child come to master its relation to its body? ‘Here’s my body,’ says the child. ‘What should I do with it? Well, I’ll go to the lavatory first thing tomorrow

morning. I'll no longer wee in bed. And then I'll assume a disguise to protect myself from my parents and their guests.'

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

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

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

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

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

'I know what it means,' says the child.

'What?' asks his mother.

'I love you,' says the child.

'Don't you want to kill your father?'

'Which identity of his should I kill?'

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

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

I CHING

THE BOOK OF CHANGES

To Lilia Kazantseva

This book changes by itself in accordance with the texture of Time.

The clouds pass and the rain does its work. And all individual beings flow into their forms.

This poem was determined by the rain and the Sun. The CREATIVE supplies the world with beauty. Nothing is said about the means by which its creations are achieved. I just went for a walk in the woods. With my eyes I discovered the itinerary of a swallow. The poem was born.

Hidden dragon. I withdraw from the world but am not sad about it. I receive no recognition. I do not care. And I cannot be uprooted, pushed around. Even death will not remove my body from where it is now. I am a hidden dragon. Wavering flight over the depths. I am testing my powers. I fly over the world and Time, correcting errors.

The RECEPTIVE is yielding. You yield to my creativity. I have built my labyrinth in your mind. You are patient and studious. The perseverance of a mare.

Being yielding and devoted does not exclude strength. You need strength to help the Creative. You have to support me in my moments of weakness. You are a column against which I can lean in moments of solitude. People are passing by. What do they know about our union? We remain in the centre and they go around us in circles. And suddenly you take me by the hand and guide me along the Path. You know the Way, for you do not think about it. Your legs carry you along, your beautiful legs. If you were to push ahead on your own initiative, thinking and analysing your moves, you would deviate from the Receptive's substance.

The sky is nothing but another Earth. Only by taking a firm stand on Earth can one walk in Heaven. Only by kissing the Earth can one receive Heaven into oneself.

The dark power is never too far away. So one should not deviate from the Path. When there is hoarfrost underfoot, solid ice is near. And one cannot walk barefoot on ice. The solid ice may hide a lake. What will prevent one from drowning in the lake if the ice breaks into pieces? Only in appearance is the ice solid. The dark power is treacherous. A solid friendship may hide hypocrisy and malicious smiles. An intimacy may hide weapons. A dagger lies at the bottom of my friend's glance. Don't I feel the coolness of its blade?

The cause of a murder is not to be found between the morning and evening of one day. A blood trail leads towards other days and centuries. The trail of blood. The Path of History. And one should obstinately deviate from it. The Path of History and the Path of Wisdom happen to bifurcate in the woods. The Path of History is well-trodden. How easy it is to walk along that path.

The Path of Wisdom is strewn with obstacles. But even bats can sense obstacles in their path. Only the first steps are hard. One's feet get stuck in the mud of ignorance.

DIFFICULTY AT THE BEGINNING. How difficult it is to begin a sentence. I say 'I' and lapse into silence, unable to go on. What can I do with myself? What secret of my soul am I about to betray to a stranger?

Difficulties pile up. There are skyscrapers everywhere. Can I edge my way between the skyscrapers? Horse and waggon part. I am stranded in a desert. Can I see the Path in the sand? Can I trace the Path by walking through the desert? I let the waggon stay where it is. I need it not. The horse is far away, galloping beyond the horizon. So I have to walk through the desert, slowly, obstinately. Walking through loneliness. The firm and yielding unite for the first time and the birth is difficult. Clouds and thunder. But movement in the midst of danger brings great success.

The young fool seeks me. Myself. My YOUTHFUL FOLLY. What do my memories bring in their wake? The garden path. Why did I not follow it? Running before my mother. I might never have lost her. I would always have glanced back. What a pity my mother is not walking behind me now. I would even content myself with her silent figure. Her walking figure, her features. Why did I lose my mother? The young fool. Why did I not look at her day and night? Why did I not sleep in her room? My cradle stirred into motion by her hand, like a pendulum. Time, Time, Time. Why did I get out of my cradle? Why did I lose my mother's hand? A spring wells up at the foot of the mountain. Why does the spring become a brook? Flowing away, drying up in a desert. Entangled youthful folly brings humiliation. Time brings humiliation and deception. Outside the cradle. Outside the centre.

The ancient Indians did not care about history. Their spring remained at the foot of the mountain. But that spring was as vast as an ocean, as deep as an endless thought. And the mother's fingers continued to push the cradle. Gently, softly, without imparting to it the rhythm of Time.

Shall we renounce history instead? Shall we blot out names and dates? History has been written on water.

WAITING. Holding back. Danger lies ahead. But the danger lies everywhere. One should not turn back either. Going back is dangerous, for one is supposed to drift with the current. And the current of hours never flows anticlockwise. The clock might be broken by an insistent hand. Only the mother is in a position to handle the clock properly. By pushing the cradle with her fingers. Nourishment. Who is able to nourish us save our mothers? Our saviours. The saviours of humanity. Throughout our lives we should be spoon-fed by them.

Building castles in the sand. One does not seek out difficulties.

Waiting in blood. Waiting in the midst of history.

One is likely to succeed by crossing the great water on which history is written. I skim along history, step over it, jump over it. But the blood and the mud splotch on my feet. History splutters blood.

Danger and strength produce CONFLICT. One is not advised to cross the waters of history. The blood remains but one can close one's eyes. The smell of the blood persists, endures. What is to be done? One cannot engage in conflict. One returns home, gives way.

When there is a conflict, the masses are sure to rise up. Hence the arrival of the ARMY. Army means mass. Army means enemy. Army means mourning.

Two men with machine guns are enough. They are the army. And the bullets they shoot are like birds carrying death in their beaks.

A sage contemplates the itinerary of death-birds. He makes no attempt to catch them. And he feeds them not. He knows they are part and parcel of landscapes. They are reflected in lakes and pools. Every puddle reflects them. He steps over puddles but his feet are stained, smeared with death. He returns home and washes his feet.

HOLDING TOGETHER is something joyful. Shaking hands with your neighbours, hearing their voices. What do they talk about? I cannot hear their words. But their voices are the music of life, my own flesh and blood. There are no strangers in the world. I have already met all these people in our mother's womb. We are all reflected in the same water. As waters flow together on the Earth, so should human beings sit at the same table, drinking the same wine. Truth is like a full earthen bowl. Thus, in the end, good fortune comes from without.

Intertwining signals will never replace hands and glances. A mere touch is better than a distant message, however important. What can a distant message bring to one's room? Information. In the West the technological revolution, particularly in the area of information technology, is proceeding apace. But a glance is deeper than any screen. And there are layers of meaning in one single glance. I unfold your glance, the embroidered carpet of your love. I unwrap the gift of your caress.

My enemy puts his sword at my feet. Its blade is warm now. The sword has transformed itself into a quill-pen. Why not write a poem with it?

A blank sheet of paper

Contains a poem.

A caress

Restores life to a void.

A warm emptiness reflects everything.

Shall I go on writing this poem?

Indefinitely?

My pen glides across the sheet of paper, tracing the Path.

No matter whether I write it or not.

It has already been written.

THE TAMING POWER OF THE SMALL. There are small people in our house. They also sit with us at the table. How to distinguish them from our friends? How to detect their small-minded attitude? They eat with knives and forks. They might behave normally for a while, but sooner or later they betray themselves. Forks drop from their hands, knives pierce their friends' bodies. When the snake's fangs pierce the flesh of its victim, the venom is injected.

The venom of small people spoils our wine that becomes bitter, undrinkable. We throw it away but the venom remains. The venom flows out of their mouths and radiates from their deeds. The air is painted in brownish colours.

Their small talk cannot be seen. It can be heard everywhere, poisoning our discussions. Their words are like insects. Shall we wage war against the flower-destroying insects?

The wind drives across Heaven, bringing on its wings a myriad of tiny brown insects. One cannot see Heaven. The Sun is covered with those insects. What are they eating on the surface of the Sun? Have they already poisoned sunbeams, warmth, rain, rainbows?

The spokes burst out of the waggon wheels. And the waggon collapses on the road. How can one follow the Path? By following the itinerary of birds.

If you are sincere, blood vanishes and fear gives way. No blame.

You are rich in your neighbour. Knock at your neighbour's door and you will be admitted, for his door has been left ajar. There are no secrets amongst friends.

The rain comes, there is rest.

TREADING upon the tail of the tiger. The tiger does not bite the man. The tiger understands the language of the man. They converse in the shadow of a Christmas tree.

Simple conduct. Progress without blame. Even in solitude the man speaks to others and hears his neighbours. And tigers pay him visits in his room. They can defend him from his enemies. His eyes are tigers, his thoughts are tigers. He needs no weapons. He destroys his enemies with his thoughts. The rays issuing from his eyes are tigers.

A small man treads on the tail of the tiger. The tiger bites the small man.

PEACE. The small departs. The great approaches.

The small people rise and leave the round table. Only knights remain at the round table. And the footfalls of King Arthur can be heard in the night. It is a good omen, a promise of peace. The way of the superior man is waxing. The way of the inferior man is waning. There are two moons in the sky: the small moon and the big moon. The small moon grows smaller. The big moon grows bigger. The big moon waxes lyrical. The big moon waxes eloquent. In due course the big moon becomes the Sun.

Bullets melt in the hearts of victims like snow and ice. Hoarfrost is no longer underfoot. And solid ice is far away. The lake is transparent once more. And clouds drift above it.

The light principle is within, the shadowy without. The small men disperse of their own accord. Police need not use tear gas to disperse the mob of dwarves.

Heaven and Earth unite. Peace, peace, peace. The ruler divides and completes the course of Heaven and Earth. He regulates their gifts. He divides and completes human history. He devises a system of universal schooling. Bearing with the uncultured in gentleness.

When ribbon grass is pulled up, the sod comes with it. Undertakings assure good fortune.

Heaven and Earth unite. The world is liquid. The world is a lake in which I am reflected.

The man in the street is my self which can be found in all things. Even above Heaven. Even beneath the Earth. Even beneath the Earth my self wanders at night. And throughout history. Why do I wear Dante's clothes? He is not my brother, nor my keeper. Nor even my contemporary. But we are one and the same body. Nothing casts shadows any more, neither the past nor the future. That which is above Heaven, that which is beneath the Earth, that which is between these two, Heaven and Earth, that which the people call the past, the present and the future, are spun across space from intertwining skeins. They are my own self. And my self is bound together by nerves and tendons, by ligaments and veins. My blood flows through the universe, through history. My meditation controls the way my blood flows through the universe. Nothing is hard like ice. The universe is compliant. My thoughts penetrate everywhere. My nerves are everywhere. The Sun is my thoughts and my eyes. The branches of a tree are intertwined. They are my fingers. And my tree pierces the canopy of Heaven. Its roots are far beneath the Earth. And the small men trip over the roots of my tree.

Things cannot remain forever united. STANDSTILL.

Standstill and peace are opposed in their natures. The great departs. The small approaches. The small men no longer stumble against the roots of my Christmas tree. They jump over them. And they stamp on them, laughing with joy.

The green slime spreads out all over the countryside. And in the cities the green slime covers palaces. Diseases are spread by mosquitoes.

Heaven and Earth do not unite. The shadowy is within, the light without. Weakness is within, firmness without. The man with a machine gun stands behind my door. He is just my reflection, my doppelgänger. I stand behind my own door. And I knock at my door. I say to myself, to my visitor, 'Who art thou, that same am I. Who I am, that same art thou. Since thou art I, come in, O myself.' A hail of bullets.

The hail batters on my windows. Violent rain and hail have devastated crops. What if I should fail? I tie my thoughts to a cluster of mulberry shoots.

The superior man falls back upon his inner worth. He withdraws into himself. He stumbles upon his own self. He sits down upon his own roots. The standstill helps the great man to attain success. As long as he sits on his own roots he is invulnerable. His roots spread all over Heaven. His ideas take root in a new land.

If struck and felled by an axe, a tree springs from its root in a newer form.

FELLOWSHIP WITH MEN. At the gate, in the meadow, in the room. Around the dinner table. As Thomas has emphasised, even in cases where there have to be winners and losers the transaction is not necessarily a combat. For example, when two individuals of a certain species of coral find themselves in a place where there is room for only one, the smaller of the two will always disintegrate, and it will do so by means of its own autonomous mechanisms: 'He is not thrown out, not outgamed, not outgunned; he simply chooses to bow out.' Excessive aggression, competition and destructive behaviour are predominant only in the human species.

Weapons are hidden under the table. What do my feet touch? It is not another foot I touch under the table. It is not the foot of a beautiful woman. My toes encounter coldness. The coolness of blades and barrels. The sudden cold snap has brought the first widespread snow.

For three years I do not rise up. I cannot attack. But I can go out of my room. Going out of the gate for fellowship with men. Who will ever blame me for that?

Life leads me on a Path of many windings.
 Now I walk to the left, turning round a corner,
 Now my motorcar swerves to the right.
 My course is checked by a corpse,
 And again I skim along my Path.
 Here my thoughts pour down on a sheet of paper
 Like the rain in spring, like a torrential rain.
 There I am so overburdened with knowledge
 My branches crack and fall down on the grass.
 But as soon as I look inside, I find your image.
 Our words are sweet and strong like the fragrance of orchids.

POSSESSION IN GREAT MEASURE. Supreme success. It is enough to quote the name of this hexagram. Do I need to embroider upon a triumph? Why not sit down in a rocking chair and order a glass of champagne? The superior man curbs evil and thus obeys the benevolent Will of Heaven.

A big waggon for loading. Let us load it with capital letters.

Heaven helps the man who is devoted. He is allowed to push the waggon loaded with the Will of Heaven. It is no arduous task. The Will of Heaven is as light as a feather.

Why not fill my flat with capital letters and exclamation marks?

He who possesses something great must not make it too full. The champagne must not spill on the floor. MODESTY. The superior man carries the bucket without spilling a drop.

Modesty gives honour and shines forth. Modesty is the Moon. And the Moon is a heavenly bowl brimful of champagne. Not a drop has been spilled.

Even plain water contains the Will of Heaven. A light rain is falling. Modesty has come to expression.

My walls are mirrors. It is favourable to set armies marching in order to chastise one's own city and one's country. So I marshal my army against myself. The weapon lying on the table is the highest expression of my will. I regulate the rhythm of my heart by pointing a revolver at myself. I press the cold barrel against my temple and become immortal.

When one possesses something great and is modest, there is sure to be ENTHUSIASM.

But I might be robbed of my greatness and modesty. Often by myself. The heroes of old introduced double gates and night watchmen with clappers to guard against robbery. They kept away their own greediness and vanity. People got richer and also greedier. And they finally robbed themselves of their riches.

My own hand takes a pearl necklace from my jewel box. I cut off the hand that robs my house. I set my armies marching and cherish the bullets in my heart. He who wholly comprehends this sacrifice rules the world as though it were spinning on his hand.

The waggon is ready. And the horse is impatient. The line of floats, bands and horseback riders stretches on for three miles. Four days of festivities. The superior men die in order to be re-born. They plant new seeds. To know the seeds, that is essential and divine. The seeds are the first imperceptible beginning of movement. And the movement carries one along the Way. The great men ride on horseback amongst ruins. Firm as the rock they are, those great men. Perseverance brings good fortune. They ride until their horses collapse under them, exhausted.

The great men are fatally wounded. They are fatally ill. They put pressure upon themselves. And thus they continue to live. Every day they drink a small quantity of poison so that the poison does not kill them.

Constant illness keeps our body on its guard.

The heroes of old tamed the ox and yoked the horse. And they rode towards the Hereafter and therefore left death far behind. And their waggons were loaded with the light of Heaven. They transported it to distant regions. For the benefit of the world. Thunder in the middle of the lake. The Will of Heaven.

FOLLOWING. Following one's Path in a waggon, on a horseback. To go out of the door in company produces deeds.

Seasons follow each other. I should tread a measure with seasons. Slowing down in autumn. I should keep pace with seasons. There are fast seasons. There are slow seasons. And autumn slackens its pace. Autumn hardens into winter. I slacken my legs and slowly lie back.

And night follows day. At nightfall the superior man goes indoors for rest and recuperation. Thunder is at rest in the lake. The light of Heaven becomes a crystal vase. But the light of Heaven is still on.

WORK ON WHAT HAS BEEN SPOILED. Order comes into the world.

The wind blows low on the mountain. I must begin from the beginning. In due course the wind will get higher and carry the clouds across the sky. In due course the wind will become a messenger of Heaven.

The ocean begins on my writing desk. I am crossing the great water.

The plaster is beginning to fall from the walls. I must have my room re-decorated. Even the sky is to be re-painted. A decorated ceiling. Christmas decorations.

Decay. Working on what has been spoiled by fathers. If there is a son, no blame rests upon the departed father.

Were you cold, Father? You were distant. You seemed to be walking far away, amidst the ruins of earlier civilisations. You would pick up a stone and try to fit it into an old pattern, into the Great Wall of China. 'The wall has crumbled to pieces,' you used to say.

And you often quoted Confucius: 'The essence of the gentleman is that of wind. The essence of small people is that of grass. And when a wind passes over the grass, it cannot choose but bend.'

I wish the essence of the gentleman could be that of rain, of downpour. Small people are much akin to shirts dangling from a clothes line. I wish the shirts might become wet, soaked through.

When there are things to do, one can become great. APPROACH means becoming great.

The more we approach our goal the further off it gets. The more we know, the wider is the expanse of our ignorance. As long as I stay in my room the world remains small.

Shall I keep it small? Shall I hold it in the palms of my hands? Loneliness is the key to smallness. In my room I do with the world what I please.

Approach. A major column of tanks is approaching the parliament. No point in overthrowing one government, two governments. It is too late for military coups. But it is not too late for salvation. It is never too late for salvation and solutions. One need not yield to fate.

The superior man is inexhaustible in his will to teach. Even without computers, even without pencils, even without a voice. His glance contains the wisdom of the world. His gestures are the way to salvation. He is walking along the Path. Why not follow him? His disciples cannot approach him, but they walk in his wake. His inner music shakes them into wakefulness.

The will is directed inward.

CONTEMPLATION. When things are great one can contemplate them. Shall I leave my room and go out? Or shall I contemplate the world under a microscope?

Shall I contemplate the world through the crack in the door? The voyeur of the world. Can one see the world otherwise, on Earth?

A woman undressing in front of a mirror. A vision of pure beauty, enhanced by the narrowness of the crack. Distant, inaccessible. Wonderful. This vision is far better than the panorama of a huge, empty hall. The wasteland of modern architecture. Steel and glass.

Contemplation of my life. The intimacy of my meditation. Only through the crack in the door can it be appraised. Its determination, its Path. The focus of my meditation. My Path is the crack in the door. A narrow Path opening out onto pure beauty.

Contemplation of my life decides the choice between advance and retreat. Advance, advance. Even outdoors will I hold the world in the palms of my hands.

Self-knowledge does not mean preoccupation with one's own thoughts. Rather, it means concern about the effects one creates.

Even outdoors will I caress the world.

BITING THROUGH. When there is something that can be contemplated, there is something that creates union. Biting through means union.

What does that mean? How many things have I contemplated? Am I united with them? I am walking towards them, but they fly away at my approach. The world slips through my fingers and turns to sand. Quicksand, all around you. Dealing with problems is rather like walking on quicksand. I can get sucked down into the world. I am allowed to perish in the world. I am not allowed to grasp it.

Am I allowed to bite through the world? My mouth remains open. The lump of the world has got stuck in my throat. The bone of the world. The bones of the dead. A silent cry. I look like a crying man or woman. My mouth is open. Wide-open, wide-eyed. I am likely to choke on the world.

I am enveloped in a cloud of choking dust. Is that the world?

Thunder and lightning. I am surrounded by the charred and blackened remains of buildings. History lies before me like an open book. The *Book of Permanence*. People have a need for permanence.

Some drugs taken in large quantities cause permanent brain damage. The brain of the world has been damaged.

Thunder and lightning are united. But rain is left out. The world is burning.

Biting on old dried meat and striking on something poisonous. Biting on dried gristly meat and receiving metal arrows. What shall I do with these arrows? My neck is fastened in the wooden cangue so that my ears disappear. I can feel the wooden cangue. I can feel the coolness of the arrows.

One drop of this poison would be enough to induce paralysis and blindness.

GRACE. Another of your names.

You are in the book now. In every line. A white horse comes as if on wings. The world is a pretext for your appearance.

Grace in hills and gardens.
 You climbed those hills,
 You walked around those gardens,
 You adorned them with your grace,
 You wrote down your name on them.
 So I read your name everywhere now.
 A plane is writing it upon the sky.
 Writing down, writing up.
 My roll of silk is meagre and small.
 I have withdrawn from people of the lowlands
 Who seek nothing but magnificence and luxury.
 This roll of silk I own is big enough
 For your name that I write on it day and night.
 Humiliation, but in the end good fortune.
 The gifts I have to offer are poor and few.
 What counts, however, is the sincerity of feelings.
 I offer you this roll of silk
 With your name written across it.

SPLITTING APART. The mountain rests on the Earth. An image of fragility? Hardly. Even a steep, narrow mountain is not likely to topple over. Yet this is the image of splitting apart. The mountain does not rise up in the air. The mountain rests on the Earth. Its base is broad and reliable. Will it topple over? Anything can happen. Images and meanings contradict each other. Even the same image often contradicts itself. The same word is liable to contradict itself. The *Book of Changes* rests on this principle. But sometimes the book itself topples over, although no one so much as brushes against it. And there is no draught in the room. Why does it topple over? Because one cannot be sure of anything.

I open up the book. As I read the sentence on which my eyes alight in search for a solution, the meaning of the sentence begins to change imperceptibly, unavoidably. When I have finished reading it becomes its opposite. The sentence, the meaning. My life. The superior man takes heed of the alternation of increase and decrease, fullness and emptiness, for it is the course of Heaven. But often they come together and remain united through the Will of Heaven—fullness and emptiness, increase and decrease. The same instant can contain them. The instant might be full and empty. The instant might be small and huge. And so might human beings. And words.

Eternity is comprised of opposites. And there is a particle of Eternity in every instant. Within the realm of Time.

You change your mind twice within an hour. Sometimes it happens more often. Several nuances in your voice can be distinguished, several opposed intonations. And several tints in your eyes. You might say about your former husband, 'He was an honest man.' And six minutes later you might add, 'He was a crook. And he betrayed me.'

Splitting apart. Widowhood. The bed is split at the edge because one has no wife.

The bed is split up. The disaster affects not only the resting place but its occupant.

I am at one with my bed. Solitary people become their own furniture.

Things cannot be destroyed once and for all. They can be destroyed for a while. They are in this state now. In the state of being destroyed, in the state of ruins. Torrential rains have caused heavy casualties and widespread destruction. Throughout history. Only rainy days. That is what our history consists of—rainy days.

The leg of the bed is split in order to destroy those below.

There is a large piece of fruit still uneaten. On the bed. Why does no one pick it up? The fruit is beauty. The fruit is poetry. The fruit means an effort. The effort denotes an unsatisfied person.

Things cannot be destroyed once and for all. RETURN is the stem of character. Return leads to self-knowledge. Coming back to oneself. Where have you been all these years?

Standing before the door of one's own house. The prodigal son returned home to put his trials and tribulations behind him and seek forgiveness from his people.

To and fro goes the Way. You depart and return. And you notice upon your return that you have never departed. How can you depart? How can you leave your own body? And your soul? Can you drop it into a bowl?

Friends come without blame. Coming back to you. Your living room is swarming with people. And a shaman lifts his arms.

Thunder within the Earth. THE TURNING POINT. The thunder has been hidden, buried. The Second World War has been buried. But its tomb is open.

INNOCENCE. By turning back one is freed of guilt.

The tombs of crimes are open. A traveller comes to a standstill and looks into them. The open tombs of crimes. Is he innocent? Where has he been all these years? Is there no knife in his pocket?

A child kneels down by the edge of a tomb and looks down, his eyes wide-open. Is the child innocent? Under Heaven thunder rolls.

Innocent action brings misfortune. And you cannot even blame those innocent people. 'We merely looked into a tomb. But we had not killed the man. By the way, there was no corpse in the tomb.'

You cannot even talk about the innocent.

THE TAMING POWER OF THE GREAT. There is no greatness in the world. The superior men are hidden underground. I kneel down and apply my ear to the surface of the Earth. I hear their voices. They are still my neighbours.

The taming power of money. Even horses can be tamed by money. Not to mention shrews.

The axletrees are taken from the waggon. The wheels are taken from the waggon. The money is taken from the passengers' pockets.

The waggon is taken from the traveller.

THE CORNERS OF THE MOUTH mean providing nourishment for what is right. What is the use?

All poems are lying in open tombs. No one kneels by the tombs. No one prays by them. No one reminisces in front of them.

The corners of the mouth. Uplifted. A smile. Not a Chinese smile, not the Buddha's smile.

To share in the life of the foolish

Will lead to the state of woe.

You share not, and they will hate you.

What good comes from contact with fools?

Advice on their duties stirs anger.

Your own good deeds they impede.

When you ignore what they say they are angry.

A small man. Of his betters he is envious.

Mad for praise and wroth of blame.

Is there ever any goodness

In those foolish common men?

PREPONDERANCE OF THE GREAT. Sounds like a joke. Great indeed was the time when preponderance of the great could be envisaged.

A dry poplar sprouts at the root. An older man takes his bride by the hand. Following my Path. Walking away from death. The Fountain of Youth. You are the fountain in which my body will bathe day and night.

You are so beautiful and gracious. And frivolous. My platonic idea of beauty and youth.

An embodiment of my ideas. The embodiment of loyalty and purity. Are you akin to the *Book of Changes*? Everything is akin to the *Book of Changes*.

The lake rises above the trees. It is going to rain.

Should I know the meaning of anything? Will it help me out? I do not know the meaning of this hour. Does it really mean more than a tree? A tree cannot become a receptacle of one's desire, even if one hides a love letter in it.

Leafing through a book. The *Book of Changes*. The *Book of Leaves*. The *Book of Dead Leaves*. But even dead leaves are alive.

Whatever you do succeeds. Perhaps. If success is identical with failure.

The danger of Heaven lies in the fact that one cannot climb up to it. I can. There is a ladder in my lumber room. What is the point in climbing up to Heaven?

One should strive to attain small things only. But small things are not worthy of one's attention.

Bound with cords and ropes. Shut in between thorn-hedged prison walls. Just a statement. No comment, no change. Only the *Book of Changes*.

THE CLINGING. Men loudly bewail the approach of old age. No comment. Even Confucius said nothing about it.

INFLUENCE. The masculine subordinates itself to the feminine. Taking a maiden to wife brings good fortune. Maiden. Performing graceful dances. I grab your arm and dance you around the room.

DURATION. Our way must not be other than long-lasting.

Perseverance brings good fortune for a woman because she follows one man all her life.

THE RETREAT. They never withdraw, those people. Small people. They are always going forward.

THE POWER OF THE GREAT. The great are small now.

PROGRESS. Going forward. Walking towards death. It is better to remain where I am. The world should sit down in my rocking chair.

DARKENING OF THE LIGHT. And the Sun became black as sackcloth of hair.

Many think the end of the world is drawing nigh. Wiping everything out. A world conflagration.

The Earth is seething with indignation. We have ill-treated the Earth. She can bear our footfalls. Our mother, our common mother. Our footfalls caress her, but she cannot bear our blood. And our greed.

Once we all shared a common language. This language was the Earth. And then we started to build the Tower of Babel. We got away from the Earth and we did not reach Heaven. We remained somewhere in between.

The Earth is an accomplice of the Sun and other heavenly bodies. Their sister, their daughter, their wife, their mother. The Earth puts a veil over the face of the Sun. The veil of destruction. The beauty of the world hides itself beyond the veil. Hoping for better days. Hoping for better nights.

The Earth shares the blood of humanity with the Moon. The blood of victims. There is too much blood on Earth. The Earth is overflowing with blood. There are too many rivers on Earth, too many lakes.

The Earth shares the blood of history with the stars. And the stars become heavy with human blood. They detach themselves from the firmament and drop to Earth.

Stupidity. Whatever we think and write on Earth is communicated to Heaven which is the mirror of the Earth. And Heaven cannot bear our words. The scroll of Heaven has grown suspicious of our ideas. Heaven is loath to reflect our minds.

And even mountains cannot bear the sight of us. And every island aspires to become a desert island. No admittance. Robinson Crusoe is persona non grata. Islands refuse to listen to our footfalls.

And there arose a smoke out of the pit, as the smoke of a great furnace.

The bottomless pit has already been opened. And the smoke continues to arise out of it.

How could I close the pit? Where is a lid large enough to close it? All lids are small. Suitable for tins, not for pits.

The Sun and the air have been darkened by the smoke. We are sitting in the dark, at the back of a theatre. There is nothing on the stage, neither actors nor props. The dark red curtain.

Locusts, locusts. Small people. Reports from Earth say that swarms of locusts have destroyed eighty per cent of crops. Crops mean 'generative forces' and 'generative powers'. And 'poetry'.

I climb to the top of the Christmas tree and light a candle in the sky. And that is enough.

THE FAMILY. You are the treasure of the house.

OPPOSITION. When the way of the family draws to an end, misunderstandings come. Opposition means misunderstandings.

Confucius shows that opposition is the natural prerequisite for union. As a result of opposition, a need to bridge it arises. There are lots of bridges in my room. All my corridors are bridges. And my bed. My own body is a bridge.

Water on the mountain. OBSTRUCTION. This image reminds me of something. When did it happen? I was with my parents in a car. A lake, up in the mountains. My treasures, my youth. Time is an obstruction. On the path leading to the past. Will my memory remove it? In the midst of the greatest obstructions, friends come.

DELIVERANCE. Through movement one escapes danger. Walking away from the end of the world.

When Heaven and Earth deliver themselves,
 Thunder and rain set in.
 And the wheel turns again,
 And one tilts at windmills.
 A useless enterprise.
 Everything is quite useless
 And one cannot vanquish windmills.
 It is the action that counts.
 Travelling on the sails of a windmill,
 Up and down, up and down.
 Brandishing one's lance in the air,
 Threatening the gods and destiny.
 Useless, pointless, ludicrous.

Ideals are nothing but words
 Unless one goes out.
 What can be found outdoors?
 Useless enterprises.
 Mockery and smiles.
 Only teenagers may have
 All these idealistic visions
 Of brotherhood and fraternity.
 The primacy of art.
 Empty words.
 Unless one writes a poem
 That none will ever read.

Poems are never empty.
Effort and hope.
No goal required.
Writing a poem,
Re-writing a poem.
The goal of a poem?
A shoal of exotic fish,
Anything and nothing.
Walking along the Path
On a rainy day.
Looking at a rainbow.
Rain and rainbows.
They are inseparable
Like decrease and increase,
Obstruction and deliverance.
Gathering together,
Drinking wine.
Lamenting and sighing.
Flood of tears.
Any feast is a funeral
And vice versa.
Do I know
When I am happy?
Tomorrow is the best answer
To many questions and doubts.
Pushing upward,
Walking towards the future.
Renewing my weapons
To meet the unforeseen.
My weapons are a poem.
A sword, a bow, an arrow.
An arrow flies through my poem
But cannot kill Achilles.
If one man becomes immortal
Everybody is freed from Time.
Only by saving others
Can I save myself.

Climbing Heaven, reaching Olympus.
Sitting and drinking with the gods.

Through oppression one learns
To unleash the wrath of the nation.
Oppression reminds of death
And awakens compassion.
Oppression means an encounter,
The awareness of common destiny.
Men are oppressed by stones
And lean on thorns and thistles.
All stones are tombstones.
I replenish my cup.
I will not be oppressed
By creeping vines.
The well nourishes
And is not exhausted.
But if the jug breaks
Misfortune will come.

Pushing upward, going downstairs.
A dead woman in my corridors.
An encounter with my destiny.
Heaven and Earth bring about love,
And the four seasons complete themselves.
But for love, the snow would not melt.
The snow melts in the mouth of my beloved,
And a tree sprouts from her caresses.
Water and fire subdue each other,
And mountains meet in the air.
Hope means an encounter.

When one's own day comes,
One may create revolution.
Not the French Revolution,
Nor the Russian Revolution.

Just a different word or sentence
 Uttered in a different tone of voice.
 A change of colours. The *Book of Changes*
 Instead of manifestos and leaflets.
 A mistletoe instead of a thistle.
 A mistress instead of loneliness.
 If one man is madly in love
 History takes a turn for the better.

Nothing transforms things
 So much as the ting.
 The cauldron. Cast of bronze,
 The ting was the vessel that held
 The cooked viands in the temple
 Of the ancestors and at banquets.
 The head of the family served the food
 From the ting into the bowls of the guests.
 My aspirations. My dearest wish.
 The fostering and nourishing of men.
 The flame kindled by wood and wind.
 The cauldron used by Tsouang-tse.
 The same cauldron, the same fire.
 The dish is still hot enough
 To be enjoyed by the multitude.
 There are no kings without subjects.
 And the multitude create poets.
 Muses do not roam around deserts.
 They shout and run in the streets.
 Muses play hopscotch on pavements.

Will Hamlet's father
 Always remain a ghost?
 Can he be avenged?
 Can every crime be redeemed?
 Unless the dead are alive
 They cannot be avenged.
 Nothing can redeem a crime

Unless the victim is prepared
 To embrace the torturer.
 And sometimes it is better
 Not to embrace one's torturer.
 History leads us into stupor
 Through its endless corridors.
 History is a bad drug,
 Not De Quincey's opium.
 The result is paralysis.
 Dreams lose the name of action.
 A poem is unfinished.
 Not like Schubert's Symphony
 But like a draft, a discarded draft.
 The pit is a wastepaper basket.
 Poems are burning,
 Troy is burning.
 Neither Homer nor Yeats
 Witness the fire.
 And Plato's fire dies in the grate.
 Should one talk at length
 About one's kinship with the stars
 Under the circumstances?

'To be or not to be' is a question
 That will not be answered today.
 But the soul can wear many bodies
 And one of them will know the answer.
 And that body will redeem other bodies,
 Even those burning in Hell.
 And once again Virgil
 Will guide Dante
 Along the Path,
 Down the Path,
 Up the Path.
 Paradise.

Once rain falls, remorse is spent.

The rain releases tension,
In accordance with the tradition.

The prince's meal is spilled
And his person soiled.
We can be lucky and unlucky
Within one single hexagram,
Within one moment.

Doubt is a balance
Between opposite forces.
Hesitation is a balance
Between two decisions.
Hamlet looks at his bodkin.

The superior man
Sets his life in order
And examines himself.
What does he find?
Doubts, hesitations?
Will Sancho Panza
Ever deliver him
From the windmills?
Will he comfort him
along the Path—
On the tortuous Path
Leading through the wood?
The path full of victims.

The sacrificial spoon,
The sacrificial chalice.
They shall not fall. It is enough
To hold them in one's hands.
The ritual shall be performed.
A hundred thousand times
I lose my treasures
And climb the nine hills.
I get my treasures back
And my face is reflected

In the lake of my childhood,
 Up in the mountains.
 The spoon and chalice
 Remain in my hands.
 No longer do I feel
 My mother's body
 But she is behind me,
 Backing my mission.

Every human is a puppet,
 An empty wooden doll.
 Void it is, a mass of misery,
 A straw, a number of words.
 Keeping still. Going into a courtyard.
 All this amounts to the same thing,
 To the same empty ting,
 To the same misery,
 To the same illusion,
 To the same death.
 'A rest that peace begets—'

I should not permit my thoughts
 To go beyond my situation.
 My situation is here and now.
 In this room, on this bed.
 The restless heart is to be subdued
 By forcible means.

I turn the page
 And read something different.
 The reverse of stillness. Another illusion.
 There is one page in the *Book of Changes*,
 Only one page. Many movements
 But nothing happens. Shadows of shadows.
 Like a word drawn with a stick in water.
 Like a dewdrop at sunrise.
 But what if the Sun does not rise?

Will the dewdrop remain there?
 In the cold of the dawn?
 Is the dewdrop as huge
 As the mountain lake?

All depends on the angle of vision.
 From where I am standing now
 The world seems beautiful.
 All depends on the page I am reading.
 I have no wish to turn this page.
 Will the Eastern wind turn it?

Again the windmills are set into motion.
 Evil giants. Devils, demons.
 Even one page cannot keep still.
 It re-writes itself all the time.

Development. The maiden
 Is given in marriage,
 Again and again.
 How many marriages
 Without a single divorce?
 Mirage instead of marriage.

Abundance. Fullness.
 The ting is brimful of food,
 But everybody is hungry.
 It is a warm day, but overcast.
 The overcast, drizzly skies.
 Shall we walk away from them?
 As far as other skies?
 The wanderer.
 Success through smallness.
 The success is small. The sky is near.
 A damp cloud instead of God.
 Why build the Tower of Babel?
 It is pointless to go far away.

There are no other skies.
 Heaven is just one page.
 Heaven is small and low,
 As low as my ceiling.

In times of dispersion and separation,
 A great idea provides a focal point
 For the organisation of recovery.
 I must kill Claudius.
 Not by abstention from action
 Does a man attain
 Freedom from action.
 Nor by a mere renunciation
 Does he really attain
 Perfection.
 Not for a moment can one remain
 Without performing action.
 Everyone is made
 To act helplessly,
 Hopelessly.
 In no way
 Can the killing of Claudius
 Obliterate Auschwitz.
 Yet kill him I must.

Why go on writing this poem?
 To save the Library of Alexandria?

A firm resolution is the happy end.
 I must do my duty. The rest is literature.
 The rest is silence. Limitation. Success.
 To limit one's life to the sense of duty.
 He who knows no limitation
 Will have cause to lament.
 Sweet limitation brings good fortune.
 The sense of duty. Inner truth.
 One should cross the great water.

Claudius is always on the other side.
 Not in my room, not within reach,
 Not within the range of the guns.
 So I should cross the great water—
 The dewdrop, in other words.
 Preponderance of the small.

And what will happen after completion?
 Another beginning. Another lake.
 Another transition from chaos to order.
 Another ghost. Another Claudius.
 Another room. Another body.
 But the same soul. The same poem.
 The same unavoidable, inviolable duty.
 To discipline the Devil's Country.
 What is willed is done.
 No remorse.
 No blame.

Another beginning. One kills
 Three foxes in the field
 And receives a yellow arrow.
 There is nothing magic in it,
 Nothing unusual. A daily routine,
 An eternal routine. Yellow arrows
 Are strewn around my carpet,
 And foxes prowl around my flat.
 Today I will not harm them.

The arrows are lined up in my corridor.
 This is my Path, my destiny, my future.
 Should I constantly think of the future?
 Let the present overflow the cup.
 That is the future—a few drops of the present
 On the tablecloth. Why not drink the cup
 And thus abolish the future?

Do I really need it?
The present is elastic.
It stretches so easily.
I can stretch it out
If I am happy.
And I am happy.

Happiness depends on words.
Our moods depend on words.
Let us repeat the word 'happiness'
Until we grow tired and sleepy.
And deep sleep is nirvana.
No point in dying.
I turn in and fall asleep
And keep my dreams at bay.
Following one's destiny
Like a somnambulist.
Is that our happiness?
Walking in the moonlight,
Skirting round a lake.
Blood has become translucent.
Blood is thinner than water.
Water on the mountain.
The prince shoots at a hawk.
I pick the hawk up.

There are no enigmas in the world.
The hawk is lying on our dinner table.
Such things are commonplace.
Arrows and hawks, water and wine.
I empty my cup. The Path is tortuous.
There is no such thing as a straight line.
And no lines are parallel. They all meet
Somewhere, sooner or later. The living
Meet and embrace the dead in the streets.
The prince shoots at a hawk on a high wall.

As a falcon or any other bird having flown around in the sky becomes weary, folds its wings and is borne down to its nest, even so I hasten to that state where I desire no desires and see no dream. My bed grows. My bed becomes as large as my room. My bed spans the stars. I will lie down on the universe and protect it with my body.

I am a king, a god. I am everything. My hands and mind are building the highest world, the highest tower. I do not fall into the pit. I fly above the pit. I am the pit. I can fall only into myself. And I am not pursued by anybody, save by myself. And I catch up with myself. How fast I have run. Now I am tired. Shall I lie down on the star-bed and embrace myself?

How many wounds are there all along my body? Do I feel them? Cessation of pain. Deliverance from pain. From the wounds of Time.

INCREASE of pain. DECREASE of pain. Heaven dispenses. Earth brings forth. Ten pairs of tortoises cannot oppose it. What can oppose it? An image? A face distorted with suffering? A smug grin?

Deliverance from images.

BREAK-THROUGH. (RESOLUTENESS)

Leafing through the book. Picking up words. To go wording.

There is no skin on my thighs. Walking comes hard. But I continue to walk. Walking and mountaineering.

Under Heaven, wind. COMING TO MEET. There is a fish in the tank.

Deliverance from words. There is no fish in the tank. But there are plenty more fish in the sea.

A melon covered with willow leaves.

MEN AND WOMEN

1
 Autumn. Leaves are not
 Falling, though. What date is it
 Today? Today's not today,
 Nor is it tomorrow. The day before
 Yesterday, a month ago. You'll tell me
 What day it is when
 Roses
 Come into bloom.

The protagonist of *Fathers and Sons* is on his deathbed. His dying request concerns a woman—not a father, not a son, not the future of the Russian Empire. 'Will you send a messenger to Madame Odintsov, Anna Sergeyevna, she has an estate not far off....Do you know?' (Vassily Ivanych nodded.) "'Yevgeny Bazarov," he is to say, "sends his respects and told me to tell you he is dying." Will you do that?'

Vassily Ivanych is the protagonist's father. He is also a son of his own son—in spiritual or psychological terms—because he is a rebel and partly a nihilist. 'I said I would rebel,' he shouts hoarsely after his son's untimely death. 'And I will rebel, I will!' His wife calms him down.

'This would seem to be the end. But perhaps some of our readers would care to know what each of the characters we have introduced is doing now, at the present moment,' writes Turgenev. This is the beginning and some of our readers care to know what happened *before* Bazarov's untimely death. Where, for instance, do these roses come from? In his deliriums he must have seen a lot of roses.

"Doctors usually have to be paid, don't they," observed Bazarov with a smile. "You know yourself, doctors are a greedy lot."

Bazarov is a doctor and all over the world—not only in Russia—doctors are paid and given presents at Christmas. In the Soviet Union doctors would get bottles of cognac and tins of caviar on any day, provided their patients were alive. Doctors are the rulers of our world: even multimillionaires fawn upon them. Health is the cornerstone of our society within the framework of which there is nothing you can give your life for; there is nothing you can sacrifice one of your cells for except money. Nothing else is worth your blood corpuscles.

'No, it's not money I need from you.' (Actually Bazarov does not care about money at all.)

'What is it then?' Fenichka asked. (Fenichka is a peasant girl with whom Bazarov's host, Nikolai Pavlovich, fell in love a long time ago; yet he is reluctant to marry her notwithstanding an offshoot she provided for his family tree by giving birth to a male child called Mitya.)

'What?' Bazarov repeated. 'Try and guess.'

'I can't.'

'I'll tell you then. I want...one of those roses.' (Bazarov is flirting with a woman who would not understand his nihilistic stance. So he talks about flowers and points out that animals and insects know them better than humans.)

'Which will you have—a red or a white one?'

'A red one, and not too large.' (The rest is a 'matter of technique', as the Russians say.) 'Smell how lovely this rose is that you gave me.'

Fenichka stretched her slender neck forward and put her face close to the flower....The kerchief slipped from her head on to her shoulders, revealing a soft mass of shining black, slightly ruffled hair.

'Wait a minute, I want to smell it with you,' said Bazarov, and he bent down and kissed her vigorously on her parted lips.

But it was not so easy to deal with Madame Odintsov.

She was not a peasant girl one might seduce through a ritual exchange of gifts and therefore, when talking to this *femme du monde*, Bazarov displayed his so-called nihilism, unconsciously relying on the inborn eccentricity of many aristocrats. What is nihilism?

Incidentally, Bazarov did take notice of money, judging from the answer he gave to his aristocratic opponent, his host's brother, who had put the following question to him, "'I take it, you do not acknowledge art, then?'"

"'The art of making money or of advertising pills for piles!'"

This is just a part of nihilism—repudiating the arts which are not utilitarian enough to advertise pills for piles (or piles for pills). Why not? Andy Warhol and his followers might already have conferred on advertising the status of art; but I don't go to picture galleries any more. Around twenty years ago a former French president announced on television that he enjoyed commercials as much as other arts—even more, owing to the unbridled imagination of their authors. I have no idea what G. W. Bush thinks about commercials as related to Art.

"'I've told you already, uncle, that we don't recognise any authorities," Arkady interposed.'

Arkady is Bazarov's friend whose hospitality brought about a number of duels between fathers and sons, ranging from arguments to a real duel fought in accordance with the rules that Zaretsky—a character from *Eugene Onegin*—stuck to with enthusiasm.

'We base our conduct on what we recognise as useful,' Bazarov went on. 'In these days the most useful thing we can do is to repudiate—and so we repudiate.'

'Everything?'

'Everything.'

'What? Not only art, poetry...but also...I am afraid to say it...'

'Everything,' Bazarov repeated with indescribable composure.

Pavel Petrovich stared at him. He had not expected this; while Arkady positively glowed with satisfaction.

Do I repudiate everything? Certainly not. There are values to which I am attached so much that no fashion or decaying—my brain must be rotting—will ever make me forego them for the sake of a whim or a woman. 'Arkady glanced round and saw a tall woman in a black dress standing near the door. He was struck by the dignity of her carriage. Her bare arms hung gracefully beside her slim waist; light sprays of fuchsia trailed prettily from her shining hair upon her sloping shoulders; her clear eyes looked out from under a rather prominent white forehead with a tranquil and intelligent expression—tranquil but not pensive—and a scarcely perceptible smile played on her lips. A sort of affectionate and gentle strength radiated from her face.' Madame Odintsov. 'Tranquil but not pensive' is a fine touch. Had she given more thought to Bazarov's double nature—nihilist and humanist—she might have fallen in love with him.

It is almost the end of October but the leaves hanging over me as I stroll in our woods do not fall despite the laws of physics. I feel so *gemütlich* at home that any journey, however delightful or necessary, jars on my nerves and disrupts my inner mechanics to the point of making me fragile, almost breakable. It is as if I were inside a box manipulated by uncouth and heedless individuals who, after letting it fall down, say malignantly, 'They've not written "Fragile" on it.' I *have* written 'Fragile' all over my body and soul, but it is too late, I suppose, considering that nothing remains of my former self I used to cherish and pamper. And this self of mine, which I recall spasmodically, with apprehension, was yearning to become a conductor—a musical guide of bodies and souls. I listened to recordings and read a few books where conductors shared their views on how an orchestra should be directed; 'Fragile' was not written over it. A great conductor of the past was allowed to curse an orchestra and get away with it: no one showed any readiness or ability to kick him out. Even a second-rate conductor of the past enjoyed a large degree of freedom because, to some extent, he was an enlightened monarch. And, oddly enough, his subjects were also free as long as they thought of music and forgot about *gemütlichkeit*—the keyword of this day and age. And the keyword of music is Silence.

I know what *gemütlichkeit* means when I sit in front of my computer which is the best orchestra in the world: it is under my thumb.

Just then the long-drawn notes of a 'cello floated out to them from the house. Someone was playing Schubert's *Expectation* with feeling, though in an amateurish manner, and the melody flowed sweet as honey through the air.

'What's that?' cried Bazarov in amazement.

'It's my father.'

'Your father plays the 'cello?'

'Yes.'

'And how old is your father?'

'Forty-four.'

Bazarov suddenly roared with laughter.

'What are you laughing at?'

'My goodness! A man of forty-four, a *pater familias*, in this out-of-the-way province, playing the 'cello!'

I am fifty-nine. Playing the piano in this out-of-the-way province—my flat. No concerts: my schedule is nihilist. Why caress my book-encumbered Steinway?

The estates one sees in movies. Where
 To live? In Turgenev's novels?
 Not in a novel, nor in a poem. Yet
 These are better dwelling places than our
 Three-dimensional reality. Actually
 I'd rather live in one dimension,
 In a dot, in a note.
 A silent note.

Turgenev obliterates Space when he permits his characters to eavesdrop on each other, making things easier for everybody: you are in the know almost automatically. His characters might have performed their parts in the same room, *à huis clos*. The unity of Space, not the unity of Time. 'The art of translation from theme to theme is for an author the most difficult technique to master,' writes Nabokov, 'and even a first-rate artist, as Turgenev is at his best, will be tempted (because of the kind of reader he imagines, a matter-of-fact reader accustomed to certain methods) to follow traditional devices in this passing from one scene to another.' But Turgenev is no translator: everything happens in one room where a few people speak the same language—the language of love. All other languages melt into the background until they are needed to bolster a lover's image; nihilism is one of these languages.

Everything happens in my room. Memory is the only reality I know because it keeps things in a perspective that reaches as far as my childhood where all your betrayals are rooted. But you are neither Fenichka nor Madame Odintsov. Why should I speak of you in the essay devoted to *Fathers and Sons*? Nothing is irrelevant; everything happens in one room.

There are no betrayals in Turgenev's novel. Odintsova betrays Bazarov after his death as she marries again, 'not for love but out of conviction (that it was the reasonable thing to do) a man who

promises to be one of the future leaders of Russia, a very able lawyer possessed of vigorous practical sense, a strong will and remarkable gifts of eloquence. He is quite young still, kind-hearted and as cold as ice. They live in the greatest harmony together, and may live to attain happiness...or even love.' I am not dead, not yet. I hope your present lover fits the portrait painted by Turgenev in the epilogue of his novel. I am not kind-hearted and Time has taken the edge off my will. I am no longer a nihilist, Bazarov's descendant—his son.

What is nihilism? Turgenev seems to *quote* the lives of his 'sons' as he puts them in one room where they chat, embrace and fall in love, letting their fathers melt into the background.

By marrying Fenichka, Nikolai Pavlovich joins the sons at the end of the book and comes to the fore. Does he? A middle-aged aristocrat, a peasant girl.

You are thirty-one years younger. Why don't you melt into the background? You are a language I don't speak any more.

The mediocre pose as the goal and meaning, and arouse no indignation; the higher kind miscarries and invites antipathy (*I Ching*).

I thought I should brush up my German before going to Salzburg where I was to conduct Bruckner's last symphony. Compared with this journey, my life in Versailles is rather *gemütlich* despite my insomnia which, however, allows me to call my vigils 'white nights'—a homage to the French language and St Petersburg. In my youth I dreamt of becoming a conductor; now I prefer to air my grievances in foreign languages—in the language of sorrow. Now I prefer languages to music. But music is also a language, isn't it? "I will introduce you to my sister; she plays the piano well. That is of no interest to you, Monsieur Bazarov; but I believe that Monsieur Kirsanov is fond of music.' Madame Odintsov alludes to Katya who plays Mozart's *Sonata Fantasia in C minor*, as Turgenev puts it. Perhaps I use the word 'fate' too often but I cannot help hearing the initial theme of the *C Minor Sonata* in terms of fate, destiny, inexorability. Even its upward movement leaves no hope. And the coda of the first movement? And the third movement? I ought to have played this piece before setting out for Salzburg.

Where would I feel at home? Where could I live without paying homage to white nights? I slept well in Salzburg.

The first rehearsal. The first movement of Bruckner's *Ninth*. I told the orchestra that the ending was the most tragic music in history—according to a Russian musicologist. The leader looked at me and said, 'It was all the more tragic since we didn't play it *zusammen*.'

I wrote an essay on conductors where I deal with the subject in question which, for some conductors of the past, was no subject at all, no object—nothing. Precision. Ten o'clock, eleven o'clock. At 2 p.m. *sharp*. The appointments I have are not musical; they are not *smooth*. My *rendez-vous* are musical, though. So is my study where books come into their own and flirt with me as long as I am in the mood for writing.

I continued to conduct an orchestra whose members were not my books; nor was I their book. We exchanged no *information* as the rehearsals went on, starting at 10 a.m. *sharp*, at 3 p.m. *sharp*. We exchanged no *feelings* either. Some of them must have read my essay where I compare contemporary orchestras to the cheeses one cannot smell in New York grocery stores: tightly wrapped-up in plastic, they do not smell. *They* didn't smell either, those orchestra members. I would rather they had not washed for a fortnight, allowing me to come to terms with their bodies, with Bruckner's body.

Madame Odintsov held out both her hands before her, while Bazarov pressed his forehead against the window-pane. He was breathing heavily; his whole body trembled. But it was not the trembling of youthful timidity, not the sweet alarm of the first declaration that possessed him: it was passion struggling in him, violent and painful—passion not unlike fury and perhaps akin to it...Madame Odintsov was filled with fear and at the same time felt sorry for him.

The orchestra felt sorry for me, for their nihilist conductor.

'Yevgeny Vassilyich,' she murmured, and there was a ring of unconscious tenderness in her voice.

He turned quickly, threw a devouring look at her—and, seizing both her hands, suddenly drew her to him.

She did not free herself from his embrace immediately; but an instant later she was looking at Bazarov from a corner of the room.

'You have misunderstood me,' she whispered in hasty alarm. Had he taken another step it seemed she might have screamed...Bazarov bit his lips and strode out of the room.

The finale of Bruckner's *Ninth*. I stretched out my arms and told the orchestra, 'I wish I could embrace you all. The first interval is a big bear hug. The whole movement boils down to this interval spanning life and death, Hell and Paradise.' Why did I talk to them about what they could understand neither in this world nor in any other dimension? Today's sons will never understand anything unless their fathers become their own sons; unless there are only sons (and daughters) on earth—the best solution to the romantic problem dubbed 'fathers and sons' by Ivan Turgenev. In the eighteenth century sons obeyed their fathers and did their best to fit into family traditions, into the framework of high and low societies that might have been boring to some extent, considering human dullness. (Cats are neither feeble-minded nor vainglorious.) Yet humanity endured and bequeathed to us its grandeur. Nowadays you cannot even talk to an orchestra; nor can you conduct it. And an orchestra is humanity, fathers and sons. Only sons in most cases. In the orchestra I was confronted with there were only three fathers and they understood what was going on. But the leader told me, 'You won't have enough time to embrace us. The rehearsal is almost over.' A son *par excellence*. Not *my* son, though.

I talked to them about Space which is a keyword in the domain of music; another keyword is Love.

'Yevgeny Vassilyich,' said Anna Sergeyevna at last, 'let us to go my room. I want to ask you...you mentioned a text-book yesterday....' (Going to her room, suspension points. Space. On the eve of this love scene Bazarov takes a walk and returns to his bedroom 'some two hours later, his boots wet with dew, looking dishevelled and morose.' Space and Time.)

'Yevgeny Vassilyich, you must forgive me, but I didn't invite you here to discuss text-books.' (Space—the distance between the text-books and the actual topic.) 'I wanted to continue our conversation of last night. You went away so suddenly...I hope that I shall not weary you?'

'I am at your service, Anna Sergeyevna. But what was it, now, that we were talking about last night?' (A memory space, not a memory lapse.)

Madame Odintsov flung a sidelong glance at Bazarov. (A *sidelong* glance. Space.)

'We were discussing happiness, I believe. I was telling you about myself. Incidentally, I just used the word "happiness". Tell me, why is it that even when we are enjoying music, for instance, or a beautiful evening, or a conversation in agreeable company, it all seems no more than a hint of some infinite felicity existing apart somewhere, rather than actual happiness—such, I mean, as we ourselves can really possess?' (Space; an interval spanning Purgatory and Paradise.)

'You know the saying, "Happiness is where we are not"?' Bazarov retorted. (Space. You yearn for the spot where the grass is greener.)

What was before was

Not. Before what? Something did

Happen somewhere.

Something will

Happen somewhere. Where?

Where we are not.

A poem of sorts—something Bazarov might have written on his deathbed. He was no poet, though.

'Listen. For a long time I've been wanting to have a frank talk with you. There is no need to tell you—you know it yourself—that you are not an ordinary person; you are still young—all life is before you. For what are you preparing yourself? What future awaits you? I mean to say—what is the goal you are aiming for? Where are you going? What is the purpose animating you? In short, who are you?'

Big questions, grand narratives. Where do we come from? Why is there life on earth or elsewhere? Where are we going? Are we going somewhere? Where is the somewhere? Does anything animate us? Who am I? Bazarov? For what am I preparing myself? What future awaits me? Does anything await me? Am *I* waiting for anything? I am not. Why? Is there nothing in store for me? I might lose an arm, both arms. I would not be able to conduct an orchestra, let alone play the piano. Should I conduct any orchestra in the future? No time for a big bear hug, for Space. At some point they played one chord and I lowered my arms. I said, 'This movement is one chord, one harmony.' Love.

'Do you mean to tell me you could be content with such a humble career? And aren't you always maintaining that you don't believe in medicine? You—with your ambition—a country doctor! You answer me like that to put me off because you have no confidence in me. But you know, Yevgeny Vassilyich, I am capable of understanding you: once I was poor and ambitious like you; it may be I have gone through the same difficulties.'

'That's all very well, Anna Sergeyevna, but you must excuse me...I am not in the habit of talking about myself; and between you and me there is such a gulf...' (Space. There is a gulf between grand narratives and contemporary novels, between orchestras and mavericks, between you and me. The stone lady of my essays.)

'What gulf? Are you going to tell me again that I am an aristocrat? Enough of that, Yevgeny Vassilyich! I thought I had convinced you...'

'And besides,' broke in Bazarov, 'why this eagerness to talk and think about the future, which for the most part does not depend on us? If an opportunity turns up of doing something—so much the better; and if it doesn't—at least one should be content with not chattering about it in advance.'

A pragmatic approach; a spatial approach. 'How a young man can decide to ride over to the next village without being afraid that—not to mention accidents—even the span of a normal happy life may fall far short of the time needed for such a journey?' Kafka is right of course. But why does he speak of our lifespan? Everyone knows that life is short in comparison with Space and Time. Why not shorten the life of this parable for the sake of a realistic bias? 'How can a young man decide to ride over to the next village?' At the outset of Turgenev's novel, Bazarov was riding over to America, to Australia, to the Moon; he wished to conquer and alter the entire universe. Then he limited his physical (and spiritual) excursions to Odintsov's estate; and finally his body confined its aspirations to the room where he awaited Madame Odintsov. How can a young man decide to walk over to the dining room? How can a young man decide to walk over to a woman? How can a young woman decide to kiss a young man walking over to her?

'Let us suppose I do understand your reluctance to speak of your future; but we could discuss what is happening in you now...'

'Happening!' repeated Bazarov. 'As though I were some kind of government or society! In any case, it is utterly uninteresting; and besides, can a man always speak out loud of everything that "happens" in him?'

2

Nowadays people are so satisfied with the world that they have no wish to repudiate anything for fear of destroying some aspect of their lives. And what about those who repudiate not only the present but also the future? I might be of their number, providing one is entitled to speak of numbers in this context. How many people dare to repudiate the future? This is the worst nihilism—the unkindest cut of all, as I phrased it in one of my books. How can one cut the future from one's life or longings? How can one *sabotage* the lives of one's *children*? (The words cherished by Soviet historians.) 'Neither you nor I will live in those beautiful, happy days,' as Nekrasov said in one of his poems. Beckett also spoke about happy days, but he put them in the past tense—the days of yore.

""[The English aristocracy] never yield one iota of their rights, and for that reason they respect the rights of others; they demand the fulfilment of obligations due to them, and therefore they fulfil their own obligations to others. The aristocracy has given England her freedom and maintains it for her." Thus speaks Pavel Petrotich who is an aristocrat to the core and therefore does not tolerate any onslaught on ideals, on grand narratives, which, according to him, are the cornerstones of history and humankind. "I am very well aware, for instance, that you are pleased to ridicule my habits, my way of dressing, my punctiliousness, in fact. But those very things proceed from a sense of self-respect, from a sense of duty—yes, sir, of duty. I may live in the country, in the wilds of the country, but I do not let myself go, I respect myself as a human being.""

I do let myself go, alas. My sense of duty is limited to my body. I never say to myself, 'I haven't time for a bath, so I'll just have a shower.' What I put on my body, however, is of no importance to my mind and soul; unless I am invited to dinner by a French or Russian ambassador. Does my slovenly appearance take away my dignity and self-respect?

Ideals do count and the English seem to have been entrusted with the safekeeping of the 'code of politeness' and other things pertaining to the dignity and glory of Man. In Russian stories the English always win hands down—they sweep the board, in a manner of speaking; the Russians always lose in those stories and probably in real life. They are despised by all other nations except the Bulgarians who however might have updated their attitude towards us since the Fall of Communism. (Not to be outdone by old democracies, they fawn upon the Americans now.) What is more, the Russians despise themselves, otherwise they would not tell those stories where the English (and the French) win hands down. And Russian gatherings often end up in quarrels. A number of duels would have been fought in my native land, but for a shortcut adopted by the rancorous—political murder, the unkindest cut of all.

'I had occasion to hear you express opinions on many subjects; but, so far as my memory serves, neither in conversation with me nor in my presence was any reference ever made to the subject of single combat or duelling in general. May I inquire what your views are on this subject?'

Bazarov, who had risen to receive Pavel Petrovich, sat down on the edge of the table and folded his arms.

'My views are as follows,' he replied. 'From the theoretical standpoint, duelling is absurd; but from the practical standpoint—well, that's another matter altogether.'

'That is, you mean to say, if I understand you correctly, that whatever your theoretical view of duelling you would not in practice suffer yourself to be insulted without demanding satisfaction?'

'You have grasped my meaning exactly.'

The duel is fought and the old fogey seizes yet another opportunity to behave like an (English) gentleman: wounded in a thigh, he declares it is only a scratch and signifies his urge to go on with the hostile encounter. Bazarov reasons him out of this high-minded folly and, after refusing any help, Pavel Pavlovich tries to pull at his moustaches. 'But his arm sagged, his eyes rolled back, and he lost consciousness.' At least I do not swoon when opposed by the 'young guard'.

"Here's a pretty pass! A fainting-fit! What next!" Bazarov involuntarily exclaimed, lowering Pavel Petrovich on to the grass. "Let's see the damage." He pulled out a handkerchief, wiped away the blood and began to feel round the wound.' At least I am not nursed back to life by my sons and daughters.

Both Bazarov and Pavel Petrovich are my fathers—in chronological terms. Yet chronology has no meaning in this day and age when fathers and sons are compatible. (In other words, the former's computer program is compatible with the latter's operating system.) What is more, fathers often act like sons and vice versa. In a way I am my own father because I take Pavel Petrovich's side and repudiate our teenage world. Actually it is the best solution to the problem I am dissecting; Bazarov used to dissect frogs. Fathers must act like sons. Not like *their* sons, though—like *ideal* sons and daughters; like rebels, like saviours of the world. Actually Pavel Petrovich might have saved the world had anybody listened to him. Even his brother, Nikolai Petrovich, did not. He is Arkady's father. And Arkady is Bazarov's son. Sorry, he is his friend.

'So it seems that you and I are old-fashioned, over and done with,' said Nikolai Petrovich to his brother that same day as they sat in his study after dinner.' (They might have spoken today, for all I know.) 'Well, well. Maybe Bazarov is right; but one thing, I confess, does hurt me: I was so hoping that now was the time for me to get on to really close and friendly terms with Arkady,

but it turns out that I have been left standing while he has forged ahead, and now we cannot understand one another.'

'And why should he have forged ahead? And in what way is he so different from us?' Pavel Petrovich exclaimed impatiently. 'It's that *signor* of a nihilist has crammed all that into his head. I detest that doctor fellow; in my opinion he's just a quack; I am positive that for all his frogs he hasn't got very far even with physics....' (As usual Pavel Petrovich is right.)

'Yes,' observed Nikolai Petrovich, 'he is conceited. But evidently one cannot succeed without conceit; only there is one thing I cannot make out. I thought I was doing everything to keep up with the times: I have done well by the peasants, set up a model farm, so that all over the province I am known as a *radical*. I read, I study, I try in every way to keep abreast with the requirements of the age—and yet here they are saying I'm over and done with. And, Pavel, I really begin to think they are right.'

'Why do you think that?' (Pavel Petrovich is right again: they are wrong.)

'I will tell you why. Today I was sitting reading Pushkin—I remember, it happened to be *The Gypsies*.... Suddenly Arkady comes up to me and without a word, as gently as if I were a child, with an affectionate look of pity on his face, took away my book and put another before me, a German book.... Then he gave me a smile and went out, carrying Pushkin off with him.'

According to Nikolai Petrovich, his son forges ahead and leaves him far behind; in other words, the visiting team has forged into the lead with 100 points. But this sportsman of a son slows down, comes to a standstill, and even backs away at the end of the novel as he marries a woman or, to borrow Turgenev's terminology, a mother, who has got him under her thumb. In this respect he is his father's father. Doesn't Nikolai Petrovich become his own son by being rooted to the spot? Actually he is not rooted to the spot—at least in his own estimation—because he set up a model farm and has always tried to keep up with the times: a dreadful mistake. Trying to keep up with the times denotes one's incapacity to *live* with them. So he finds himself forced, willy-nilly, to remain within the space-time I worship unconditionally. Even the eighteenth century praised by Paul Valéry pales into insignificance beside this multi-faceted society where a number of geniuses would meet on a regular basis or would *not* meet: Tolstoy did all he could to avoid Dostoevsky.

Anyway Time is not a yardstick by which one's life should be measured. Only a timeless life seems to be attuned to what Spinoza calls Eternity on which one is supposed to work during one's lifetime. Why not remove Time from life? This word should be hyphenated: life-time. There are two words instead of one; there are two worlds. And they are not parallel. Time. Life.

Time....Life.

Time.

Life.

Incidentally, Bazarov would agree with me on this point. 'As to the times we live in,' he says to Arkady, 'why should I depend upon them? Much better they should depend upon me.'

Our teenagers forge ahead by displaying a tattoo on their thighs. It is better to be wounded.

They think they are daughters because they wear an earring on their upper lip. *I am your daughter.*

The Campus Leadership Program has, by their own count, helped set up 256 conservative campus groups in less than three years. The College Republican National Committee, a group that mobilises students to campaign, has tripled its membership since 1999 to an all-time high of 1,148 chapters. The impact has been felt far from the campuses where, Scott, Stewart, Chairman of the College Republican National Committee, says, campus conservatives were instrumental in the success of the Republican Party in the last midterm elections....[These students] are in constant rebellion on campus against what was called earlier 'anti-establishment', and is now called left-wing liberalism....The change is extraordinary, and was crucial to the 2004 presidential election. Throughout history, younger generations have instinctively rebelled against the establishment, whether conservative in the 1960s, or liberal in the 1990s.

Barbara Victor, *The Last Crusade*

In the 1960s we were up in arms about the old world order because we had no idea what the new world order might look like; otherwise I, for one, would have stayed at home and watched TV, a cup of chocolate in my hand. No, I would *not* have renounced my claim to another, anti-establishment world. I still have not renounced it, for all my failures and frustrations. In his thirties, Wagner wrote a number of articles advocating revolution. Later on he confined his ambitions to fighting the establishment in the domain of music. But he was a saviour of humanity in his own right; today's sons and daughters might become their own parents if they listened to his operas.

To rebellion all ages are submissive—a paraphrase of Pushkin's illustrious formula. No wonder that Bellochio continues to rebel against mediocrity, stupidity, a deficiency of passion—according to a documentary I saw this morning as I was about to leave for the country. There are other deficiency diseases I combat in my works that no one will ever so much as browse through on a train, at an airport. (My deficiency disease? My paralysis?) And I have no brother to whom I might talk in my hour of need. And the number of such hours steadily increases as I get closer and closer to the deathbed where Bazarov realised that Pushkin was right: all ages are submissive to *love*.

'And what are these mysterious relations between a man and a woman? We physiologists know what they are. You study the anatomy of the eye; and where does that enigmatic look you talk about come in? That's all romantic rot, mouldy aesthetics. We had much better go and inspect that beetle.'

He still has a long way to go—almost two hundred pages. The five preceding pages are devoted to Pavel Petrovich and his late mistress. A lady-killer *par excellence*, Pavel Petrovich fell in love with Princess R.—a gentleman-killer to some extent—who was in the habit of making unexpected and unwarranted visits abroad and would return to Russia suddenly and for no apparent reason: no one could suspect she was homesick or besotted with someone who could not travel outside his motherland's borders.

'She had the reputation of being a frivolous coquette, she abandoned herself eagerly to every kind of pleasure, danced till she dropped, roared with laughter and jested with the young men whom she used to receive before dinner in a dimly-lit drawing-room, but at night she wept and prayed, finding no peace in anything, and would often pace her room till dawn, wringing her hands in anguish, or sit, pale and cold, over a psalter. The coming of day transformed her into a lady of fashion again, driving out to pay her calls, laughing, chatting and literally flinging herself into any activity that might afford her the slightest distraction.' Princess R. was married to a well-bred and respectable, 'albeit somewhat stupid' gentleman whom she had no desire to kill, however, focusing her energy on the young men—the habitués of her dimly-lit drawing-room; Pavel Petrovich was of their number.

In a way this portrait of a young lady kills a number of granddaughters whose eccentricities and enigmas are no match for Petersburg-born high-society women; their space was far more luxuriant and profound. Her space is not limited to short visits abroad and hasty returns to the motherland; she also travels in her mind, in her soul and even within her eyes. 'The only good feature in her whole face was her eyes—and not even her eyes, they were small and grey, but the expression in them, which was swift and penetrating, carefree to the point of audacity and thoughtful to the verge of melancholy: an enigmatic expression. Even when her tongue was engaged in lisping the most fatuous nonsense something extraordinary shone in those eyes.'

A short visit to a carefree expression; a sudden return to a thoughtful one. Pavel Petrovich cannot travel so fast, with such abandon. He seems to be ensconced in an armchair while she abandons herself to yet another waltz, whirling around on a dance floor that extends far beyond ballrooms and the streets of Petersburg. Actually he does not feel comfortable in his armchair, fidgeting on the seat like a little child—in expectation of her return. His anxiety and impatience allowed their spaces to coincide now and then. He 'met her at a ball, danced a mazurka with her, in the course of which she did not utter one single sensible word, and fell passionately in love with her. Accustomed to making conquests, he soon succeeded with her too; but the easy triumph did not cool his ardour. On the contrary, he found himself still more painfully attached to this woman in whom, even when she surrendered herself without reserve, something always seemed to remain that was hidden and unattainable, beyond the power of human penetration.'

A woman I met in Moscow more than five years ago did not surrender herself despite her frequent promises to visit me either in Moscow or in Versailles. 'Tomorrow I'm free the whole day,'

she announced at the very outset of our relationship, her eyes assuming a carefree expression. And on the D-day her mother kept me posted on her Dantean journey through Moscow; I must have phoned her six or seven times. 'Now she's at the university.' 'Now she must be talking to her friend—he's very ill, you know.'

'When do you expect her back?'

'Her friend lives on the outskirts of Moscow.'

And Moscow is five times bigger than Paris.

She often seemed on the point of unconditional surrender; and then a thoughtful expression would make its appearance in her eyes—in her entire body. Over the phone her voice would sound grief-stricken as if I had told her she was an unworthy granddaughter of Princess R. Yet, in spite of her oddities—Nabokov might have fitted the adjective 'odious' into this sentence—she did not seem 'to be in the grip of mysterious forces, unknown even to herself, which played with her at will, her limited intelligence being unable to cope with their caprices.' (A masterstroke on Turgenev's part.)

The 'mysterious' force that my would-be mistress inherited from her mother and grandmother was well known to herself and to some of my colleagues who would announce dogmatically, 'Armenian women do not surrender before the wedding night.' Her intelligence was not unlimited, but its scope was sufficiently huge to offer her a panorama of her caprices to come, which, though unexpected, might be predicted even by her friends on condition that they could afford to fall ill every month. I was enjoying good health; for a while my knowledge of her inner struggles remained too inadequate to influence my attitude towards her magnetism. I thought she *was* a mysterious woman—a contemporary rival of Turgenev's character. 'Her whole behaviour was a maze of inconsistencies.'

So far so good, but what about the rest of the portrayal? 'The only letters which might justly have excited her husband's suspicions she wrote to a man she hardly knew, and her love had an element of sadness; she no longer laughed and joked with her heart's choice but would listen to him and gaze at him in bewilderment. Sometimes, usually quite suddenly, this bewilderment would change to a chill horror; her face took on a wild, death-like expression; she would lock herself in her bedroom, and her maid, putting her ear to the keyhole, would hear her smothered sobbing.' A dignified precursor of Nastassia Philipovna, her noble mother.

The only flaw I seem to discern in this love affair is connected with the versatile woman's death. She forsook Pavel Petrovich in Baden 'and thereafter consistently avoided him. He returned to Russia and tried to take up his former life but could not get back into the old groove....Ten years passed in this wise, drab, fruitless years....One day when he was dining at the club Pavel Petrovich heard that Princess R. was dead. She had died in Paris in a state bordering on insanity.' Turgenev seems to insinuate that the years she partly spent in Pavel Petrovich's company bordered on this ambiguous state, creating a series of preludes without a real fugue. He provides no description of how she coped with Time and Space after leaving Pavel Petrovich to his own devices, but for some reason I am convinced she was not insane; yet she might have expanded her private space through whims and

follies. Where is the borderline between sanity and insanity? Anyway I think that, from a *literary* point of view, both Princess R. and Nastassia Philipovna are perfectly sane. They are multifaceted creatures; they own and put into practice a score of minds. One of these minds is thoughtful; another displays a carefree disposition; yet another mirrors so-called insanity. Why does Turgenev reduce this variety to the sorry plight of *one* simple woman?

One day he gave her a ring with a sphinx engraved on the stone.

'What is this?' she asked. 'A sphinx?'

'Yes,' he answered, 'and that sphinx is—you.'

'Me?' she asked, and slowly raised her enigmatic eyes to him. 'Do you know, that is very flattering?' she added with a meaningless smile, while her eyes still kept the same strange look.

Another masterstroke on Turgenev's part. Smiles are mostly meaningful, but one *may* smile absent-mindedly. The blind display this 'sign' whenever they want to greet somebody they are not acquainted with. Her eyes kept the same look as if nothing had happened, as if she *were* a sphinx. But sphinxes are not insane; nor are the women who smile meaninglessly all the while allowing their eyes to keep a strange look. This is not even a prelude to the insanity-fugue.

Upon learning about her death he 'rose from the table and for a long while paced about the rooms of the club, occasionally halting like one transfixed behind some card-player.' The end of the sentence is another masterstroke, but I am more interested in its beginning—in the space conquered by Pavel Petrovich after Princess R.' ambiguous death. Why didn't he walk more often during their ill-starred relationship? 'A few weeks later he received a package on which his name was written: it contained the ring which he had given to the princess. She had scratched lines in the shape of a cross over the sphinx and set him a message that the solution of the enigma *was* the cross.' A sign of insanity?

In my youth I saw a film on Leonardo da Vinci. 'What is your St John holding?' says a disciple in the last episode. A few days later he glances at the picture once more; there is a cross in St John's hand. Why did Leonardo reduce St John's space to the dimensions of *one* picture? In the domain of art a sphinx is more valuable than a saint.

Spartacus also died on a cross, but no one mocked him. Bystanders did mock Jesus as He was dying on *the* Cross. There is only one Cross in history and you do not live if you are unable to die on this Cross; if you cannot perform Bruckner's *Ninth*.

My would-be mistress continued to laugh and joke in my presence. She never gazed at me in bewilderment as if she had explored all the nooks and crannies of my mind and known exactly what move I could make within an hour, in forty years. Never did her face exhibit a 'wild, death-like expression', and I am pretty sure she did not sob in her room—nor anywhere else—after our farewell drive through Moscow. She was no sphinx and, instead of reaching breaking point, her life shrank so

considerably that, when I encountered her two years later, I saw an ordinary woman who still refused to give herself over to Aristotelian love. Her behaviour reminded me of Madame Odintsov who, however, was *not* an ordinary woman. She was 'a little older than Arkady—she was twenty-nine—but in her presence he felt like a schoolboy, a young student, as though the difference in their age was much greater.' He might have got the same feeling in Helen of Troy's presence: there was something archaic about Madame Odintsov. As W. B. Yeats puts it in *No Second Troy*:

What could have made her peaceful with a mind
That nobleness made simple as a fire,
With beauty like a tightened bow, a kind
That is not natural in an age like this,
Being high and solitary and most stern?

Let us recall her 'rather prominent white forehead with a tranquil and intelligent expression—tranquil but not pensive—' Even Bazarov seemed uncomfortable in her company, whereas she 'remained as self-possessed as she had been on the previous day. Bazarov was himself conscious of a feeling of embarrassment and was annoyed about it. "What an idea—frightened of a petticoat," he thought—' He was actually frightened of her antiquity. Didn't he also feel like a schoolboy in her presence—like her obedient son?

'She happened to meet a certain Odintsov, a very wealthy man of about forty-six, an eccentric hypochondriac, bloated, ponderous and sour but neither stupid nor ill-natured.' Neither stupid nor ill-natured—the doctrine of the golden mean (Aristotle). Odintsova was also neither ill-natured nor stupid; nor was she too intelligent. 'She consented to become his wife and they lived together for six years before he died, leaving her all his property.' Helen of Troy, Leda's sumptuous daughter, married the richest of the Achaeans—Prince Menelaus, represented by Tyndareus' son-in-law Agamemnon. "'What a magnificent body!" Bazarov pursued. "Shouldn't I like to see it on the dissecting-table!" Didn't Faust desire to see Helen's body on *his* dissecting-table?

'And so you have no feeling whatsoever for art?' she said, leaning her elbow on the table, a movement which brought her face closer to Bazarov. 'How can you get on without it?'

'Why, what is it needed for, may I ask?'

'Well, at least to help one to know and understand people.'

Bazarov smiled.

'In the first place, experience of life does that, and in the second, I assure you the study of separate individuals is not worth the trouble it involves. All men are similar, in soul as well as in body. Each of us has a brain, spleen, heart and lungs of similar construction; and the so-called moral qualities are the same in all of us—the slight variations are of no importance. It is enough

to have one single human specimen in order to judge all the others. People are like trees in a forest; no botanist would dream of studying each individual birch-tree.'

A Platonic outlook. There are no stories in Plato's universe—only situations and objects. One situation is your whims; another your platitude. There are no stories in Turgenev's universe either—only love scenes, death scenes; and the bed where Bazarov dies and Madame Odintsov lives with a 'kind-hearted man'.

You will marry a kind-hearted man.

3

One woman—a cross between Helen of Troy, Princess R., Madame Odintsov, Nastassia Philipovna and Liza Tushina. One multifaceted woman; one extraordinary woman. I do my best to *read* this character into a person I encounter.

You were neither Helen of Troy nor Madame Odintsov—just an *antiquated* woman. Nor were you Marlene Dietrich whom I adore.

You *were* Madame Odintsov. 'Her eyes sought Bazarov...and she stopped short in the doorway, so taken aback was she by his feverish and at the same time deathly pale face, and by the dim eyes turned in her direction. She knew a feeling of sheer terror; a cold and oppressive terror; then the thought flashed instantly into her brain that she would not have felt like this if she had really loved him.' Unconsciously you would have chosen the doctrine of the golden mean: neither indifference nor love. You were half Platonic, half Aristotelian.

4

'The trees in a forest,' she repeated. 'According to you, then, there is no difference between a stupid and an intelligent person, or between a good and a bad one?'

'Oh, yes, there is: it's like the difference between the sick and the healthy. The lungs of the consumptive are not in the same condition as yours and mine, though they are constructed on the same lines. We know more or less what causes physical ailments; and moral diseases are caused by the wrong sort of education, by all the rubbish people's heads are stuffed with from childhood onwards, in short by the disordered state of society. Reform society and there will be no diseases.' (Reform society and there will be no geniuses.) 'At any rate, in a properly organised society it won't matter a jot whether a man is stupid or clever, bad or good.'

In a properly organised society it does not matter a jot whether a poet is bad or good, whether he is a poet at all.

A few days ago I was interviewed by a Russian musicologist. He asked me if music had been destroyed by commercialism. A sold-out concert is a 'sign of quality', as the Russians used to say in

the sixties. Anything goes, provided it is sold out. A Chinese pianist smiles; his father appears on the stage to lend him moral and physical support. The father plays a piece; the audience applauds. Work, family, motherland. Critics have no say; there are no *critics* any more. There are supporters; there are obedient sons.

I am a disobedient son, a rebellious father.

'Wretched boy!' groaned Pavel Petrovich, now no longer in a state to restrain himself. 'Can't you realise the kind of thing you are encouraging in Russia with your miserable creed? No, it's enough to try the patience of an angel! A force! You might as well say that the wild Kalmuck and the Mongolian represent a force—but what is that to us? Civilisation is what we value, yes, yes, my good sir: its fruits are precious to us. And don't tell me those fruits are of no importance: the meanest penny-a-liner—*un barbouilleur*, a piano-player who makes five farthings an evening—even they are of more use than you, because they stand for civilisation and not crude Mongolian force! You fancy yourselves advanced, but your proper home is a Kalmuck tent! A force! And finally, my forceful gentlemen, remember this: there are only four men and a half of you, whereas the others number millions who won't let you trample their most sacred beliefs underfoot—it is they who will crush you!'

The others number billions; they trample my most sacred beliefs underfoot.

Everything's the other way round:

Sons are fathers, fathers sons,

Millions are one.

Four men and a half have won.

'A decent chemist is twenty times more useful than any poet.' Bazarov would not have said this nowadays: art has become useful. Contemporary books are not particularly well-written, but they are entertaining. Are they really? They do not entertain me and my friends. (Four men and a half? They might entertain *some* of my friends.) Nothing is more stupid than reading a bad novel. In the cinema you can enjoy special effects and experience a plane crash, for instance—something you avoid in reality. So bad films are better than bad novels. Bad paintings, too, are better than bad novels: in a picture gallery you may encounter a beautiful woman. In a picture gallery or in a theatre.

'Wild cries to close books, abandon science, and go to some senseless battle of destruction—that is the most violent and harmful kind of demagoguery. It will be followed by the eruption of the most savage passions....No! Great revolutions are not achieved by the unleashing of evil passions....I do not believe in the seriousness of men who prefer crude force and destruction to development and arriving at settlements....One must open men's eyes, not tear them out' (Herzen).

One *must* tear them out: they read too many 'entertaining' books. They read them in trains and planes, at airports. They read them everywhere. One must close books. Taking my cue from Bazarov, Pisarev and Bakunin, I put my trust in the clean sweep—the total destruction of the present order. And I *would* take care of the future if I were in my prime. Too late, too late. Luckily for me no one has ever understood my books, my views, so that I am not likely to share Bazarov's predicament: at the end of his life he was the laughing stock of peasants. Yet he believed he had a 'special faculty for winning the confidence of the lower orders'. He was a 'superfluous man' *par excellence*—much more so than Pechorin and Eugene Onegin who courted women with panache, fought duels efficiently and lived longer. I fought no duels and a few sparring matches I had are lost on humanity, on posterity. 'I must join my friends,' a young woman told me as I was making love to her at a cocktail party. To make love at a cocktail party—a fatherly idiom.

What remains of all that misery? Your glance. Moscow. We had a quarrel; I was driving you to your flat. Your eyes.

Bruckner's *Ninth*. The end of the finale. '*Abschied vom Leben und von Liebe zur Ewigkeit*' was written in the score I borrowed from a friend. Farewell to life and love. Eternity. I told the orchestra, 'I won't show anything. I'm dead already. I'll just beat time. One's fingernails continue to grow after one's death.'

For them I *was* dead at that point; even my fingernails were dead.

I could not care less about Eternity.

The way you looked at me when I said, 'I've missed you. What about *your* heart?'

Your tenderness. A few moments.

PHILOSOPHICAL INVESTIGATIONS

LA GAYA SCIENZA

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Let us beware of saying that there are laws in nature. There are only necessities: there is nobody who commands, nobody who obeys, nobody who trespasses. Once you know that there are no purposes, you also know that there is no accident; for it is only beside a world of purposes that the word 'accident' has meaning. Let us beware of saying that death is opposed to life. The living is merely a type of what is dead, and a very rare type.

Modern scientists know that there are no laws, but I am not tempted to quote from their books lest this assertion become a law the very existence of which it denies. Too many quotations focused upon one theme are bound to build a monument to it and every monument is a law in its own right—a law of memory. So let these non-existent laws hang in mid-air until they fall down of their own accord; they might already have broken to pieces. A poem can do justice to *la gaya scienza* all the more emphatically since the author opens the book with a number of poems which caused so much trouble to translators that, according to Walter Kaufmann, no English version of *Die fröhliche Wissenschaft* had been available before he undertook this superhuman task. I composed the following poem last night without being aware I would use it in this essay of mine, along with Walter Kaufmann's watershed achievement.

I used to speak of the opposites,
Of their meeting in space, in time. But nothing
Meets either in space or in time which are
Separate substances. They are sub-
Stances or just my stance on how the world
Functions or lives.

But nothing
Lives; there are functions
Here and there. There are only
Function keys. The lungs function to supply the body
With oxygen; my thoughts function
To supply my body with motion. And motion is
Another function, another key that opens
Nothing.

There are no opposites: nothing can be opposed to anything, the world being a mass of necessities and substances which are not substantial, in the final analysis. Time and space are Kantian notions through which we apprehend the world as if there was something to apprehend, to probe into, to rely upon. How can you rely upon anything if there is no such thing as the law of generosity, of charity? Even the law of hospitality exists only in the silent movie where Buster Keaton outstays his welcome so as not to be killed: outdoors he becomes a target for three vengeful individuals. There are commanders and slaves, but all this amounts to very little because no order can alter a disorder where we live or die or just kill time, anxious to kill something or somebody, thereby making our contribution to the second law of thermodynamics. This law does exist, otherwise we would be immortal, eternal, invulnerable and wise.

'Let us beware of thinking that the world eternally creates new things. There are no eternally enduring substances—' Even Time will not endure, subject as it is to the second law of thermodynamics. The law itself will not endure: it is bound to die when everything is dead down to this rare type that Nietzsche calls 'the living'. So why wait for a pretext to compose a death poem or a chaos poem? Anyway, such poems are a mere function of my brain which goes through the motions as it sets my body and one or two processes in motion, for want of anything better. There is nothing better in the world: only beside something good may the word 'better' acquire a meaning.

I composed yet another poem last night and I am almost certain it would fit in with the subject matter of this text describing a state of affairs—the only subject matter we are allowed to enlarge upon. So it is not subject matter, properly speaking; just a state of affairs, a state of mind impervious to motion. In no way can it ever become a state of emergency.

It's so easy to write a poem. Unlucky in love,
 Lucky at poetry. Am I? Crows were cawing from the poplar trees
 Overhead.
 A memory. Poetry
 Is a catalogue of memories,
 Nothing else.

It's something else, I don't know
 What—my insomnia
 Or the royal insignia of crown and sceptre. Perhaps
 It's just a spectre, a spectator—a few words
 That sound alike. No rhyme,
 Just a sound, the same
 Sound—a hypnotist telling you in monotonous tones
 You are becoming more relaxed

And sleepy.

Am I supposed to take my cue from Dante who elucidates his sonnets and canzonas as he proceeds with a story of his love for Beatrice? No new life inhabits my life that is homogenous and stationary as if bent on creating eternal immobility—the opposite of the *perpetuum mobile*. I am a mere spectator before whose eyes a poem runs its course, independent and regal. And this is the only gay knowledge I may trust as I sit alone in my room where a TV set continues to embroider upon the same state of affairs.

'This whole book,' writes Nietzsche, 'is nothing but a bit of merry-making after long privation and powerlessness, the rejoicing of strength that is returning, of a reawakened faith in a tomorrow and the day after tomorrow, of a sudden sense and anticipation of a future, of impending adventures, of seas that open again, of goals that are permitted again, believed again.' No rejoicing has taken place in my life that ought to have served as a prelude to this commentary on Nietzsche's masterpiece: I have no right to tackle his problems if I am in no mood for them. And I am in no mood for a *gay science*; my science, if any, is sad, melancholy, and I should rather know nothing than make use of a knowledge undermining my convictions and resolutions. I resolved not to budge from where I am: this status quo is the best way out of the predicament I found myself in a long time ago, well before I hit upon the idea of writing a commentary on Nietzsche's science. My trials and tribulations are not as obstinate as I am; they are to disappear before I give up the ghost.

I have no faith in the future about which our author speaks with jubilation in the preface to this book where he questions laws and the reliability of space. Why pin your hopes on a stretch of time where no law can prop you up either morally or physically? Your dinner table might not carry all the dishes you put on it in expectation of a gorgeous meal washed down with a bottle of old claret. Many people think they would have lived eternally had they been born in the twenty-third century: science progresses by leaps and bounds. Let me quote a text I found in my files where it had been lurking for years, eager to obliterate any deduction of this sort:

Nanotechnology means engineering things that are a billionth of the size of the builder. Modern scalpels and sutures are simply too coarse for repairing capillaries, cells and molecules. Consider 'delicate' surgery from a cell's perspective: a huge blade sweeps down, chopping blindly past and through the molecular machinery of a crowd of cells, slaughtering thousands. Nanotechnology holds out the dream of constructing surgical instruments small enough to work on the same scale as the cells themselves. A nanotechnology robot might be wonderful at repairing a diseased red blood cell. But there is a daunting army of red blood cells for the robot to get round, about 30 billion in each one of us. The hope is that the nanotechnology robot

would use the same self-multiplying technique as the blood cells themselves. The robot would clone itself, replicate itself. Nanotechnology of this kind is all in the future, and it may never come to anything.

Richard Dawkins, *Climbing Mount Improbable*

I will not climb this mount—or any other mount for that matter—for it is easier to skirt around such obstacles and problems. Every mount is a problem, be it the mount of hope or the mount of the future, which is as improbable as the past I might have lived through in a dream or rather in a nightmare. In Russia there are people who declare that the past—the distant past—was fabricated by a few historians or writers, anxious to provide humanity with a pedestal where a monument to heroes and heroines might be deposited: everyone aspires to have a genealogical tree. In my childhood I had a tree house where I used to play for hours—a baron in the trees. Another dream of no consequence.

Science is sad and Nietzsche corroborated this hypothesis by a few texts he had included in his book where the opposites do meet: sadness and gaiety. Here is another of these texts: 'There was a time in our lives when we were so close that nothing seemed to obstruct our friendship and brotherhood, and only a small footbridge separated us. Just as you were about to step on it, I asked you: "Do you want to cross the footbridge to me?"—Immediately, you did not want to any more; and when I asked you again, you remained silent. Since then mountains and torrential rivers and whatever separates and alienates have been cast between us, and even if we wanted to get together, we couldn't. But when you now think of that little footbridge, words fail you and you sob and marvel' (16). There is no science of love, of friendship, and we cannot cry on anybody's shoulder because it is liable to dodge and thereby frustrate us. (Or the science of love is sad; it is better to have no science at all.) There is no law of love.

I thought your love was a law—the kingdom where I could recuperate and avail myself of what is dubbed 'human warmth' or 'human touch' which you interpreted rather literally: you said that touching the human body was a sovereign remedy for unhappiness, hypertension and cancer. A sovereign remedy for loneliness too. Where is our footbridge now? No footbridge separated us only a month ago when you said you would come and live with me (and be my love). Only brackets are at my disposal now. No laws, no props: I am sitting on an empty stage. *Love's Labour's Lost*. Did I love her? It was a brotherly love in the end, wasn't it? But I did not know it was the end.

I love you with a brother's love
and maybe still more tenderly.

Pushkin, *Eugene Onegin* (trans. by Nabokov)

Onegin does not love Tatiana when he recites his monologue in front of his victim who is sitting on a bench, subdued and disconsolate. He is to appreciate her charms at the end of the masterpiece—during

a ball where she shines in the company of a general whom she married on the rebound. I loved you at the outset of our relationship, but this ardent sentiment was bound to dwindle into a brother-sister cohabitation on account of the second law of thermodynamics. But I did love you with a brother's love; and maybe still more tenderly, affectionately, deeply.

A masked ball where a king
Is assassinated. No more
Masked balls. Just a ball that rolls
And disappears, sent into another space by an awkward
Player. A tennis player, a footballer? I've no idea
Which game we played. Was it
A game? A slice of time. And time can't be
Sliced. Perhaps it can.
You proved it. Valediction is a word
One might look up in a dictionary.
I'll look it up.

I did look it up—another definition carrying no weight with my girlfriends: they do not believe in farewell rituals. 'Gentlemen, away, lest you perish with me....Ay, pray for me, pray for me; and what noise soever you hear, come not unto me, for nothing can rescue me....Gentlemen, farewell: if I live till morning, I'll visit you; if not, Faustus is gone to hell' (Marlowe, *Doctor Faustus*). An exemplary farewell ritual. She was my disciple, my brother, my sister, my wife. Valediction—another sacrifice in the name of the second law of thermodynamics.

Picking out a few paragraphs from Nietzsche's book, I hoped to give free rein to my imagination which, for more than ten years, has been confined to my own persona, ego, super-ego or whatever Freud chanced upon during his search for Man. (He did not care much about women, did he?) What I am confronted with at present amounts to the same problem and adds up to a lot of hard work for all of us: my persona, ID, ego, super-ego and death instinct which has accomplished its task already. Paradoxically, the death instinct (*thanatos*) can serve to prolong life and also the state of affairs I have grown used to during my philosophical investigations. Individual life moves towards a 'natural' death; so far my life has moved towards an 'unnatural death'—a death through poetry. The nervous system of an organism is regulated by a constancy principle—a conservative tendency to stability. No motion, the law of death. Since all matter is made up of non-living, inorganic matter, then there is an instinct yearning to return to a state of inorganic inertia. A sad science. But, for all Freud's endeavours, his theory is not regarded as *scientific* in today's world owing to Popper's analysis. It is poetic nonetheless—as poetic as a poem I might have written at the break of dawn; I was too sleepy, alas.

A conservative tendency
 To stability. A bed where you partake
 Of your breakfast.
 A cup of coffee, a croissant. How many times
 Did I kiss you in this bed as I smelt
 Your skin that reminded me of
 Nothing. What
 Could remind me of you? A poem I'm writing about your
 Ego and super-ego? The urge inherent
 In all organic life to restore an earlier state of things.

I wish I could get rid of my poems, of the conservative tendency to stability that is prone to *destabilise* my daily routine. What about Nietzsche's poems?

'He sinks, he falls, he's done'—says who?
 The truth is: he climbs down to you.
 His over-bliss became too stark,
 His over-light pursues your dark.

I don't think my over-light pursued your dark: you were not the dark lady of my sonnets, as I pointed out in another book of mine. And I was not over-bright either, judging from our relationship which ended abruptly as if somebody had switched the lights off. In this sense my over-light does pursue your dark: I wish I knew what has happened. Nothing ever happens: the same state of affairs prevails over time that seems to insinuate we must change our routine from time to time. After a while time gets entangled in the times where a metamorphosis is required so that nothing comes out of it, out of them, out of something that does not exist.

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'Every great human being exerts a retroactive force: for his sake all of history is placed in the balance again, and a thousand secrets of the past crawl out of their hiding places—into *his* sunshine. There is no way of telling what may yet become part of history. Perhaps the past is still essentially undiscovered! So many retroactive forces still needed!' I conjure up the past where all my ancestors are buried alive: they must live in our midst instead of suffocating in their tombs. Nietzsche, for one, *must* live in the twenty-first century; and yet his existence would not alter the state of affairs I touch upon as I try to come to terms with our times, with our spaces—Kant's abstract notions. (With my species.) Let all secrets of the past crawl out of their hiding places, their tombs—nothing would

revamp the book that has already been published and enjoyed by so many people. This book is a bestseller and so no one feels like casting aspersions on it, let alone tampering with its contents. It is our civilisation and probably for the first time in history a book of life has become an unquestionable bestseller. But a great human being should continue to cast pearls before swine until his *ultimate* return to a state of inorganic inertia.

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All thought, poetry, painting, compositions, even buildings and sculptures, belong either to monological art or to art before witnesses. In the second class we must include even the apparently monological art that involves faith in God, the whole lyricism of prayer. For the pious there is as yet no solitude; this invention was made only by us, the godless. I do not know of any more profound difference in the whole orientation of an artist than this, whether he looks at his work in progress (at 'himself') from the point of view of the witness, or whether he 'has forgotten the world', which is the essential feature of all monological art; it is based *on forgetting*, it is the music of forgetting.

I wish I could listen to my monologue from afar, creating an additional space where so many witnesses of my subjective truth or untruth might turn up in the long run. What would I see from the outside, were I in a position to leave myself stranded in order to spy on my movements and eavesdrop on my thoughts? Many years ago I crumpled into a heap on the floor of my room and, as I pointed out earlier, my body has not budged from the spot ever since, as if to curse space, time and whatever goes with them. My thoughts continue to measure time, though, but I no longer take notice of them: their monologue is authentically interior.

I *have* forgotten the world and this non-remembrance has a lot in common with the music resounding inside myself all the more unrestrainedly since no movement of mine interferes with its course. I do not disturb my music which unfolds its pattern steadily and harmoniously as if inclined to create another time and space within my substance. But this space will not enable me to see and hear myself from the outside because it is an *inner* space where the soul, the body and God live together, paying homage to Pierre Charon and Spinoza whom Nietzsche was rather fond of. And given that I do pay homage to Spinoza in this work, the lyrics of my prayer do not turn God into a witness, a spectator or a courteous listener because He can neither hear nor help me; He is inside and likewise on a different plane of existence altogether. His indifference has nothing to do with space but rather pertains to His condition which is not *la condition humaine*—far from it.

Music theatre, which played so prominent a part in the art of the sixties and seventies, seems to be on the decline owing to the restrictions imposed by the marketing of classical music. Indeed, in recent years, composers and interpreters have returned to traditional halls whose spaces are used only

as a receptacle of sounds, as a provider of good or bad acoustics. Interpreters and instruments do not move in those spaces. Pianos and violins assume no other roles in the course of a performance; they remain what they are: pianos and violins. Pianists and violinists never become actors unless they attempt to ingratiate themselves with the audience by tossing their heads upwards, by endowing their general appearance with a romantic touch. But this applause-oriented acting can hardly be called music theatre.

Left to its own devices, music comes into its own so that you are bound to forget the world, your attention entirely riveted on the evolution of the piece you are engrossed in. Only Beckett's last plays seem to reflect the state of affairs I got involved with around twelve years ago—the only exception to my anti-theatrical stance. I recall a play where a man lowers himself into a crouch and listens to Schubert's *Death and the Maiden*, hoping he will not be seen by anyone, not even by himself: all mirrors in his room are covered. Then he hears a sound of footfalls and rushes towards the front door to find out who may visit him at that ungodly hour—all his hours are ungodly, godless and humanless. His late visitor may be the ghost of the maiden who must have died a long time ago, around twelve years ago. I never rush to the front door in the hope of meeting someone, either a ghost or a real woman. Not any more. I just listen to my music. No footfalls will ever interfere with it.

In the early eighties I wrote a composition entitled *The Encore* where an old maestro plays a series of encores. As the snatches of heterogeneous pieces succeed each other, the maestro sees and hears—perhaps in one of his nightmares—the applause or the silence of an unpredictable, whimsical audience. At the end the audience become inaudible and invisible, except one man whom the maestro cannot make out in the dimness of the hall. So, after some time, he is likely to mistake the voice he hears for his own ambitions and aspirations, for his unavoidable anguish and the feeling of solitude—those trivial but faithful companions of many artists. At present I neither see nor hear this man; the mirrors in my flat are covered and I frequently use earplugs: I cannot help talking to myself.

Pierre Charon is chiefly renowned for his theory of masks allowing a philosopher to keep things to himself so as not to shock his fellow-countrymen and, generally speaking, all those who are not mature enough to understand his thoughts. '*Je m'avance masqué*,' as Descartes used to put it, disclosing his reliance on a 'courteous exterior' as opposed to a 'discourteous interior' where an audacious doctrine is about to be born. And Nietzsche dwells on 'falseness with a good conscience; the delight in simulation exploding as a power that pushes aside one's so-called "character", flooding it and at times extinguishing it; the inner craving for a role and mask for appearance—' (361) I go outdoors and communicate with the people on whom my livelihood depends to a greater or lesser degree; what they witness is nothing more than a mask, a courteous exterior that might appear discourteous sometimes: I do not keep *everything* to myself. But if I dared reveal *all* my home truths I would be ostracised and demoted to the status of a beggar. (For the moment I am just not a chooser.) And then my inner music starts anew—a monologue on the end of the world. It is so easy to forget the world.

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This is how all artists and people of 'works' feel, the motherly human type: at every division of their lives, which are always divided by a work; they believe that they have reached their goal; they would always patiently accept death with the feeling, 'now we are ripe for it'. This is not the expression of weariness—rather of a certain autumnal sunniness and mildness that the work itself, the fact that the work has become ripe, always leaves behind in the author. Then the tempo of life slows down and becomes thick like honey—even to the point of long *fermata*, of the faith in long *fermata*.

Such is the state of affairs I am living through, assuming that time is still on the agenda; otherwise I would stay *in* this state of affairs without bothering about a way out, an exit. Anyway what I wallow in is a long *fermata* I am thoroughly acquainted with as a musician, as a pianist who continues to give concerts in spite of his immobility. *Fermata*, as Kaufmann defines it, is a 'prolongation at the performer's discretion of a musical note, chord, or rest beyond its given time value'. Nietzsche was a musician, a composer, and at some point I even proposed to play some of his compositions in order to create yet another theatrical play for the sake of an intrinsic marriage of poetry and music. So I am entitled to speak of my musical activities within the framework of this long-winded essay. I have just finished my autobiography based on Kierkegaard's life—another peculiar opus no one will ever read. Consequently I am enjoying a variety of time that is slow and 'thick like honey'. I cannot move and content myself with crouching on the floor—another mask, seeing I am ensconced in one of my armchairs—which only augments the quantity of joy, of gay science, of gay art, of gay experience.

I would patiently accept death: I am ripe for it now. Well, almost. I have to finish this book on poetry. It is true that artists die at the right time—but not always in the right space—as if guided by an inner (or outer) rhyme. Schubert could not have written anything after his last quartet, his last piano sonatas, because he was at the end of the road, at the end of his tether; it was the end and he must have known it. Nor did Webern resume his musical activities after the *Second Cantata*, Opus 31, which alludes to his journey from Purgatory to Paradise. And Paul Celan included *fermati* in his poems as if paving the way for his suicide:

With the voice of the fieldmouse
you squeak up to me,

a sharp
clip,

you bite your way through my shirt to the skin,

a cloth,

you slide across my mouth

midway through the words

I address to you, shadow,

to give you weight.

Paul Celan, *Schneepart* (trans. by Michael Hamburger)

To honour the mask, I will not acquaint my putative witnesses with the German text.

Artists hear their destiny, their inner music—*Death and the Maiden*. Death and the middle-aged man. Death and the old man.

Fermata prolongs a state of affairs beyond its given time value. But what is this state of affairs? A man in a rocking chair that does not rock him any more? He is not a rock-a-bye baby, is he? He must be asleep or dead. If he is asleep, he might wake up tomorrow or the day after. His *fermata* would be over. And what if it is not a *fermata* but the end of his piece? What piece did he perform? A theatrical play he had written for himself—in part. He improvised the other part, spurred on by a bout of inspiration or a bout of illness. Was he really ill? Anyway he was prone to severe bouts of depression, to *fermatas* that used to suspend his life indefinitely. For hours and hours he would sit on the floor, humming a nondescript tune. But each note is bound to die away if sung by a human, a bird, or played on the piano. So he would jump to his feet to signify the end of yet another *fermata*. Didn't Nijinsky jump very high when reminded of his former glory?

In the main the question is how light or heavy we are—the problem of our 'specific gravity'. One has to be *very light* to drive one's will to knowledge into such a distance and, as it were, beyond one's time, to create for oneself eyes to survey millennia and, moreover, clear skies in these eyes. One must have liberated oneself from many things that oppress, inhibit, hold down, and make heavy precisely us Europeans today. The human being of such a beyond who wants to behold the supreme measures of value of this time must first of all 'overcome' this time in himself—this is the test of his strength—and consequently not only his time but also his prior aversion and contradiction *against* this time, his suffering from this time, his un-timeliness, his *romanticism*.

La Gaya Scienza, 380

*Der Posaunenstelle
tief im glühenden
Leertext,
in Fackelhöhe,
im Zeitloch:*

*hör dich ein
mit dem Mund.*

Paul Celan, *Zeitgehöft*

TWO MINDS

One may take Socrates as an example. He was an intellectual tragic hero. His death sentence was announced to him. That instant he dies—for one who does not understand that the whole power of the spirit is required for dying, and that the hero always dies before he dies, that man will not get so very far with his conception of life. So as a hero it is required of Socrates that he repose tranquilly in himself, but as an intellectual tragic hero it is required of him that he at the last moment have spiritual strength sufficient to carry himself through. So he cannot like the ordinary tragic hero concentrate upon keeping himself face to face with death, but he must make this movement so quickly that at the same instant he is consciously well over and beyond this strife and asserts himself. If Socrates had been silent in the crisis of death, he would have weakened the effect of his life and aroused the suspicion that in him the elasticity of irony was not an elemental power but a game, the flexibility of which he had to employ at the decisive moment to sustain him emotionally.

Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, (trans. by Walter Lowrie)

I admire the courage and wisdom of Socrates in everything he did, said—and did not say. This mocking and enamoured monster and pious pier of Athens, who made the most overweening youths tremble and sob, was not only the wisest chatterer of all time; he was equally great in silence. I wish he had remained taciturn also at the last moment of his life; in that case he might belong to a still higher order of spirits. Whether it was death or the poison or piety or malice—something loosened his tongue at that moment and he said: 'O Crito, I owe Asclepius a rooster.' This ridiculous and terrible 'last word' means for those who have ears: 'Crito, life is a decease.' Is it possible that a man like him, who had lived cheerfully and like a soldier in the sight of everyone, should have been a pessimist? He had merely kept a cheerful mien while concealing all his life long his ultimate judgement, his inmost feeling. Socrates, Socrates suffered life! And then he still revenged himself—with this veiled, gruesome, pious, and blasphemous saying. Did a Socrates need such revenge? Did his overrich virtue lack an ounce of magnanimity? —Alas, my friends, we must overcome even the Greeks!

Nietzsche, *La Gaya Scienza* (trans. by Walter Kaufmann)

The 'last word' is really the last, but people who do not care about eternity say whatever comes into their heads when they feel they are breathing their last. What shall *I* say on my deathbed, on the

threshold of the Hereafter? 'Even today one may happen to talk to those who, influenced in part by a disparaging remark that Mahler drops in Ken Russell's otherwise excellent film, regard Tchaikovsky as a kitsch composer. His last symphony is in a class of its own and only a poem could describe it—a poem written in Russian.'

I was born in Moscow and lived there
For twenty-five years and nine months.

Seven years' imprisonment—in absentia.
Not a real dissident, a virtual one.
Fighting the regime with my thoughts,
Keeping my fists in my pockets.
They sentenced me because
I'd requested political asylum
In Belgium. For myself, not for others.
(Freedom of action. Freedom of association.
Freedom of speech. Freedom of worship.
Freedom of money. Free gifts. Freebies.
Freedom of information: picture galleries,
Books, discs...and restaurants.)
I'm not a hero, nor a semi-hero;
Neither a criminal, nor a semi-criminal.

Pushkin wrote about a man
Who was semi-everything:
'But there's hope
He'll be whole at last.'
Have I ever been whole?
Perhaps. Not all women
Loved me. But some of them did.
(At least they said so
And I felt their love.)
I have friends.

I'm the author of
Ten novels,
Nine hundred poems.

Semi-novels?

Semi-poems?

I've played Bach, Mozart,
Beethoven, Schubert, Chopin,
Liszt, Brahms, Debussy...

I have lived—that's enough:
Neither Descartes,
Nor Nagarjuna,
Nor my neighbours,
Nor my tax collector
Could dispute the fact.

As long as I live
I'll write; I'll play Chopin and
Schubert.

If I can neither
Write nor play, I'll think
About poetry,
About Brahms and
Wagner.

I might say
Something
On my deathbed:
A few Russian words.

I will not speak of Tchaikovsky on my deathbed; nor will I recite this English poem. But that would be less incongruous than recalling a rooster or such a debt which might have remained unpaid, according to Nietzsche: after all, Tchaikovsky is Russia. (Somebody wrote a book entitled *Descartes is France*.) And I *might* utter a few Russian words and names on my deathbed. In Nabokov's first English novel, *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*, the protagonist writes a letter to his brother—in Russian. He is on his deathbed and, being of Russian origin, he thinks he might revert to the halcyon days of his youth

by using his mother tongue when addressing someone who partly shared his former delights. Yet he is an *English* writer.

On the threshold of the Hereafter Plato's protagonist talks to his fellow citizens—about death, the Hereafter and the rooster he owes to Asclepius. Yesterday I had a talk with a young woman who suffers from multiple sclerosis. 'I don't play the piano any more,' she said, 'because I can't play as I used to play. My fingers are different now. Why listen to my sclerosis? Even when I talk I don't recognise myself. But I have to talk from time to time. I don't have to play the piano.'

'Life is a series of rituals,' I told her. 'And a ritual worthy of its name is based on firm discipline. You should try and discipline yourself to play the piano and, generally speaking, to perform the tasks you used to perform. The space of our life may expand occasionally, but for the most part it shrinks. We should adjust our rituals to a new space we find around us, doing our best within its bounds.'

The space where Socrates instructs his friends in Plato's *Phaedo* is identical to the number of pages the dialogue takes up—fifty-one in my edition. Within this shrunken space he however performs an impressive number of rituals—*homo ritualis*—as he touches on the survival of the soul after death, on his own philosophical development and on the Hereafter where, he surmises, other gods await him alongside men departed—'better than those whom I leave behind'. He thereby pays tribute to the dead and the past, carrying out another ritual that Nietzsche must have regarded as far more important than offering a rooster to Asclepius—a custom observed by the sick who slept in his temples, hoping for a cure. And life is no disease, according to the creator of Zarathustra whose dances and doctrine of eternal recurrence testify to his sunny disposition. But Zarathustra does not always leap out of his makeshift bed bright-eyed and high-spirited; and Nietzsche was often ill. As a matter of fact he was permanently ill and therefore had no reason to offer a rooster to Asclepius. Actually he might have carried out this ritual on his deathbed, but for his state of mind that permitted him neither to remember his own work nor to ask for a rooster.

The body is the source of endless trouble to us by reason of the mere requirement of food; and is liable also to diseases which overtake and impede us in the search after true being: it fills us full of loves, and lusts, and fears, and fancies of all kinds, and endless foolery, and in fact, as men say, takes away from us all power of thinking at all...It has been proved to us by experience that if we would have true knowledge of anything we must be quit of the body—the soul in herself must behold things in themselves: and then we shall attain the wisdom which we desire, and of which we say we are lovers; not while we live, but after death; for if while in company with the body the soul cannot have pure knowledge, knowledge must be attained after death, if at all.

Plato, *Phaedo* (trans. by Bertrand Russell)

Thus spoke Socrates to his friends and relatives, doing justice to yet another ritual—that of dualism which must have paved the way for Christianity, for the religion where the soul is worshipped to the

detriment of the body. After this tirade he could not have announced that life is a dance on mountaintops or rather the eternal recurrence of this dance (and of his death sentence, among other things). His last words are an ironic re-statement of what he had said before: 'And the true philosophers, and they only are ever seeking to release the soul.' So the elasticity of irony was his elemental power and not a game: after all, the ironic approach to his countrymen's notions was a ritual he had performed throughout his life.

"Crito, we owe a cock to Asclepius; make this offering to him and do not forget."—"It shall be done," said Crito, "tell us if there is anything else." But there was no answer. Shortly afterwards Socrates made a movement; the man uncovered him and his eyes were fixed. Seeing this Crito closed his mouth and his eyes' (trans. by G. M. A. Grube). How long did the pause between 'no answer' and 'shortly afterwards' last? One blank page ought to be added to the dialogue.

A number of blank pages. A death poem, a death dialogue. A dying man's colleagues sit around his bed, silent and dispirited. He does not say a word. No debts to be paid, no roosters, no new gods. The Hereafter does not exist; there is nothing after life. Would a ritual of silence fill up the shrunken space?

What about a piece of music performed by three or four colleagues? A Schubert trio, a Haydn quartet? Or Tchaikovsky's *Trio in A Minor for Violin, Cello and Piano*, Opus 50 dedicated 'to the memory of a great artist'? The first movement.

TRACTATUS POETICO-PHILOSOPHICUS

In its final form, the book is a formidably compressed distillation of the work Wittgenstein had written since he first came to Cambridge in 1911. The remarks in it, selected from a series of perhaps seven manuscript volumes, are numbered to establish a hierarchy in which, say, remark 2.151 is an elaboration of 2.15, which in turn elaborates the point made in remark 2.1, and so on.

Ray Monk, *Ludwig Wittgenstein*

1 The world is all that is the case. (And what if nothing is the case?)

1.1 The world is the totality of facts, not of things. (Today's world is the totality of facts *and* things. You often buy facts, but even more often you buy things. You buy things all the time. And you often say, 'What with one thing and another I forgot to phone you yesterday.')

1.11 The world is determined by the facts, and by their being *all* the facts. (In fact, there is nothing else. And facts are not thoughts. A friend of mine got a message through the Internet. He did not answer at once, pondering on how he should express his ideas. Shortly afterwards he got another message, 'Why don't you answer, you, selfish brute?')

1.13 The facts in logical space are the world. (The facts in illogical space are also the world.)

2 What is the case—a fact—is the existence of states of affairs. (There is only one state of affairs and it never alters.)

2.0121 It would seem to be a sort of accident, if it turned out that a situation would fit a thing that could already exist entirely on its own. (It *would* be a sort of accident, if an *outside* situation could fit my life.)

2.01231 If I am to know an object, though I need not know its external properties, I must know all its internal properties. (Today there are no internal properties. Nor do you need to know an object's external properties. You just know the object from the very start.)

2.0124 If all objects are given, then at the same time all *possible* states of affairs are also given. (All objects *are* given. All possible states are given too.)

2.014 Objects contain the possibility of all situations. (Subjects contain the possibility of one situation.)

2.02 Objects are simple. (So are subjects.)

2.021 Objects make up the substance of the world. That is why they cannot be composite. (They can be composite, but they do make up the substance of the world.)

2.022 It is obvious that an imagined world, however different it may be from the real one, must have *something*—a form—in common with it. (My addenda have a lot in common with the real world—a form and a content.)

2.0232 In a manner of speaking, objects are colourless. (So are subjects. But my former mistress likes rich jewel colours such as purple, blue and green. She likes jewels too.)

2.0233 If two objects have the same logical form, the only distinction between them, apart from their external properties, is that they are different. (If two subjects have the same illogical form, they are not different. If all subjects have the same illogical form, they are not different either. I wonder if their form is really illogical. What is the logic of life?)

2.024 Substance is what subsists independently of what is the case. (Nothing exists independently of what is the case because the case is every object and subject. The subject is an object and vice versa. And a case of wine is both.)

2.026 There must be objects, if the world is to have an unalterable form. (There *are* objects. I wish I had a good sales pitch: my publisher sold only 257 copies of the book I wrote in the early eighties.)

2.061 States of affairs are independent of one another. (They are not. The world is the global village. There is only one state of affairs.)

2.062 From the existence or non-existence of one state of affairs it is impossible to infer the existence or non-existence of another. (From capitalism one may infer the existence of communism and anarchy. An enlightened monarch may be inferred from a president. But it is impossible to *alter* the ultimate state affairs.)

2.1 We picture facts to ourselves. (That is exactly what I am doing.)

2.11 A picture presents a situation in logical space, the existence and non-existence of states of affairs. (A sheet of paper is a logical space.)

2.12 A picture is a model of reality. (My picture is a baroque model of reality, a reflection in water. *Pli selon pli*.)

2.141 A picture is a fact. (I hope it is an event.)

2.151 Pictorial form is the possibility that things are related to one another in the same way as the elements of the picture. (They *are* related to one another in the same way, but what correlates them is curves and not straight lines.)

2.1511 *That* is how a picture is attached to reality; it reaches right out to it. (It reaches out to it—in a roundabout way.)

2.1512 It is laid against reality like a measure. (It *is* laid against reality like a measure.)

2.16 If a fact is to be a picture, it must have something in common with what it depicts. (If an *event* is to be a picture, it must have something in common with what it depicts.)

2.161 There must be something identical in a picture and what it depicts, to enable the one to be a picture of the other at all. (There *is* something identical.)

2.19 Logical pictures can depict the world. (Poetical pictures can depict the world.)

2.2 A picture has logico-pictorial form in common with what it depicts. (A picture has poetico-pictorial form in common with what it depicts.)

2.202 A picture represents a possible situation in logical space. (A picture represents a possible situation in poetical space.)

2.221 What a picture represents is its sense. (What a picture represents is its *nonsense*.)

2.225 There are no pictures that are true *a priori*. (There *are* pictures that are true *a priori*.)

3.01 The totality of true thoughts is a picture of the world. (The totality of false thoughts is the world.)

3.02 A thought contains the possibility of the situation of which it is the thought. What is thinkable is possible too. (What is thinkable exists in its own right.)

4.05 Reality is compared with propositions. (I hope it is. Or is it better not to compare reality with propositions?)

4.114 [Philosophy] must set limits to what can be thought; and, in doing so, to what cannot be thought.

It must set limits to what cannot be thought by working outwards through what can be thought.

What can't be thought is unthinkable.

I thought you'd never chuck me. I couldn't

Think of such a possibility, of such a fact. Now I'm faced

With this fact. It's also an event, a situation,

A state of affairs—an ultimate state

Of affairs.

Les affaires sont les affaires.

Business is business. I'll repeat this saying in all

Languages I know. What's more,

I'll learn other languages to proclaim this truth, this proposition,

This picture of reality. It's logical, isn't it? It's not

Poetical, though.

I will set limits to what cannot be thought

By working outwards through what

Can be thought.

4.115 [Philosophy] will signify what cannot be said, by presenting clearly what can be said. (I did not make you happy.)

4.116 Everything that can be thought at all can be thought clearly. Everything that can be put into words can be put clearly. (Remembrance of things past.)

4.12 Propositions can represent the whole of reality, but they cannot represent what they must have in common with reality in order to be able to represent it—logical form.

In order to be able to represent logical form, we should have to be able to station ourselves with propositions somewhere outside logic, that is to say outside the world.

I'm used to staying
Outside the world and also
Outside myself:
I can't hear anything
From the inside.

You are
Outside logic and poetry.
You are inside the world.

From where I am I can hear
The still, sad music of humanity.

4.1212 What *can* be shown, *cannot* be said. (I cannot show anything. A thing of the past. A fact of the past. Is it? An event of the past. A situation, a state of affairs. Not an *ultimate* state of affairs, though.)

4.1213 Now, too, we understand our feeling that once we have a sign-language in which everything is all right, we already have a correct logical point of view. (Nothing is all right. Actually no sign-language would ever have cut our Gordian knot. Does any sign predict the forthcoming sadness?)

Well, that's a sign of the times. You
Were a sign of the spaces where
We lived: so many flats, so many dinner rooms
Where we drank wine...So many
Ws: well, was, where, we, world, words,
Waves, wallflowers, worship, WYSIWYG.

4.25 If an elementary proposition is true, the state of affairs exists: if an elementary proposition is false, the state of affairs does not exist. (Our state of affairs does not exist any more. Was it a state of affairs? It probably was. You told me I should expect you on September 5th. We were supposed to celebrate my birthday together. Waiting for your call. My birthday. I am still waiting for your call. October 9th. Our proposition must have been false.)

4.26 If all true elementary propositions are given, the result is a complete description of the world. The world is completely described by giving all elementary propositions, and adding which of them are true and which false. (One proposition is enough. A complete description of the world. But this world is not mine. And my world is incomplete because I cannot add anyone to it. Their world is elementary, my dear Wittgenstein. Why did you investigate it? Allow me to add *you* to the present state of affairs. Won't you help me?)

4.41 Truth possibilities of elementary propositions are the conditions of the truth and falsity of propositions. (All your truths are false, my dear girl, otherwise you would not have disappeared. You must have lied to me all along. My *Lied*, my *Winterreise*. My *Sommerreise*.)

5.135 One elementary proposition cannot be deduced from another. (My life cannot be deduced from their world. Let bygones be bygones. Anyway I would never be able to deduce you from our bygone relationship.)

5.1361 We *cannot* infer the events of the future from those of the present. (You said you did not know what kind of birthday present—. 'Your presence is enough,' I told you. A cliché is better than a betrayal.)

5.14 If one proposition follows from another, then the latter says more than the former, and the former less than the latter. ('You have always lied to me' follows from your disappearance and it says more than your disappearance. Yet your disappearance is quite eloquent, I can assure you.)

5.153 In itself, a proposition is neither probable nor improbable. Either an event occurs or it does not: there is no middle way.

Either an event occurs or it
Does not. It did not
Occur. Perhaps it did—
Somewhere. I was not there when
It did occur.

The same music
Salutes me. The same birds sing
My praises this morning.

You are
A woman I've been with for more
Than fifteen years.

The milk of Paradise.
The black milk.

5.155 The minimal unit for a probability proposition is this: the circumstances—of which I have no further knowledge—give such and such a degree of probability to the occurrence of a particular event. (In all probability you will never get in touch with me again. You are not likely either to ring me up or to come to my flat.)

5.6 The limits of my language mean the limits of my world. (One of my friends told me about a book entitled *At the Beginning was the Heart*. The protagonist is a famous musician. 'The heart has nothing to do with music,' my friend pointed out. 'You need ears.' 'Yes,' I answered. 'A book on me should be entitled *At the Beginning was the Word*.' And at the end will be the word.)

5.61 Logic pervades the world: the limits of the world are also its limits. (Poetry pervades the world: the limits of the world are also its limits.)

5.63 The world and life are one. (The worlds and life are one.)

A new life mixed with memories, with former
Lives. Are they just old, those lives
Of mine? I don't know if I'm
Happy now. Perhaps I am. What kind of
Happiness is it? A virtual world, wishful thinking,
Another poem? I might be happy
On the threshold of a *Vita*
Nuova—on the threshold of it.

5.63 I am my world. (The microcosm.)

5.632 The subject does not belong to the world: rather, it is a limit of the world.

5.634 Whatever we see could be other than it is.

Whatever we can describe at all could be other than it is.

I hope it is other than it is. I am
Other than I am, am I not?
Didn't I say at some point I had a gift

For happiness?

Not your happiness, my dear
 Fugitive. My happiness, and yet another
 Happiness—a happiness described
 In other words.

And there's no limit
 To this serial joy.

5.64 Here it can be seen that solipsism, when its implications are followed out strictly, coincides with pure realism. The self of solipsism shrinks to a point without extension, and there remains the reality co-ordinated with it.

6.13 Logic is transcendental. (Poetry is transcendental.)

6.362 What can be described can happen too: and what the law of causality is meant to exclude cannot even be described. (It can be described.)

Another cup of wine. Another
 Film.

Roses are blooming.

Something else
 Must be blooming. I don't know
 What.

The world. Or just a flower.

Open *The Book of Life*
 And find what you're looking for.

6.373 The world is independent of my will. (The world is dependent on my will. Anyway it depends on the word.)

6.374 Even if all that we wish for were to happen, still this would only be a favour granted by fate, so to speak: for there is no logical connexion between the will and the world, which would guarantee it, and the supposed physical connexion itself is surely not something that we could will. (A poetical connexion would not go amiss.)

The last movement of *Das Lied von der Erde*.

Every farewell is a homage to it.

Every farewell is an echo of it,

An unworthy echo.

Fate doesn't strive for beauty and poetry.

Fate has no ear for music.

No time to wait for a beautiful evening.

No time to enjoy a beautiful morning.

And the parting cup is plastic.

I shall sit in my favourite armchair

And listen to *Das Lied von der Erde*.

I shall find what I'm longing for:

The wine sparkling in the golden goblet,

The blades of grass covered with frost,

The pavilion of green and white porcelain,

The jade bridge, the young girls picking flowers,

The moon's reflection falling on a deep pool,

The quilt from Ch'eng-tu, the drifting clouds,

The phoenixes drawing the carriages,

The wild bamboos dividing the blue haze...

And my friend, all my friends.

Forever and ever. *Ewig...ewig...*

The world of the happy man is a different one from that of the unhappy man.

POLITICS

My life follows no pattern, and yet I know that patterns are not harmful because nothing is harmful unless we become a nuisance and try to impose our own patterns on whatever lives, breathes and dies. We are eager to govern the world and, even if we join no government, we strive to subdue many things—as many as we can lay our hands on—in order to feel on top of the world. And this top may turn into a bottom at the stroke of a pen, but we don't mind because the world is the world and wherever we find ourselves, provided we are inside the world, we are supposed to rule it, being in charge of nature and our fellow creatures.

Often we even have a crack at dominating our elders and betters without knowing how to deal with utensils or the flies hovering above us. We swat them with a rolled-up newspaper instead of flaying our arms around, which would enable us to get rid of them without committing a murder: in some religions such an act is well and truly regarded as a homicide. Should we make peace with flies? After all, they do not murder us, leaving the field clear for superior, more violent representatives of the animal kingdom. One thing is certain—we have an ambivalent attitude towards flies, mosquitoes, wasps and so forth; only bees merit our obsequiousness on account of what they can offer us. But even they suffer from our bad temper if, in the course of their carefree flights, they dare sting us in the arm or on the bald patch. Actually I am not sure they ever enjoy a carefree flight; nor do they get close to our body with the express purpose of imprinting a red circle on our skin. They are supposed to turn nectar into honey, and that is what they achieve unless we prevent them from doing a full-time job by interposing ourselves between their greediness and the nearest four-leaf clover.

A Christian might suggest we should sacrifice the other cheek when stung by a wasp, which is easily done, considering that wasps can wound their adversaries as often as they wish: they do not die in the act. Bees, on the other hand, sacrifice their lives—let alone their cheeks—if, driven by their murderous élan, they retaliate against an imaginary onslaught. Should we hold out an olive branch to wasps by turning our head in such a way as to arouse their anger once more? Should we dodge bees to spare their lives? No point in turning the other cheek: they cannot sting us twice because they have no weapon to speak of after the first attempted murder. May I ask you to visualise an ancient warrior who, in the heat of a battle, throws his lance, hoping to kill his adversary outright or at least to unsaddle him? If he does not miss the mark, he may recover his weapon on condition that no other adversary shows up in the immediate vicinity of the above episode. If he does miss the mark, however, he is not likely to recover his weapon in the world where battles should be won at all cost. According to ancient myths, illustrious warriors are permitted to cross the threshold of death and to live happily ever after in a sort of heavenly mansion where they wield their lances round the clock without ever losing them. I mean, the warrior I touched upon may recover his lance in the Hereafter, provided he is illustrious enough to gain access to the celestial abode where humans carouse with gods.

Does any bee in this hive stand a good chance of recovering its weapon?

The life of bees looks enticing as long as you remain on the surface of it—in front of a hive. God knows what happens inside it, given that on the surface our fellow creatures also look more or less demure, especially in the course of gala nights held in aid of children's charities. But inside their castles, alias their flats, men beat their wives so that TV authorities feel duty bound to show a woman awaiting her husband in a dark room: the curtains have been drawn. Beyond them a car screeches to a standstill and the woman peers through a chink in the curtains; she then returns to her armchair and buries her face in her hands without giving a deep sob, contrary to popular belief. Indeed many people think that women cry as they prepare themselves to the torture inflicted on their bodies by their husbands' fists or sticks. She does not cry because she knows she has plenty of time to do so after the torture, her body covered in bruises. 'Don't beat you wives!' A kind of commercial.

What would happen if the victim turned the other cheek, doing justice to what may be characterised as a patriarchy-born tradition in the context of which female species, due in part to their innate frailty, were their companions' playthings? In days of yore, despite their ignorance of Christianity and its guidelines, women got a real kick out of being maltreated by their mates and actually went so far as making things easier for them. In the pre-Christian world, however, the other cheek was often replaced by the hair to which a local misogynist would direct his attention in order to draw an unfortunate woman to her provisional abode or out of it, depending on where a more appropriate form of punishment was to take place. In a Buster Keaton movie, the protagonist intervenes on such a woman's behalf and receives a stern rebuke from her for his protective attitude: you are not supposed to interfere with other people's delights, especially if the action has been set in the realm of masochism.

All English-speaking individuals are aware that Hobbs judges severely our state of nature, alias our desires dictated solely by the impulse to self-preservation. On the one hand, we long to safeguard our liberty; on the other, we seek to dominate our fellow-creatures and even the animals we cannot automatically treat as playthings. As a result, there arises a war of all against all, making life hell for humankind. What the philosopher advocates is a central authority to which all its subjects are bow without a murmur, for murmuring may lead to a conflict and conflicts are notorious for outgrowing their own boundaries to become a world war, a worldwide tragedy. And then we read in Martian newspapers, 'Four billion earthlings died in the aftermath of these nuclear explosions.'

Suppose a member of the central authority on which Hobbes enlarges to the detriment of democratic, up-to-the-minute views calls up a TV station to point out they should create a sort of commercial levelled against those misogynists who continue to beat and kick their wives in spite of technological progress and feminism. Or *because* of the rise of feminism, come to think of it. Never mind, I saw this *spot publicitaire* twenty years ago, in Paris, during the first decade of my French life. Or was it in the late seventies?

We live on our globe and only a minuscule part of our preoccupations is linked to animals and insects. Generally speaking, they leave us in peace as long as we do not destroy their nests, hills and what not; as long as we limit our destructive tendencies to the creatures of our own species. Of course a dog can leap to his master's rescue even if no one threatens its own life: humans kill dogs largely when the latter protect their masters from the very start, being on the loose in the house where a murder is to be committed. But dogs often come out of the blue—right in the middle of the process during which a man- or woman slaughter may or may not become an item in the late night news. In this case, the aggressor gets bitten by the dog and dies on the spot unless their would-be victim takes pity on them and conveys their bleeding body to the nearest hospital. Lao Tzu taught that one should repay hostility with good deeds. Confucius disagreed with his rival on this and many other points: 'With what then shall we reward good deeds? No, reward hostility with justice, and good deeds with good deeds.'

But the intended victim may have no animal at their disposal and is therefore duty bound to protect their body with their own bare hands. Luckily for them, the aggressor is not always armed and sometimes even look as innocuous and cheerful as a long-standing friend.

Several months ago I was asked to write a short text for a concert dedicated to the victims of totalitarian or semi-totalitarian regimes. You say something along the lines of, 'A powerful and corrupt elite has bled this country dry' and you find yourself in a prison or, worse still, in a concentration camp. Shortly afterwards the citizens of free countries – or rather the members of their educated elites – unite and condemn the barbarous practice as a result of which an innocent man is forced to consume porridge instead of treating his taste buds to a dainty dish. Here is the text I wrote:

Purists think that no artist should enter politics unless he or she is too old to create a masterpiece. According to them, you may realise you are stuck in a cultural desert where nothing but mediocre works can see the light of day. Why spend all your time and energy on these works, on second-rate performances? Purists round off by saying that some artists support a cause célèbre for the simple reason that such an exploit may give a welcome boost to their careers. These ideas are false no doubt. W. B. Yeats began to care about politics in his youth, which did not prevent him from writing his best poetry late in life. He lived in a period of cultural opulence and was indifferent to fame.

I thought I might be misconstrued, for people tend to approve of such actions; and even some purists succumb to the allurements of politics so as not to be treated as snobs and heartless individuals living in ivory and other towers. In the late seventies, Michel Foucault was invited to the most important

literary programme they had on TV at the time and, instead of answering philosophical questions, fished for a sheet of paper out of his pocket, found it and read out the names of Russian political prisoners. I am not sure he really alleviated their suffering, but I would have done something along these lines, had *I* been invited to speak on TV. I might also have answered a few philosophical questions.

Today's politicians make me laugh not only because they sound ridiculous but also on account of those who pin their hopes on what, according to their belief, can be done in the domain of politics. Take Obama, for instance, and think of the fuss they made about his victory which, in my opinion, was nothing more than a victory – not a promise, not a salvation. Of course he was better than the other candidates, but being better does not mean anything unless you compare a contemporary president to Winston Churchill or George Washington. But usually people compare themselves to their neighbours – or to pop stars who also live next door – and not to the heroes of the past.

Yesterday I saw a Japanese film entitled *Thirteen Warriors* or *Thirteen Contract Killers*, in modern parlance: a minister engaged the services of a samurai to get rid of an influential person. This samurai says to his future victim, 'You're about to die. Prepare yourself! I was ordered to kill you and I must obey the unpleasant order.' Once the deed is done, he says to the victim's bodyguard, 'We should fight a duel.' The samurai does not fight and consequently gets killed – to his rival's amazement. 'Why did you let me kill you?'

'It's better this way. I was ordered to kill your master. It was your duty to kill his murderer.'

'You won this time,' said the bodyguard. 'I'll take my revenge in the Hereafter.'

Why not compare today's military to these warriors?

And then newspapers spoke about Obama's 'slide' as if, for all their experience, the journalists had never heard of the 'law of pendulum' which may also be called the 'ups-and-downs law'. Life is made up of particles and waves that govern our destiny and public opinion without asking if we like their message – their message, rather – or not at all. I wish I could lie in a Jacuzzi where one becomes a target for particles and tiny waves – a pleasant massage and also a sort of message. 'Don't go anywhere, stay with us,' says the message and I am listening to it now, although I am in my study and not in my bathroom. And even if I *were* in my bathroom I would be unable to experience the blissful effect produced by Jacuzzi's particles and waves for the simple reason that I have no Jacuzzi in my bathroom or elsewhere. But I might take a soup spoon and imitate this effect by moving it under water – back and forth, up and down. These ups and downs are much more pleasant than the ones we are subjected to both outdoors and indoors.

The best man is like water.

Water is good; it benefits all things and does not compete with them.

It dwells in places that all disdain.

(Lao Tzu)

Even in my bathroom I am not protected from a heart failure or a fall which may follow my attempt to rise, leaving the hospitable bath. I might break my arm, my leg, my ribs and other parts of my body, let alone electrocute the whole of it, my soul included. Be that as it may, I should rather stay in my bath, doing nothing: not for all the tea in China would I perturb my inner or outer peace by following in Agatha Christie's footsteps. She used to create her masterpieces in the lukewarm water supplied by her pipes and taps.

Unfortunately it is more useful to speak about politics even if you do not know the first thing about the subject. Of course you do not need to be versed in economy or diplomacy to say, 'Yes, We can' or 'The questions we ask today is not whether our government is too big or too small, but whether it works – whether it helps families find jobs at a decent wage, care they can afford, a retirement that is dignified.' But even these clichés are useful in a way, for we feel reassured whenever hearing such a promise which, incidentally, is not really a promise: the same political rhetoric is repeated on a daily basis all over the world. But if the inhabitants of the global village did not hear these words they would kill each other – that is what Hobbes declares in his opus magnum. So let us go on: 'The only thing we have to fear is fear itself,' 'The only thing we should be happy about is happiness itself,' 'The only thing we should be proud of is our pride.' The last example would work if the populace were in the grip of mass hysteria that Rousseau calls 'The General Will'. In this case the particles rule the waves with an iron fist, dragging the crowd in one direction only – towards the outstretched hand of a tyrant. Men are like animals, but eventually they come to recognise the authority of 'The General Will' – which often amounts to the will of a general – because they all perceive the benefits of obedience to it. It is to this 'corporate person' that citizens transfer their freedom and allegiance.

I, for one, have no intention of transferring my freedom to any person, even though I do perceive the benefits of my allegiance to the establishment upon which my career and livelihood depend. Writing poems is perfectly useless, but I prefer the useless and the superfluous to whatever propels you to international stardom; and I despise the get-rich-quick mentality of this day and age.

I seem to have sunk without trace.

Two or three letters.

What remains is one word
But none will recognise me.

There are many words but
None will recall my name.

Three letters. One has
A deleterious effect on my soul.

I cannot say I am happy with the way of life I imposed upon myself, spending all day long in seclusion which is not justified by any artistic purpose. I compose poems now and then, but their number and quality are not superior to what a Poet Laureate can achieve all the while making almost daily public appearances and signing copies of his latest books. A part of my routine has a deleterious effect on my state of mind, on my moods that I no longer keep under control in order to enjoy life to the utmost. So I enjoy life only partly and I have no idea which part I sacrifice for the sake of my self-imposed loneliness. Money, fame, family life, patriotism? Law-abiding citizens have a love of country engraved in their hearts and a respect for 'The General Will' in their innermost soul and so function as one being. And I walk away from this so-called being as soon as I find myself too close to it – within shouting distance, as it were. I realise that a freely chosen obedience to 'The General Will' allows all members of society to be as free as it is humanly possible to make them. But their attitude towards humanity and possibilities is so narrow-minded I am tempted to leave the earth and go to another planet inhabited by another species. Incidentally, I think that humans are an endangered, but by no means a rare species.

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

Rousseau thinks that obedience to 'The General Will' converts individuals from stupid and limited animals into intelligent beings. I think it is the other way round: obedience to 'The General Will' converts individuals from intelligent beings into stupid and limited animals. 'The General Will' is not limited to voting only, but concerns our ideals and customs, our precepts and attitudes. Any individual who does not accept its rulings is automatically mistaken and so must be 'forced to be free'. If no one

takes notice of your ideas and creations, you are forced to be free and so can spend twenty-four hours a day in your bathroom. Am I still writing about politics?

There is a direct link between politics and morals: the former grows out of the latter and often outgrows it, leading to despotism and stupidity. Public opinion is often despotic and stupid unless you deal with an obvious crime like a murder or a rape. And a public outcry provoked by a work of art for religious reasons is always ludicrous, for it takes into consideration only the moral aspect of what comes under scrutiny. And yet even Rousseau admits that an isolated intellectual hermit who rejects modern society is actually doing something rather artificial. 'Back to nature and to the freedom enjoyed by Amiens and the melancholy Jacques!' – an outdated slogan. 'Back to society', on the other hand, is an intention fraught with difficulties and risks. People are not content with three letters; they want the entire alphabet and even numbers, preferably numbers. And they despise useless things.

Confucius said, 'The superior man is not an implement (*ch'i*). ' I have no Chinese and consequently cannot dissect the word *ch'i* in the style employed by Derrida. What Confucius might warn us against is the state of a tool pushed around by superior forces. An implement is intended for a narrow and specific purpose – for taking money from a number of purses, among other things.

A broad-minded, many-sided individual does not play up to anybody, for they have got enough space at their disposal. The superior man does not need a spaceship to set off on a round-the-universe cruise.

Confucius said, 'Lead the people with governmental measures and regulate them by law and punishment, and they will avoid wrongdoing but will have no sense of honour and shame. Lead them with virtue and regulate them by the rules of propriety (*li*), and they will have a sense of shame and, moreover, set themselves right.'

What is virtue? The virtuous man hears the music of the spheres and the chimes of midnight. An artist to the core, he plays his own games up in the mountains and preaches a new gospel in the vale of tears.

Was Nietzsche's superman virtuous? And what about the rules of propriety?

What's the name of that mountain

Within the shouting distance?

A nameless human. He or she

Will go with me wherever I'll go.

I'll travel from life to death
Without let or hindrance.

When the people of the world all know beauty as beauty,
There arises the recognition of ugliness.
When they all know the good as good,
There arises the recognition of evil.
(Lao Tzu)

DETERMINISM

Tomorrow is old as the hills. Tomorrow dates back to the moment of the Creation, to the big bang. It was experienced on the day when there was no light. So it was not a day, was it? Was it a night? It was not tomorrow, then. It was tomorrow *night*. All right. What does it matter? What matters is that tomorrow has been on the agenda since time immemorial. Why should I live through a day which is much older than the hills? I'm not old-fashioned, am I? They call it determinism. And what about *my* determination? I am *determined* not to repeat the past—tomorrow, in other words. I know that my health is partly determined by what I eat so I don't eat much. And eye colour is genetically determined, I'm told. But what do I care about my eyes? Even women don't care about them. They care about my mind which is also genetically determined, I presume. Once I got a long-distance call and spoke to a young woman who was in the frozen food business. I wasn't interested in her food, but she called me two days later and said she liked my voice. She also liked the way I voiced my ideas. Flattered and excited, I exposed to her my theory of determinism and she left me in peace, after a while. But she didn't leave me in peace forever. I got another call and yet another. She still liked the way I talked to her. I did my utmost to forget you, she said. She couldn't forget me and I continued to talk to her in the hope we might meet some day. I made her acquaintance at the outset of my stay in the country where she lived. Actually she was waiting for me at the airport. As soon as a customs officer closed my suitcase I spotted a beautiful woman. I hope she's waiting for me, I told myself. She *was* waiting for me. Was our love affair genetically determined? Was it *tomorrow*, in a way of speaking? The love of yesteryear. What genes am I indebted to for this rapture? Did I meet her right after the big bang? At the airport? So I must have been born *before* the big bang. I must have lived in France twenty-four years before the big bang. Or did all this happen on the same day, at the same moment? And this moment is carrying on in its own sweet way. Is that how the matter stands with the world? I died before being born. I wrote this text before uttering a few words in English. In other words, I didn't know English when I wrote this text. What's more, I didn't know *anything* when I wrote this text. I knew neither words nor women nor genes which go on ordering me about. Did *they* know me, I wonder? Did they know I would write about them on October 11, 2006? When where *they* born? Did they request biological asylum in Adam's body? Did *I* partake of the forbidden fruit? Where's Eve?

JOHN-PAUL II

It is this love which must inspire humanity today, if it is to face the crisis of the meaning of life, the challenges of the most diverse needs, and, especially, the duty to defend the dignity of every human person. Thus the message of divine mercy is also implicitly *a message about the value of every human being*. Each person is precious in God's eyes; Christ gave his life for each one; to everyone the Father gives his Spirit and offers intimacy.

This consoling message is addressed above all to those who, afflicted by a particularly harsh trial or crushed by the weight of the sins they have committed, have lost confidence in life and are tempted to give in to despair. To them the gentle face of Christ is offered; those rays from his heart touch them and shine *upon them, warm them, show them the way and fill them with hope*.

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

The value of every human being. Well and good. You are a human being, aren't you? You *are*, aren't you? You think, you dream about women and men, therefore you are and no one can say ‘you are not’ because Descartes says you are and our Cartesian law does not contradict Descartes, not even for the sake of argument. You wonder what you may do for the sake of argument, but you grow weary of arguments and yourself. You say to yourself, ‘I am not’ and you are not, for you are what you think you are and your time is subjective, according to St Augustine and probably to St John-Paul II as well. Your time is subjective so you stand up and say something about the value of every human being. They ask you if you are a human being. You say, ‘I am.’ You are probably wrong, but no one contests any claims made against the fragility of human beings. You say, ‘I'm not fragile’ and they begin to pummel you into submission, saying they have several Gulags where you can spend the rest of your life unless you repent like Boris Godunov. At least you should see a few ghosts who are likely to accuse you of murder, assassinations and other machinations.

I know I am precious in God's eyes and I see His eyes that impart to my being, ‘You're precious even if you don't exist.’ And I say to God and John-Paul II, ‘Didn't Christ give His life for me, for my blasphemies and superfluous novels? What does His intimacy mean? Does He read my books? I don't

need other intimacies.’ Last night I read the beginning of my last novel to one of my former mistresses. I read out loud an excerpt from a novel written by a famous writer who got a literary prize two years ago. I should have read it silently, for she said, ‘This is wonderful. And the other excerpt is boring.’ My text is boring so I do not exist. Am I precious in God’s eyes? Even non-existent people can be precious in God’s eyes, especially if they are writers. What is more, I write about God and therefore deserve an Audi Q7 and a villa on God’s Riviera where so many saints disport themselves, playing soccer and thinking about Argentina where football is veneered along with Borges and books in general; along with new popes. It is this love which must inspire humanity today: Borges, God, my books, their textures, Dante’s texture and Beatrice, the women I loved. Some of them are dead.

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

‘Do you often think?’ ask the popes.

‘From time to time.’

‘What do you think about?’

‘I think about the message of divine mercy.’

‘What do you think about this message?’

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

‘What do your thoughts consist of?’

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

‘Only God is wise. All other creatures are stupid.’

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

Well, there are no serpents in the neighbourhood despite the multitude of bushes and trees I can see whenever I take the trouble to look out of my window which does not seem to believe in God, for all my efforts. I wish my house could fall in love with God and if my dream comes true, I shall be supported – both morally and physically – by my house, by its faith, in a moment of doubt and despair,

during a week when I am too weak to believe in anything, even in the next minute, let alone in the next hour. And in such moments one just has to look at the walls of one's house and these walls may tell one how beautiful Christ's face is on a cloudless day, and one is permitted to contemplate His face for an hour or two, being cut off from the daily rounds and the world where people ignore God's face and other attributes of our divinities.

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

'To them the gentle face of Christ is offered; those rays from his heart touch them and shine upon them, warm them, show them the way and fill them with hope.' To whom is the gentle face of Christ offered? To 'one', to 'ones', to the poor, to the rich who give everything they own to the poor, to the people who spend their lives on their knees, to the knees that support and sustain those people during their prayers. I do not belong to any of these categories and groups; yet my knees are ready to perform a variety of tasks, provided I give the signal they need to understand what I want and what God allows them to do tonight, at 8 p.m.

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

Christ's heat can also *warm* you – not only because our pope spoke about this warmth in one of his speeches delivered from one of the balconies for which European cities are renowned all over the world. A pope stands on a balcony and says to you, to everyone, 'To them the gentle face of Christ is offered; those rays from his heart touch them and shine upon them, warm them, show them the way and fill them with hope.' You understand the words you hear, but you do not see the rays that the pope's speech seems to hammer home because it is a message you do not understand. I mean – and others mean this as well – that Christ's rays are a message or perhaps *the* message you have to pay attention to, otherwise you will die prematurely, far from your bed and not in your sleep – far from it.

And the message you ought to hear has nothing to do with the message you see on your computer screen whenever you are about to buy a few cases of wine: 'Excessive drinking is a health risk.'

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

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

'Rays and hope.'

'What rays, what hope?'

'I don't know.'

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

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

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

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

'Do you need this small amount?'

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

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

FEELINGS, SENTIMENTS

JOY

How to experience joy? You send me some flowers and think I'll be overjoyed to see and smell them. I will not, no doubt about it. I'll have to break them to see what's inside in order to understand how joy can affect other people. Of course they don't break flowers to find out what joy is, but I don't feel anything as I look at the roses an old lady from Tokyo sends me once a year to wish me a happy birthday. They don't make me happy, these roses, but I'm grateful to her all the same. Does this gratitude have something to do with joy, with happiness? Are joy and happiness synonymous? I've no intention of consulting books to answer this question. So many questions should be answered, but this one may remain unanswered because it's not very important to know if happiness is different from joy. If you're happy, you don't give a hoot about words that can describe your state of mind, the shape of your body.

Answering questions makes me happy; asking questions makes me happy too. Probably happiness is a long joy—joy at breaking point. The point is it doesn't break. If you feel like being happy for a long time you don't break your joy; on the contrary, you'll see to it that your joy is in good repair. But joy isn't a house or a floor: you can't repair it. So you entertain it rather, making it laugh; you hire a magician or switch your TV set on. Your joy laughs; your joy enjoys itself. Another question: is it *your* joy, your *private* joy? Do other people enjoy its presence in their households or elsewhere? In the streets, for instance? I don't know; I don't care about what other people feel or think. Their joys are certainly different from mine because I don't know them: I know neither those people nor their joys. We're not on the same wavelength so our joys are different. Our lives are different; and yet I wish we could live the same life, being together all the time, hugging each other round the clock. What a pity humanity doesn't feel the same joy—or the same sadness, come to think of it. If we felt the same sadness we could still embrace heartily without thinking about our individual joys or sorrows. Let me become a citizen of the world if it's the only way to experience joy, to say to myself, 'I'm happy I was born.'

Am I happy I was born? Was it a joyful moment? I mean, my conception? Were my father and mother in a joyful mood? Christmas is such a joyful time of year. Was I conceived at Christmastide? Was I conceived on a rainy day, in early autumn? I feel rain in my veins, not blood. I wish I could feel blood in my veins, not necessarily blue blood. Rain, rain, rain. Or snow. Which do I prefer? I don't know. I prefer blood if I'm allowed to choose between blood and water. But choosing doesn't make you experience joy *automatically* unless you choose amongst the objects which are likely to brighten your eyes, to send a shiver of pleasure down your spine, through your every bone. And, unless your bones are too old to experience anything, you *can* become happy by choosing an appropriate object, an appropriate man or woman who will do their best to preserve this precarious state of mind and body in order to ensure your safety in the world where it's threatened every day, every minute.

Even if you don't threaten joy, it dies of its own accord as if dying was its natural inclination subordinate to what is called 'fleetness'. I don't like the word and so do my best to amputate the second half of it, leaving on the surface only 'fleet', which reminds me of my youthful aspirations: I was dreaming about the Royal Marines. Well, I couldn't dream about the Royal Marines for the simple reason that I was living in the Soviet Union where nothing royal was tolerated with the exception of the visits paid to our land by the royalties susceptible to the charm of communist ideas or just bent on improving their quality of life. As a result of those visits, the quality of *their* lives might have improved, for all I know, but *my* life maintained the status quo. And I didn't like the origins of my life: after all, I was born in the Soviet Union. I had no alternative but to drift with the tide, and drift with the tide I did, although I kept withdrawing into myself as if I could find joy inside my body or soul or both. Actually you can find joy *everywhere*, provided you take no notice of whatever prevents you from feeling it all the time. If something crops up—something that may interfere with your concentration—you just jettison it and applaud your feat, clapping your hands loudly, triumphantly, as if you had won a world championship. You did win it, taking into consideration your state of mind, your joy, your happiness. You're happy, aren't you? You should say to yourself that you're happy, otherwise you won't be happy: words are actions and vice versa.

Where do words live? They live in a wordhouse. What does it look like? It looks like a lighthouse, but lights in that house or in those houses—there are many of them, I hope—were replaced by words a long time ago. In point of fact, those houses stockpile words instead of lights so they radiate a single beam of words or many beams of words; sometimes to no purpose. Why radiate words if no one understands you? But how can you *understand* a word beam, let alone a beam of many words, or even many beams? Why should you understand them? Let everything penetrate your body and soul. Anyway you can't understand a beam.

Nothing gets inside me. Everything goes out attracted by whatever glitters outdoors: funfairs, seashores.

As I walked along the seashore I saw several different sorts of seaweed and lots of tiny crabs. When was it? I don't remember. Last year, the year before last. I was happy, wasn't I?

I wept for joy when I was told I would walk there forever; even *after* doomsday.

LOVE

'I saw you, but a mystery covered your face.' Thus begins one of the schmaltzy Russian love songs—we call them 'romances'—in which love or rather its birth (or death) happens to be described so hesitantly, with such uncharacteristic prudence, that one wonders if the author is talking about a real woman or a figment of his fertile imagination. This birth of a new tragedy might not take place after all, judging from how the man—the narrator, to be exact—goes about it. He accepts an invitation and enters a ballroom where his eyes light upon a young lady whose face is mysterious to the point of awakening a premonition of love in his fragile heart. His heart must be fragile indeed, otherwise he would set about courting the woman in white on the spot instead of speaking of her as if bent on writing a novel. He does nothing of the sort, contrary to the expectations of those who pounce on every miniskirt they run into during their walks in their native cities and also abroad—everywhere. I mean, he neither writes a novel nor makes amorous advances to the lady whose face remains impenetrable; and yet she wears no veil. What *does* she wear? A white dress or a black one: she might be in mourning for her husband. From this point of view, it's more advantageous to meet a woman in black than a woman in white—from the narrator's point of view; after all, he accepted the invitation to the ball where he hoped to meet a specimen of female beauty, muttering to himself: 'What else does one go to balls for?' He doesn't belong to any diplomatic corps, for he speaks about a woman and not a man: in days of yore, women couldn't be sent on fence-mending missions. He has no intention of approaching his aunt or anyone else about a loan: he doesn't so much as touch upon *other* people in his narrative. Besides, all the guests see him ogling that woman who resembles the standard heroines of *romans de gare* in the books we read at railway stations, at airports. She is mysterious for the simple reason that in bestsellers women often perform a dance of the seven veils, removing one by one their hypocritical smiles so that we gradually realise they're all vampires underneath.

The man doesn't feel like being thrown in at the deep end, which may be inferred from the ultimate stanza: 'I've no idea whether I love you or not, / But it seems to me I do love you.' This undecided statement speaks volumes about his mood: a man in love doesn't say 'it seems to me' or something along these lines, opting instead for a full declaration of his dependence on such and such woman. Nor does he point out: 'I find myself unable to articulate my feelings.' On the contrary, he proclaims his love from the rooftops, shouting: 'I love you, I love you, I lo-o-o-o-o-ove you!' The narrator or the author of the poem set to music by a composer whose name slips my memory whenever I focus my attention on it does nothing of the sort. Actually I focus my attention on the composer himself and not on his name which continues to slip my mind as if reluctant to come out into the open and reveal its mystery and the place in the pantheon of geniuses bestowed upon it by musicologists and concert-goers. Luckily for my head, I abandon the search before some name or other crops up within my brain or outside it: any Proustian search gives me an atrocious headache.

No search of any kind mars the poem subjected to scrutiny in this essay: after giving us a broad outline of his encounter, our ball-goer switches over to his state of mind, to his capacity or utter incapacity to love human beings. In his endeavour to appropriate the woman he saw—a fleeting image, nothing else—he recalls her impossibly tiny waist and the way she gazed pensively at a glass she was holding level with her lips. He strives to live up to the symbols of love he read about in his youth: Romeo and Juliet, Tristan and Isolde. It is as if he were reading a step-by-step guide to building a love nest. But *Tristan and Isolde* is a bad guide, considering its unhappy end and all the wounds—physical and physiological—inflicted upon the protagonists who can't even savour the last bars of the opera. In this respect Isolde is more fortunate than Tristan: she dies later and consequently knows her swansong by heart.

At first our protagonist feels an overwhelming urge to fall in love with the mysterious woman; and yet he doesn't even dare dance with her for fear of a faux pas. Then he puts a brake on his feelings as a splendid array of *femmes fatales*—Isolde is of their number—forces its way through the crowds in order to reach his inner eye; hence his timid, quasi non-existent declaration of love: 'But it seems to me—' Almost unconsciously, he lets his instinct for self-preservation gain ground so that his corny song would have displayed a magnificent diminuendo, had he gone on writing it: 'It seems to me I don't love you.' 'I don't love you.' 'I hate you.' 'No, our relationship has nothing to do with what they call a love-hate relationship. Lack of trust is very destructive in a relationship, and I don't trust you. There's no relationship to speak of, as far as you and I are concerned. "Indifference" is a key word in this situation.'

All this remains in the margin of the text or even beyond it—far from the writing desk where a few sheets of paper lie in expectation of another masterpiece. The author crumples up one of them and throws it in the wastepaper basket as if something *had* been written on it: a love poem, a hate poem. The mysterious woman makes her appearance somewhere in his study, not far from one of the walls at which he stares in the hope of spotting another opportunity, another human being with whom he might hit it off at last, falling in love, leaving the nest of his childhood and building his own home. He jumps to his feet, comes up to her and begins to stroke her face, cunningly alert to the ineffectuality of his caresses. But his instinct for self-preservation is in high spirits. 'I love you, I love you, I lo-o-o-o-o-ove you!' sings the substance. 'I love you, I love you, I lo-o-o-o-o-ove you!' echoes the instinct. 'I must build myself up to peak performance on the day of the next ball,' sings the substance. 'I'll fall in love, I'll fall in love, I'll fall in love.'

'You'll fall asleep,' says the instinct.

'You'll find that your baby usually goes to sleep after a feed,' says a psychoanalyst to the hero's mother.

HATE

Now and then the area of hate lies within love, within its sphere of influence, although hate is certainly older than love, according to Hobbes and other thinkers who do their utmost to protect human beings from themselves, from their own barbarous instincts. Love-hate relationships are only a variety of hate which basically exists on its own and therefore needs no crutches to hold its sway over much of human feelings. 'I hate you, I hate you, I ha-a-a-a-a-a-te you' would resonate through the world if such a song were socially acceptable, fitting at least one of our codes of politeness. Of course there are people who make no attempt to be sociable, but even they don't put their hatred of humanity on display because they wish to be left alone; and you're not likely to be left alone if you hate your own species. Pilloried by your colleagues as an obnoxious loudmouth, you would be compelled to withdraw into your own fantasy world, losing your job and livelihood, branching out on your own. Your fantasy world *may* talk you into setting up shop: 'What about a very small restaurant in the Kings Road?' The only problem is you're a terrible cook—nothing you try to make turns out the way it's supposed to. But you know that cooking vegetables for too long isn't advisable: they lose all their goodness. Besides, you always let the fish cook for half an hour before you add the wine. Two useful starting points, aren't they?

Why do people hate each other? You can even hate all of humankind, being appalled by whatever happens next door and also in the distant countries you've never set foot in: the information you get from newspapers always puts you off globetrotting. Don't you hate the newspapers you read every afternoon, after your frugal lunch? Of course you read them in order to hate the world and whoever inhabits it even more than you do at present, but your hatred isn't boundless and you've already reached its limits; otherwise you wouldn't sing in your bath: 'I hate it, I hate it, I ha-a-a-a-a-a-te it.' What you *should* do is burn newspapers, all of them. Don't they speak about the world you hate so violently, with such unbridled fury? They're part and parcel of the world, and whatever belongs in it must be destroyed without further ado. Actually the world deserves to be locked up for what it has done over the millennia. But where could you lock up the world? In another world, within Andromeda? What about locking up the Earth and leaving the remainder of the universe in peace? Even Mars isn't responsible for what is going on in our midst, on the so-called globe. And yet Mars is closer to us than Saturn and Jupiter whose innocence stands out a mile; all the more so since, according to our scientists, they're uninhabited. Indeed, humans would contaminate the entire solar system and even the Pole Star if they *were* inhabited, if only by amoebae.

You may hate a man (or a woman) who beats you ferociously or just flings something in you face, hitting your eye with such accuracy that for almost a quarter of an hour you writhe in agony on the floor and cry bitter tears. You don't open your eyes for fear of realising you've become a king in the country of the blind.

Suppose a human being swiped you round the head. What kind of hatred would you feel under the circumstances? Would you hate the offender's arm and nothing else? But it must have been guided by his or her brain which you consequently hate even more than whatever obeys its orders—unless you focus your attention on the fingers, on the imprint they left on your skull. The internal logic of your behaviour would, however, be undeniable only if you singled your offender's *will* out of his whole substance, out of the nonsense stuffed into his head by history and everyday life. It is his or her will you're supposed to blame for what occurred two or three months ago, for the atrocious headache you've been suffering from ever since that night when, on some flimsy pretext, a human being departed from the code of politeness and struck a blow you can't put behind you. It's no wonder the incident still rankles: you'll never be able to put your head and your pain behind you unless you commit suicide, letting your adversary prosper in the world you're prepared to leave forever. That's why your hate is so intense, so implacable: you can't put it behind you either.

What's more, you know for sure that this kind of incident occurs not only in your flat, but also all over the world, in the distant countries you'll never visit, disgusted as you are by your fatherland's middle-class mores. Humans are accused of cruelty to humans and animals: not only farmers beat their subordinates to death. An ordinary human is capable of beating his dog or cat with a stick, and his neighbours don't turn a hair because they know it is an animal that undergoes the torture, not a human. And even if they hear a human scream, they go on with their lunch, convinced that no stick, no whip will ever touch their thick skins. Anyway their skins are so thick that no amount of beating could make them sympathise with their fellow creatures or pets. 'There are few crimes more truly shocking than the murder or abuse of children' they say with a note of disapproval in their voices. Do they differentiate between the scream of a child and that of a grown-up? They do and so take no notice of the screams they hear round the clock: their neighbours have no children. And they see only old men and women as they peer into the distance trying to read a road sign.

The hate you nourish for Lenin, Stalin and Hitler should by no means diminish on account of the days that separate you from their crimes. Don't count the days, months and years! Time doesn't count whenever a crime is perpetrated. It counts neither in the prison where the wrongdoer serves time nor outside it—in the streets where old, middle-aged and young creatures devote all their energies to window-shopping. If you murder someone, you murder the whole of humanity. The when and where of a murder become eternity and infinity as space-time blurs and fades, leaving behind our memory, a history book.

You hate mosquitoes that prevent you from dozing off. You hate them all the more vehemently since you know that some types of the anopheles mosquito transmit malaria to humans.

There are different kinds of hate: big and small, round and triangular. Hate comes in all shapes and sizes.

SADNESS

I'm often sad for no reason at all because sadness doesn't look for an explanation or justification. Sadness can't be compared to a bolt from the blue; it descends on you slowly as if using a parachute or a ladder hanging beneath a helicopter. Or it comes from the bowels of the earth where it contrives yet another meeting with joy, with the other side of the coin, so to speak. The duality of our life is mirrored in many expressions: 'every cloud has a silver lining', 'look on the bright side' and so on. Every coin has a bright and a dark side; the latter is associated with gloomy pictures you're bound to paint if sadness exacts revenge on you, saying: 'Why are you jumping for joy? You don't have very much to feel joyful about at the moment.' So you begin to brood over what it said and soon forget your joy, your happiness, your broodiness.

It always brings on an attack of broodiness when I go and see my sister and her children. No longer do I feel like having a baby, for you're never too young for dying: even in your cradle you listen to death, to its triumphant march. A triumphant march, a funeral march, Mendelssohn's *Wedding March*—what's the difference between them? They say it's no easy task to stop the forward march of progress and time. Some Taoists can do that, but my child isn't likely to immerse himself in Taoism. Anyway, it's not enough to get books out of a library and pore over them in your room or on a bench in a city park. You must find a guru—a person whose knowledge and experience convey you to the twilight zone or rather to the sunrise zone where you'll fly at will, poking fun at those who, unable to deal with gravitational forces, are condemned to walk or crawl around.

I hate stupidity, but it's nothing but the other side of the coin, too: I can't help feeling sad when my hatred subsides, leaving a bad taste in my mouth. I know that my efforts assisted by my former hate, were doomed from the very start. I'll never topple the Statue of Stupidity erected by grateful, indebted humanity whose attachment to whatever distracts one from death-thoughts is proverbial and undoubtedly explicable. But are all those individuals stupid only because they fear death and its consequences? I'm afraid some of them believe they'll live forever, judging from how they disport themselves around golf courses while the employees of funeral parlours read and re-read the following sign, 'The regime in this office is hard work and more hard work.'

Joy provides a perfect foil for sadness; so does hope. For example: We were so outclassed—we didn't have a hope in hell of winning. People prefer to forget that they're definitively outclassed when compared with heavenly hosts and the heroes who are granted the privilege of ascending to the stars. They don't listen to those who declare that no man or woman is permitted to hobnob with the gods in our time—not even after his or her death. To tell the truth, they couldn't care less about the gods, or even about God; what they do care about boils down to their own immortality, to the survival of their corporeal self. They wouldn't mind rubbing shoulders with the gods on condition that they might live forever either in heaven or on earth.

A piece of music may also induce sadness, and yet there are no feelings in music so that you can't pinpoint exactly when it switches from joy to its opposite or at least to a mood lying in between, somewhere in the middle distance: major and minor keys have nothing to do with moods, feelings and sentiments. To the uninitiated a twelve-tone opera sounds depressing, even if there's a rave-up going on in front of them—on the stage cluttered with tables and bottles of wine. Suppose the stage director told them during the performance, 'Come in and join the festivities—what will you have to drink?' Embarrassed and incredulous, they would turn down his suggestion—not on account of their incapacity of suspending disbelief, mind you: they're gullible enough to buy any miracle cure they chance upon. And they think the actors playing parts in soap operas are real to the point of being held accountable for the crimes committed by the heroes and heroines. These deluded opera-goers—or incurable opera-viewers, rather—can't bring themselves to take twelve-tone music at face value. It's just music, nothing else—don't read into it any misfortunes that may befall you in the near future! On your way back you may be run over and killed by a reckless driver, but music isn't capable of portending this disaster—or any disaster, for that matter. Just listen to it, listen to it, listen to it! Join the festivities and drink some wine! Drink to your heart's content while the going is good. This scene is so drawn-out you've plenty of time to get intoxicated and fall into a gentle slumber amongst the singers. You're bound to have a terrible hangover the next morning, convincingly proving that sadness is a dark lining of joy. But what does it matter? You'll return to the opera house and enjoy the same scene over and over again in order to accustom yourself to its twelve-tone background. But for music, we would feel sad even after spending a peaceful night at home, being stone-cold sober and in good spirits. Life has no meaning unless you listen to music, prepared to climb onto the stage where a fancy-dress party is in full swing. This stage director throws really wild parties.

Sadness, sadness, sadness. It doesn't rhyme with loneliness; yet they have something in common. Loneliness is just another feeling which may invade you at home, in front of your television set. No soap operas, no operas. Porn movies, soft porn. No popcorn. I won't write an essay about loneliness, for I've written a lot about it elsewhere, hoping that joy might make its appearance, if only in the wings. I'm not likely to carouse on any stage, however small. Why not carouse at home? I wish I could write the following sentence, 'We'd been up carousing till the early hours and were exhausted.' I'm not supposed to write, 'I'd been up carousing till the early hours and was exhausted.' By using the verb 'to carouse', you intimate that you enjoyed yourself by drinking alcohol and speaking and laughing loudly in a *group of people*. So I'll just *drink* to my own health.

Sad to say, playing with words is outmoded. They're taken at their face value. Why not take them at their heart value, brain value, spine value, soul value? But aren't they music in their own right? Let me listen to words without digging up the information they carry in their bosoms. 'It was a message much of the world was waiting to hear.' 'We must pick ourselves up, dust ourselves off, and begin again.'

PAINTERS AND PAINTINGS

MUSEE DES BEAUX ARTS

There is an image in front of us and this image unfolds as we look around to ascertain what we are surrounded with—a useful piece of information, especially for those who are afraid of robbers or contract killers. Most people are not tempted to *describe* this image in pictorial or literary terms; they rely on cameras to *reproduce* it exactly as it appears to them. A painter may also reproduce the image, adding to it, however, a few items from his *inner* world to create a mixture that Kirchner spoke about, anxious to emphasise his contribution to the *outer* world.

What would happen if a writer decided to reproduce an image without borrowing anything from himself, from his moods and beliefs? The point is a writer cannot *reproduce* a portrait or a landscape: he is bound to get *involved* with it, interposing words between the image and the page where the image is transcribed. And these words emanate from his own self, not from a landscape or someone's body.

A painter can reproduce an image *exactly* as it appears to him and to his fellow-creatures, otherwise the latter would not recognise the cityscapes brought into prominence by hyperrealists. Writers cannot do that. They must *estrangle* themselves from the image in order to deal with it on their own terms—there are no other terms available to them. There are no hyperrealists among writers, in other words. Actually the words used in the previous sentence might have been *other* words. A hyperrealist painter is not supposed to use other colours, and even his or her brushstrokes are image-oriented, so to speak—no *inner* images.

Writers cannot reproduce pictures in their work; even Malevich's squares are too intricate for such an enterprise. Let us take W. H. Auden's *Musée des Beaux Arts*.

In Brueghel's Icarus, for instance: how everything turns away
Quite leisurely from the disaster; the ploughman may
Have heard the splash, the forsaken cry,
But for him it was not an important failure; the sun shone
As it had to on the white legs disappearing into the green
Water; and the expensive delicate ship that must have seen
Something amazing, a boy falling out of the sky,
Had somewhere to get to and sailed calmly on.

One does not have to know Brueghel's masterpiece to realise that some elements are missing from the description provided by W. H. Auden. The ploughman looks at his plough, otherwise he *would* have noticed those white legs sticking out of the water. Besides, there is a white spot nearby which, if scrutinised closely, turns out to be an old man's corpse. Through this gentle touch the painter might have been alluding to the well-known Flemish proverb: *De ploeg gaat over de lijken* (The plough moves over corpses). In a literary work devoted to Icarus such allusions should be revealed and dealt

with appropriately; they are absent from W. H. Auden's picture because the poet strives neither to copy Brueghel nor to deconstruct him. What he does attempt in the last stanza is a sort of pictorial justification of what he said before—in the opening stanzas. Here they are:

About suffering they were never wrong,
 The Old Masters; how well they understood
 Its human position; how it takes place
 While someone else is eating or opening a window or just walking
 dully along;
 How, when the aged are reverently, passionately waiting
 For the miraculous birth, there always must be
 Children who did not specially want it to happen, skating
 On a pond at the edge of the wood:

They never forgot
 That even the dreadful martyrdom must run its course
 Anyhow in a corner, some untidy spot
 Where the dogs go on with their doggy life and the torturer's horse
 Scratches its innocent behind on a tree.

What is so remarkable about these stanzas? The distance they create between Brueghel's picture and the theme they embroider upon: suffering and indifference. A kind of universal truth to which they aspire must encompass a great many phenomena. So the distance or rather the space these stanzas open up by turning around Icarus, by flying above him, as it were, expands the picture itself, all the more so since W. H. Auden touches upon Brueghel's other characters: children skating on a pond, for instance. The discrepancy between the opening stanzas and Icarus contributes to the creation of this space. (The ploughman does *not* walk dully along.) That is how a poet or a writer can successfully deal with a painting—at some point he must get away from it. Or he must probe into its mystery at length and with obstinacy so that the picture disappears in the long run, replaced by the text. Something along these lines happens at the beginning of Foucault's *Les mots et les choses*: he devotes as many as thirteen pages to the analysis of Velasquez's *Maids of Honour* (*Las Meninas*). It is a painting about representation. Of whom? Of nothing but the system of representation. Foucault's analysis is a representation of a representation and so forth. Slowly but surely the picture recedes into the distance. The space thus created allows Foucault to put forth this hypothesis: in the classical episteme the subject is bound to escape its own representation.

Proust is also fond of the space which may allow one to appreciate a monument or a picture in terms of their universality. (I do realise that speaking about Foucault and the universal truth within one

essay is rather incongruous.) Marcel's grandmother, who intends to adorn the walls of her grandson's room with beautiful monuments and landscapes, relinquishes the idea of acquiring photographs—a vulgar, commercial means of representation.

Elle essayait de ruser et, sinon d'éliminer entièrement la banalité commercial, du moins de la réduire, d'y substituer, pour la plus grande partie, de l'art encore, d'y introduire comme plusieurs 'épaisseurs' d'art: au lieu de photographies de la Cathédrale de Chartres, des Grandes eaux de Saint-Cloud, du Vésuve, elle se renseignait auprès de Swann si quelque grand peintre ne les avait pas représentés, et préférait me donner des photographies de la Cathédrale de Chartres par Corot, des Grandes Eaux de Saint-Cloud par Hubert Robert, du Vésuve par Turner, ce qui faisait un degré d'art de plus....Elle demandait à Swann si l'œuvre n'avait pas été gravée, préférant, quand c'était possible, des gravures anciennes et ayant encore un intérêt au-delà d'elles-mêmes, par exemple celles qui représentent un chef-d'œuvre dans un état où nous ne pouvons plus le voir aujourd'hui (comme la gravure de la Cène de Léonard avant sa dégradation, par Morghen).

Du côté de chez Swann

Instead of paying an anachronistic homage to hyperrealism, Marcel's grandmother interposes a few layers between the original and its representation as she chooses the *Cathédrale de Chartres* painted by Corot and not a copy reproduced by a camera. And she adds yet another 'épaisseur' by means of Time that allows Marcel to see an invisible work of art—Leonardo's *Last Supper* before its degradation.

The theme 'Time and painting' is dealt with differently in the episode where Bergotte dies at an exhibition, in front of Vermeer's *The View of Delft*. At first he takes in the *entire* picture—so much so that for the first time he notices the blue dresses worn by two women. Then the picture is reduced to the yellow wall that he had thought about before going to the exhibition. Weakened by an onslaught of dizzy spells, he repeats over and over: '*Petit pan de mur jaune avec un auvent.*' It is as if he were looking at the picture *after* its degradation. Unconsciously, however, he attempts to ward off the final blow of destiny through this yellow wall which, in the domain of symbols, may be associated with light and life: 'Yellow tends so strongly to brightness that there can never be such a colour as dark yellow,' as Kandinsky put it. In Mexican cosmology, golden yellow was the colour of the Earth's 'new' skin at the outset of the rainy season—before it grew green once more. Yellow is therefore a vehicle of divine immortality. Logically enough, Proust speaks about Bergotte's immortality at the end of the episode in which *The View of Delft* has pride of place. Exhibited in the windows of bookshops, the late writer's works become a tangible symbol of his resurrection. '*On l'enterre, mais toute la nuit funèbre, aux vitrines éclairées, ses livres, disposés trois par trois, veillaient comme des anges aux ailes déployées et semblaient, pour celui qui n'était plus le symbole de sa résurrection*' (*La Prisonnière*).

When enlarging upon Giotto's symbolic figures—*Charity, Envy, Justice, Injustice*—Marcel brings in a kitchen girl who, for a while, obliterates the symbol represented by *Charity*, substituting a coarse reality for it. Again the distance separating a beholder from what he looks at increases as Marcel runs down Giotto's work on the grounds that it smells of garlic, to put it figuratively. (Proust does not resort to this figure of speech.) The method employed in this episode is dialectical: in the final paragraph, which corresponds to synthesis, Marcel admires Giotto's work because his *Charity, Envy, Justice* and *Injustice* are more realistic than symbolic. Marcel found their counterparts in real life—another instance of the universal truth. '*Il fallait que ces Vertus et ces Vices de Padoue eussent en eux bien de la réalité puisqu'ils m'apparaissaient comme aussi vivants que la servante enceinte, et qu'elle-même ne me semblait pas beaucoup moins allégorique.*' In this particular case, the universal truth may be asserted thus: symbols are as real as humans and humans are as allegorical as symbols.

One may also chance upon a non-existent painting—another aspect of invisibility in the domain of art. Gogol invents a portrait that consumes its successive owners; Homer creates the shield of Achilles. Perhaps this shield or rather what was painted on it likewise destroyed its owner: the universe is a burden one cannot bear nonchalantly. (Even Hercules was unable to hold the celestial globe for a long time.)

After painting the sky Hephaestus passes on to terrestrial scenes:

Two cities radiant on the shield appear,
The image one of peace, and one of war.
Here sacred pomp, and genial feast delight,
And solemn dance, and Hymenaeal rite....

Next, ripe in yellow gold, a vineyard shines,
Bent with the pond'rous harvest of its vines;
A deeper dye the dangling clusters show,
And curl'd on silver props, in order glow:
A darker metal mixt, intrench'd the place;
And pales of glitt'ring tin th'enclosure grace...

Thus the broad shield complete the artist crown'd
With his last hand, and pour'd the ocean round:
In living silver seem'd the waves to roll,
And beat the buckler's verge, and bound the whole.

The *Iliad*, Book XVIII (trans. by Alexander Pope)

I chose these excerpts from Homer's account because they are echoed by W. H. Auden in his poem *The Shield of Achilles*:

She looked over his shoulder
 For vines and olive trees,
 Marble well-governed cities
 And ships upon untamed seas,
 But there on the shining metal
 His hands had put instead
 An artificial wilderness
 And a sky like lead.

The distance created by W. H. Auden is also linked to Time, to its baleful influence upon humankind. The Proustian kitchen girl now wanders through the artificial wilderness instead of peeling asparagus. Hector, Paris and Aeneas have been confined to a concentration camp.

Barbed wire enclosed an arbitrary spot
 Where bored officials lounged (one cracked a joke)
 And sentries sweated for the day was hot:
 A crowd of ordinary decent folk
 Watched from without and neither moved nor spoke
 As three pale figures were led forth and bound
 To three posts driven upright in the ground.

KLEE

ANFANG EINES GEDICHTES

He was not a poet, but he was in love. So he decided to write a poem and send it to his beloved.

He was clattering away on his grandmother's typewriter because real writers type their works: he had seen them many times on television. Do poets type their works out? He recalled a poet painted by an old master. The poet was holding a quill. He had no quill at his disposal, but a number of pens awaited him in the upper drawer of his writing desk.

He wrote something on a sheet of paper, folded it crosswise and lengthwise, found a suitable envelope and put the sheet inside. Then he opened the envelope, unfolded the sheet and read what he had written on the spur of the moment. The moment must have been bad. '*Un mauvais moment*,' he said to himself. On second thoughts, however, he translated his thoughts into English. 'Don't I write in English?' he asked himself. 'I'd better get used to the language. I must keep my hand in.'

He covered another sheet of paper with the words 'I love you'. 'That's not enough,' he said to himself. His heart was not in his work. Where was his heart? It was in the bosom of his beloved. Facing the sofa were three television sets, each tuned to a different station. He switched them off and resumed his search for the right word. His radio squawked like a parrot; he switched it off too. 'Why did I drub her at tennis?' he wondered.

'I'm stumped,' he told himself a few moments later. 'Some people believe that the family is the bedrock of society, but she won't marry me if I don't send her a poem.' So he wrote the letter A on a sheet of paper lying in front of him. 'Letters are more trustworthy than words,' he thought. 'Besides, they're not as cumbersome as words.'

He wrote the letter A on a sheet of paper, made a bird out of the sheet and flung the bird into the air. He hoped to entice his room into helping him out. But space took no notice of his manoeuvres and he bent once more over his writing desk. 'Why doesn't it help me?' he thought. 'My writing desk is older than any sheet of paper hidden in its drawers. It's wiser than any living creature—after all, it was born in the sixteenth century.' For a while he stroked his writing desk; he scratched it with his nails; he pounded on it.

The answer to the origin of a poem lies with computers where, in an imaginary model, the poet can stipulate all the factors that impinge on his mind. So he switched his computer on. He read whatever appeared on the screen. 'This cold weather could spell trouble for gardeners.' 'She was two months' pregnant and feeling slightly queasy in the mornings.' 'Should I mention our future son in my poem?' he asked himself. 'She's not pregnant yet, but she will be pregnant if I send her this poem.' What poem?

He realised he had not written anything yet. So he picked up his pen and began to write.

I think I was short-changed in the pub.

How are the mighty fallen!

It sounds too good to be true—

An ideal wife.

What's the catch?

He tore the poem into shreds and threw them into a wastebasket. 'A high-flying life-style and spondulicks to support it,' he wrote on another sheet of paper.

SIE SINKT INS GRAB!

She thought she was sinking into the grave and nobody could talk her out of this illusion. 'You're unsinkable,' her friends told her. 'Didn't you survive the Titanic's encounter with the iceberg?'

'I was born much later,' she would reply.

'Isn't comfort your primary consideration when you travel?'

'Yes. But what does that have to do with the Titanic?'

'You always took a few turns on deck before retiring.'

'On what deck? There are so many decks in the world.'

'You would come from your cabin warmly clad in heavy woollies with bloomers bought in Switzerland, two jersey petticoats, a plaid cashmere dress, golf stockings, a muff of Russian sables in which you kept your automatic pistol—'

'I saw pistols only in movies.'

'You refused to enter a lifeboat until the crew members literally had to throw you in.'

'It's a deathboat I'm sailing in right now. And this boat is sinking.'

""Start rowing," you told the men, "and steer the bow into the sea.""

'The Dead Sea,' she replied.

'With your chinchilla coat you covered three small and shivering children.'

She could not walk elegantly because she thought her legs were in the grave—not just a foot but both legs enveloped in golf stockings. Sometimes she would stand for hours in the middle of her room, unable to reach her favourite armchair. Instead of parquet floor there was a layer of earth in her house. And she showed this earth to her visitors as proof of what was happening to her. 'Don't you see my house is a cemetery?' she asked them.

'You must have taken a long walk in your garden,' they replied. 'Nowadays you can't remove the mud from your shoes.'

'But I've stayed indoors for two months.'

'The earth is everywhere,' they reassured her. 'Don't we live on it? Anyway, it's better to sink into the earth than into the sea. We're used to our earth, aren't we? Isn't the earth our mother? Don't we long to go back to our mother's womb?'

She continued to sink into the earth, if only in her mind. But her mind was large enough to include her body and the panorama offered by her favourite window. The view she was so fond of stretched as far as the horizon. 'My grave is large,' she told her friends.

'No wonder—you were born into an illustrious family. Your family vault—'

'I'd rather lie in my bed,' she answered.

Her bed was also sinking and she did not care if it was sinking into the earth or into the sea. A bed is not a submarine, is it? No one can survive underwater by means of a bed. Luckily for her, she was not sinking into the sea; she was sinking into the grave. 'Anyway I can't swim,' she thought. 'But you don't have to swim underground, do you?'

She calmed down at last and died in her bed. In her sleep.

WERDENDE LANDSCHAFT

This landscape is in the making—like Bernard Shaw's God. But this landscape is not God; it is just a landscape. There is a tree inside it; or outside. No one knows where it is. Of course some day the tree will belong in the landscape, but for the moment it might be outside; it might be outdoors. Actually the whole landscape is indoors—a picture you can hang on a wall. Why don't you hang it on a wall in your flat? Because the landscape is in the making. You think it will become bigger and more beautiful; it may become uglier, though. Somebody may destroy it by having a house built in the middle of it. And the landscape will turn into a garden. And children will play on the grass and mutilate cats.

So you buy *Werdende Landschaft*; you fear it might be destroyed by later additions. But the landscape continues to grow on your wall, in your flat. Actually your flat is part of this landscape. You are also part of it. You walk around it, carving your name on trees and listening to birds. Your name disappears as other trees grow within the landscape and outside it; and birds sing louder and louder. You cannot hear your stream of consciousness. There is a mountain stream in your flat and you are not allowed to transfer it to another landscape. Actually there are no other landscapes any more; one landscape can encompass the universe. It does. It *is* God.

DER GEFUNDENE AUSWEG

They have found the way out. Who are they? Three people. There is no way out, but they have found one. So they are going out. Are they? It is not a way out. You always go into a space from which you will try to escape sooner or later. You may find a way out; actually it is a way in. How could you get rid of Space? It is easier to get rid of Time.

MALEVICH

Dying is not
 The thing of the past. Nor is it the thing
 Of the future. It is
 Nowhere. Dying or living.
 What difference does it make?
 You're dying.
 So what?
 The same goes for your life. So
 What? Nothing is 'What' or 'Which'. Nothing is
 'Anything'. Even your smiles
 Or tears.

This is a homage to *Black Square* exhibited in 1915. What does a black square mean? It repudiates both the past and the future. A circle may remind us of a sphere. A sphere is perfect, harmonious and so humanity moves towards it, hoping to reach it in this world. Anyway Paradise is spherical. A black square would be nowhere if Malevich did not paint it. It is somewhere now—within the bounds of his picture. But if somebody asked Malevich, 'Where is your landscape?'

'Nowhere,' he would answer.

'And where are humans or animals?'

'Nowhere.'

'Where's the world?'

'Nowhere. Actually the world is a black square.'

'Are *you* a black square?'

'I am.'

'You don't look like one.'

'It's my ideas that count.'

'Are all your ideas black?'

'For the moment.'

'Are they square?'

'They are. And you'll go square-eyed if you stand in front of my masterpiece for another ten minutes.'

A symbol of censorship: a lot is hidden behind it. The past and the future among other things. One of my friends thinks that *Black Square* destroyed the art of painting. Isn't it just a building block? I, for one, would not use it: I have other materials at my disposal. A watershed—no doubt about it. In

my mind, however, it is associated with Andy Warhol whose paintings marked a watershed in the development of art.

Sometimes it is better not to develop what you have got; as if you were dead. Why develop a white circle, a transparent sphere? Why develop a beautiful melody? Even Schubert could not improve upon his own melodies.

Bruckner also shunned progress.

POLLOCK

You're painting a something. You can't abstract from nothing.
You can only abstract from life, from nature.

Jackson Pollock

I can abstract from nothing. There is no life and nature is just nature. What could I abstract from it? A few colours? Red, blue, yellow, white. What could I abstract from these colours? Other colours? What would I do with them? Do colours express my moods, my hopes? I wish I could *extract* something from colours, lines, figures and faces. What could I extract from faces? I could *abstract* a lot from them, but I have difficulty in dealing with the abstract. So I deal with nothing. There are no faces in it, no handshakes. And I abstract from nothing. What I get is a black square, a white square, a square, a triangle, a circle, a vicious circle, an ellipse. An ellipse is the closed figure obtained when a cone is cut by a plane. So I pick up a plane and cut a cone.

Pollock touches upon the Indian sand painting of the West and goes on thus: 'When I am in my painting, I am not aware of what I am doing. It is only after a sort of "get acquainted" period that I can see what I have been about. I have no fears about making changes, destroying the image, etc. Because the painting has a life of its own. I try to let it come through. It is only when I lose contact with the painting that the result is a mess. Otherwise there is pure harmony, an easy give and take, and the painting comes out well.' Indeed some critics point out that Pollock's serenity sticks out a mile, provided one glides through his pictures or plunges into them headlong. In this case, the surface and bottom coincide and reveal their kinship, for sooner or later the opposites meet up and embrace fraternally – not only in Nicholas of Cusa's works.

ARSHIL GORKY

A woman stands hesitating on the threshold, but I let her in as if nothing had ever happened in my life: intrusions, dissolutions, humiliations. She does not enter my house through the side door and that is why she feels she can do whatever she likes or dislikes with it and its owner. I like neither her likes nor dislikes and she begins to humiliate me by not noticing my beautiful furniture, my books, my chandeliers. She walks through my house, although it is not a road along which one can walk in the direction of Paradise or in any other direction: even a bouquet of flowers may appeal to some women. This morning I bought an assortment of *foie gras* and there are also a few slices of salmon on my dinner table, alongside two bottles of champagne she does not deign to notice. There are two ice buckets on the table: twin buckets, twin bottles, twin towers. She destroys them by her indifference, by the winter of her eyes that hardly look at me as if I were a servant on whose efficiency one counts without offering him a friendly look, let alone a handshake.

She does not look at my terrace from which I watch the fireworks that celebrate Louis XIV and his century, his operas and mistresses. Yet she longs to go to Versailles, to the chateau where she hopes to see what she has come for, using my house as a hotel suite the walls of which are covered with buttons. You push one button and a servant knocks at the door, holding an ice bucket and a bowl of caviar that matches the pleasures lying ahead of you and also behind your magnificent body. So many handsome individuals have availed themselves of the body that stands today in the middle of my house, pushing buttons and eating whatever it finds on my dinner table. And then the body says: 'Your house looks like a rubbish bin.'

'Does it really? A huge rubbish bin in which one can chance upon 18th-century furniture?'

'Have you put clean sheets on the bed? The tablecloth is dirty.'

'Of course I have.'

'Go and tuck the bottom of the sheet under the mattress.'

'I don't have to.'

Suddenly she stood up, sprayed herself with perfume and stank out the whole house. 'That's what should be done,' she said.

'Do my hands smell of onions?'

'There's something in the fridge that smells mouldy.'

'You haven't opened my fridge yet.'

'But I'm sure that something in the fridge smells mouldy. And your armpits are starting to smell.'

'Do my feet smell too? Why don't you say I have to wash them? I have a long hot bath every evening.'

'Do you have a long cold bath every morning?'

'Of course.'

'Let's wait and see.'

We waited for a while, but I have no idea what she saw and heard at the end of this period and in my bed where I had hoped to savour her body and love-oriented virtuosity. I saw her body and I might have paid tribute to sexual ecstasy, had she treated me with respect at the dinner table, on the terrace and also in the entrance hall where my furniture always welcomes whoever pays me a visit. Not everybody receives a warm welcome in my house and sometimes only my furniture and walls tolerate my visitors whose insolence knows no bounds because none of these visitors study insolence to find out where its bounds are situated.

‘Will you drive me to the airport?’ she asked.

‘Do you mean to say you don’t want to take advantage of my hospitality?’

‘Beauvais. Is it far away?’

‘It is. I can’t drive you to Beauvais.’

‘My lovers often drive me across Europe. One of them is prepared to take me as far as Vladivostok.’

‘I can’t. I can’t see anything in the dark.’

‘I know you’re not a cat.’

‘I suffer from cataracts.’

‘My lovers shouldn’t suffer from cataracts. They’ll have to operate on your eyes.’

‘Your lovers?’

‘You know what I’m talking about.’

‘I do. The operation has been scheduled for March.’

‘And in April you’ll know if the operation to restore your sight was successful.’

‘I don’t think so.’

‘An old car like that burns up petrol, I suppose. I’ll pay for the petrol.’

‘All your jokes are falling flat tonight.’

‘Anyway I can’t wait. And I can’t live in your house. I can put up with the house being untidy, but I hate it if it’s not clean.’

‘Why don’t you clean it?’

‘Because I’m not your charwoman. I’m just your *woman*.’

‘You are not.’

At some point she suggested we should marry and I recall this episode as I look at Arshile Gorky’s *Betrothal II* where some forms attack each other because there is a history of antagonism between them. The same goes for *our* forms, *our* couple which has no history to speak of – just a week spent together in *my* bed, in *my* dining room, in *my* entrance hall. (I wish I had dubbed it ‘exit hall’.) Claws and tendrils, hairpins and knives. They all sprout from what is apparently soft and harmless – a peace-loving woman. A war-loving woman. A warmonger. But I will not commit suicide. I will not.

The picture is entitled *Betrothal II*, which means that, once upon a time, there was *Betrothal I* and we are supposed to wait for *Betrothal III* and even *Betrothal IV*, as if one failure was not enough.

It is enough, but I go on trying; yet there is a lot of harm in every attempt and every hope attached to women I meet up with or never come across. Some of them do go in my direction and I cannot help meeting them in restaurants and in my room that is far more hospitable than its owner – an old bald man. One of them said, ‘I have to go to Moscow, but I’ll come back to Petersburg because you’re staying here until next week. I can’t live without you and I’ll resign from the company, if necessary.’ I did not say anything: I thought my kiss would convey my feelings and also my state of mind that no word, no speech could express as fully as a caress and a conspiratorial glance. I might have been wrong because she did not keep her promise: she had said she would call me from Moscow to let me know everything about her return to Petersburg. She did not call and no message awaited me at the hotel, at the reception desk from behind which two beautiful women kept showering me with praises. They said my handwriting was beautiful and they also took notice of the way I spoke Russian which is badly spoken nowadays – not only by foreigners but also by native speakers who mispronounce some words and leave garbled messages on my answerphone. And they are unable to affect an upper-class accent.

I came back to Versailles and found no message on my answerphone. Her disappearance could not be explained by negligence or a memory lapse: she is a business woman and therefore knows that one is supposed to keep appointments or at least to cancel them if one has to go to a funeral or to the dentist. I rang her up and she said she had been busy writing out the wedding invitations for her sister or for her distant cousin. ‘I can’t talk to you right now because I’m as busy as a bee.’ I was afraid that if I proposed she might refuse; and yet I did propose to her, hoping to hear the ‘yes, yes’ one lights upon at the end of *Ulysses* – or any other ‘yes’ for that matter. I said I had seen her soul at the hotel where she used to lie down on my body in order to feel its length, breadth and depth. What about the beating of my heart?

‘I saw your soul,’ I said. ‘Where is it now?’

‘I don’t know,’ she said.

‘Do you have no soul?’

‘Are you a misogynist?’ she asked.

‘I can’t come to Russia – I’ve got no visa. Could you help me? At the hotel you promised to extend my visa, if I remember rightly.’

‘I don’t remember anything,’ she said. Two days later I received an email in which she let me know she was too busy to tackle the problem I had mentioned on the phone. ‘I mean I can’t extend your visa because I have to deal with many visas and foreigners right now. Besides, I’m going abroad and I’m not likely to come back before Christmas. I’m awfully sorry. All I need to complete my happiness is a baby and you often behave like one. But I’m looking forward to another kind of baby and you certainly know what I mean.’ Sure enough, her email wasn’t meaningless and, for all my efforts, I couldn’t find a fatal flaw in her reasoning. So I erased the email and wrote a few poems where I expressed my wish to forget her; as usual I was relying upon my memory that seldom ignores

my wishes. So I do not remember her even if, from time to time, I need a shoulder to cry on. And since her shoulder is not available, I cry on some abstract shoulder that I do not have to visualise because I can automatically turn it into a pillow or a computer. This time the onus is on my computer to ensure I am not overwhelmed by feelings of depression, which does not mean I am used to being hospitalised for depression or any other psychological illness.

Betrothal IV. The woman who managed to spoil my appetite on New Year's Day keeps ringing me up to say she cannot forget me, and I am about to send her the previous paragraph by email: I think her memory needs to be taught a lesson I am prepared to teach it. I may add a few words to the story of my abortive attempt to divert the course of my celibacy, of my personal history. 'Dear memory, I wish you could have a swim in Lethe. Don't you ever utter the word "betrothal" – the forbidden fruit!'

FRANCIS BACON

When I first saw this painter, his pictures, I was revolted because I thought in my veins ran the blood renowned for its achievements in the Middle Ages and also through the history that followed in the wake of St Thomas of Aquinas and other representatives of medieval philosophy. But I am not a man; I am a cross between a cat and a dog. And many other animals take part in my life and afterlife; so do plants and stones.

Bacon's characters are enclosed by cages or other geometrical figures that symbolise their absence to some extent: they are not free to move outside their circles because their bodies and minds do not seem to be entitled to circles: to a close circle of friends, for instance. They are on their own as long as they remain within Bacon's squares or rectangles; and they are likely to remain there forever, being pictures and not popes.

I sit on my throne and may think I am a pope because no one says I am not. I open my mouth and cry, scream to my heart's content. I wish I could live forever, even if I am doomed to scream throughout my eternity. Let me cry and while away this endless life in a picture, not elsewhere. Go and see me in a museum.

I am a picture, not a Berliner.

ANDY WARHOL

I am watching a documentary on Andy Warhol who is not my favourite painter; I cannot say I find his attitude towards reality repugnant, but his acceptance of it is almost embarrassing. You go shopping and you buy whatever you need without saying to yourself, 'This is soup and it is real so I can buy it and give it to my children. This soup is healthy, according to my TV set and television never lies, otherwise people wouldn't watch it. And everybody watches television; the people in charge plan an exciting publicity campaign with our advertisers. And they succeed because our society and the world we live in can't do otherwise – if you don't succeed, you die and no one wants to go either towards an early or a late grave. Graves should be kept at bay and our doctors do their best to remove our tombs from our lives. And the stars we see on our screens are so beautiful we're eager to watch and marry them. But they're too remote, too inaccessible: we have to content ourselves with the images provided by Andy Warhol who must be the first painter of the 21st century. If you don't live and create your works in the next century, you're a bad conservative artist and no one pays attention to you and your dusty creations. And no one cares for your dreams which don't belong in our beautiful, brave and safe, protected world where soup and actresses are tasty and healthy. We don't need other worlds – at least Nietzsche thought so. The afterlife is harmful, considering that we neglect our present lives if we decide to live in another world, ignoring soups, actresses, actors and their poodles. That's why we love Andy Warhol. We can't say his pictures are an ironic commentary on our world – they're the hymns sung by the most important painter of our and future centuries.'

If I go to a shop and spend my money on some soup, I do not need to see this soup on a canvas they are about to hang in a museum, for no one will ever say, 'For further information, please contact our world-famous museum.' This soup is probably good for my health and for that of my only child, but I am likely to gather this information when watching TV and walking down the street where a lot of smiles invariably welcome potential buyers whose pockets are stuffed with chequebooks and credit cards. (So are their minds, by the way.) Warhol's pictures do not say if there are lots of vitamins in the soup I am prepared to buy on my way to happiness, and in spite of the fact that I trust our soup-producers to the point of buying whatever they put on the market, I wish to know how many vitamins I shall eat today and tomorrow. Warhol's pictures do not say, 'A diet deficient in vitamin D may cause the disease rickets. Our soup abounds in vitamin D and if your children are served our soup day in day out, their bones will not become soft. If your children dream of our soup, their bones will be shaped correctly. You'll always enjoy the beauty of your children's bones.'

Warhol's pictures do not say a word about my brain and its dependence on soup and vitamins swimming in the soup and in the shops where all these different varieties of soup can be purchased this afternoon. Studies suggest that a regular intake of vitamin C significantly improves brain function, but Warhol's pictures do not suggest anything of the kind and I wonder why I should buy soup, emptying my pockets and bank accounts. Of course I can buy Warhol's pictures and even hang them on my

walls instead of letting them adorn some museum's collection and the minds of those who go to such museums, thinking their intellects will reach a higher degree of truth as a result of such visits. Why should I buy Warhol's pictures? I would rather go to the shop and buy all the soup I can find there because soup is even more real than Warhol's pictures, being three-dimensional and full of vitamins. And there are other types of soups, along with cabbages and fruit juices, in the shops I go to: I do not need to enrich my collection by paying too much attention to Andy Warhol's realistic productions.

And what about death? Wasn't Andy Warhol keen on it? Why did he devote so many pictures to disasters? A car crash, a plane crash, a leg lost in the woods, two legs on a dinner table, three legs hanging in midair as a result of two plane crashes, blood, tears, fears. Apparently he did all he could to avoid the subject in the halls where people always talk about the beauty of life and their own happiness that radiates from their faces and Warhol's pictures – with the exception of the pictures devoted to disasters, needless to say. Warhol seems to say to us, 'You should be reminded of accidents because you can't enjoy your life to the utmost if you're not constantly grateful for your very existence to God and His angels who are your guardian and ministering angels – never forget this detail.'

They look at such pictures and say to themselves, 'It's not my car. It's neither my blood nor my body. I'm not as fat as this corpse.' And they strike up an interesting conversation with other visitors, other potential buyers. 'He has horrible fat thighs, doesn't he?'

'He does,' says a visitor, looking at the corpse.

'I eat all the time but I never get fat.'

'Neither do I,' says the visitor, looking at her own thighs. 'Are you suggesting I look fat in these trousers?' she asks all of a sudden.

Whatever they say about Warhol's fears and allergies, he often 'looked death in the eyes', as the Russians say when thinking about daredevils and other devils whose lives often hang on hairs – another Russian idiom. They actually say, 'His life hangs on a hair,' and I wonder why no one has ever made us enjoy such a life in a museum or in a villa – not necessarily on the French Riviera. You choose a suitable long hair and hang some living thing or other on this hair fastened to the ceiling or any of the walls you can spare to offer the world yet another masterpiece. Anyway, such an installation is far more expressive and meaningful than a shark one is tempted to hang in a barn or anywhere else, including a villa on the French Riviera where there is enough room for a dozen sharks, however monumental and horrifying.

Like a lot of young men, Warhol used to flirt with danger – especially when he lived in the so-called Factory where a woman can shoot you if your body is to hand. There was a woman in Andy Warhol's life; and yet he never touched her either in his bed or anywhere else because he had other fish to fry and probably the fish he had to touch were much bigger than the woman in question. Be that as it may, one day that woman felt like shooting somebody, but the person she had in mind was not available for some reason: he also had other fish to fry and those fish did not happen to disport

themselves in the Factory, for all the delights one could experience in Warhol's company. So the woman turned her attention to Warhol who seemed to enjoy his own company to the utmost: like tigers, he was a solitary animal and therefore enjoyed fishing and other solitary pastimes.

He was walking around his studio and the voice he suddenly heard set his teeth on edge – not only because he was in no mood for chatting about what he had done in his childhood, in Pittsburgh, in New York, in Paris. Besides, he could tell from her voice that she was not pleased. He said to himself, 'I recognise the voice and the woman to whom this voice belongs. I like neither this woman nor her voice and I think she's up to no good.' And he was right for once; many people think that Warhol was *always* right, but I think he was right *for once*, which does not mean he could not be right once again – on the following day, for instance. On the following day, he said to himself, 'I'm going to die', and he was wrong. Never mind, never mind.

The woman raised her gun, took aim and fired, but before she took aim and fired, she heard Warhol's voice and she knew it was his voice she continued to hear, for he was crying non-stop, 'Valerie, don't shoot! Don't shoot, Valerie! Don't you know I'm a genius? Of course you know that. Everybody knows that and that's why people try to protect me because the chief aim of human life is to create men and women of genius. Without these geniuses, life has no meaning and makes no sense, however assiduously we try to find it. I mean, we haven't got a ghost of a chance of finding anything unless we're surrounded by geniuses, by artists who announce, foretell and predict the 21st century. Am I not of their number? I mean, I belong to the category of these artists and you should respect that. You should protect me instead of trying to murder me in broad daylight. This light is so broad the whole world will see this murder of yours if you carry on with your work and shoot me dead. So I wouldn't shoot me dead, if I were you. Of course I can't step into your shoes because you're not a woman of genius. Actually you may become one if you shoot me dead because your photograph will adorn the front pages of all the newspapers – all over the world. And whoever is famous belongs to the category of geniuses. Don't you know that our time and its managers are always right? Don't shoot me, don't shoot me! Stop it, stop it! Too late.'

As we all know, Andy Warhol survived and they did not show the lady's photographs – at least I saw none in the films I watched last night instead of other films I might have watched, had I been less curious about Warhol's destiny. I still do not like him and my dislike of his work and life seemed to have assumed massive proportions as I began to look for his autobiography: I knew I had it in my library and I was surprised at being unable to lay my hands on it. I began to wonder if I had flung it out of the window or not, given that I am capable of such a deed because bad books often get on my nerves to the point of making me forget myself; and whenever I forget myself, others and the whole world, I swear loudly and fling many objects out of the only window I am prepared to use for this purpose.

For all my efforts and persistence, I have not found Warhol's autobiography. My wish to quote some excerpts from it can be fulfilled only on condition that I take the trouble to watch one of the

films I saw last night: the book I am talking about was quoted in this film devoted to Warhol's lives and deaths. To tell the truth, I am far more interested in his numerous deaths than in his only life about which one has heard a lot, even if one is not in the habit of buying the films one can find at the Centre Pompidou where many books and videos await the well-to-do victims of our consumer society. Why not consume Andy Warhol and his soup?

'I was desperate because nobody loves me and it's Easter, and I cried.' Of course you feel your loneliness more acutely at Christmas and during any other celebration because people buy soup and Christmas trees; they sing their songs and kiss each other as if revelling in their newfound *joie de vivre*. They find this joy and lose it the next morning. Why do they lose it so quickly? There is no way they could work for ten hours at a stretch, and feeling happy is a full-time job unless you decide not to be happy round the clock, punctuating your happiness with coffee breaks. Well, Andy Warhol was neither happy nor desperate, according to his autobiography or rather to the excerpts I may use if I feel like it in an hour or so. Why wasn't he desperate? He would have taken his own life, had he been desperate and on the brink of extinction. Why *was* he desperate, I wonder? He had everything he might hope for, and even if the sentiment of love eluded him for a week or so, he could trust his admirers and those who are still in love with money, having survived their idol and the source of their incomes for almost 30 years. They were young and might have fallen in love with Warhol at the earliest opportunity – upon seeing a sign, a glance, a gesture or the despondency emanating from his expressive, telltale face. And only handsome young men – and a few beautiful women – were allowed to gain admittance to the Factory where the king of pop art was waiting for love and the solace associated with it. What can *I* hope for? Should I cry and feel desperate? This is a desperate situation which requires a truly radical solution, but I can cope neither with the situation I have found myself in nor with the desperate need for some reassurance usually given by fathers, mothers, uncles and aunts. And what about ants? They live under the ground in large and well-organized social groups and care neither about fame nor money. I should study their behaviour instead of listening to Warhol's hypocritical autobiography – a tear-jerker in its own right!

By the way, at last I saw the face of the woman who shot him: they do show it in the film I am watching once again for the sake of a few scraps of information I do not really need. What *do* I need his autobiography for? Even his soup is more nourishing, come to think of it. 'He controlled my life,' she said as she did all she could to vindicate herself. My favourite Russian hostess often speaks of those who have the knack of controlling not only animals but also humans – either through magic potions or by means of 'thought and pin transference', as they call it. Of course they have got many other gadgets at their disposal and their victims fall ill, die and say to their children, 'You'll die too. What's more, your children and grandchildren will also suffer from this curse.'

'We know the story,' say the children and grandchildren. 'A wicked witch put a curse on the princess for 100 years. Then the princess woke up and met a handsome prince. She wouldn't have met

him if she hadn't fallen asleep – the prince was much younger than the princess. So we don't mind witches and their curses.'

'You're doomed to fall in love and get married.'

'What's wrong with that?'

'Your husbands and wives will beat you senseless.'

'We'll divorce them and marry princes, princesses, dukes and other aristocrats.'

'Their servants will beat you to death.'

Andy Warhol used to control this woman's life, but the woman wrenched herself free and shot Andy Warhol whose blood was shown on TV – along with the journalists who had continued to walk around his supine body until the end of the shooting. 'And then I felt old and grey and tired and out of it,' wrote Andy Warhol after the incident – many years after the incident, as a matter of fact. Do *I* feel old and grey? No one shot me 10 years ago and I am 10 years Warhol's senior: he died at the age of 55, if I am not mistaken. I think I am mistaken, but that does not really matter, for I feel like using 'number 10' – not 'number 9' that the Beatles were so fond of – and whatever parallels I draw today will differ from each other by 10 units only, however wide of the mark I may prove to be as a result of this self-imposed rule.

Would I agree to incarnate Andy Warhol – not in a film, in *real* life – and die 10 years ago? And what about the books I have written over the last 10 years? And the crowning achievement of my long literary career, my postscript, my version of *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*? People live and prosper without these books of mine, and I could have died without them. Why not? Andy Warhol, on the other hand, goes on living in films, in people's hearts and also in the minds of those who believe he is our contemporary – the first painter of the 21st century, in other words. And he was depressed after falling out with a score of handsome young men. 'I've been thinking that all my problems are because I'm feeling old. I've pinpointed the problem.' He must have been 50 on the day when this entry first appeared in his diary. He might have repeated this complaint many times, for all I know: he was in the habit of looking at himself in mirrors and 'bleaching his face', as one of the Factory associates put it. No more wrinkles, the halcyon days of his youth.

Even at the age of 30, one may feel old if one is not surrounded by young people who say, day in day out, 'How young you look! You're younger than the young! And you make love better than any Don Juan!' And money helps in these matter all the more efficiently since thanks to money and jewels one can build up an empire where the sun does not set and one's youth never fades, staying near the bed in which so many adventures take place and do not fade away because such halcyon days are immortal, if not eternal. Soon Andy Warhol felt young again as he met a handsome young man and went with him to a beach where one does not have to bleach one's face, trusting instead the power of the sun and the beauty one stands and lies by; and the waves continue to perform their unfinished symphony.

Of course one's internal organs are not as subservient as young boys who do whatever one may ask them to do on condition that they see a suitcase stuffed with dollars or a painting devoted to the subject; and the painter does not need to put the dollars he paints in a suitcase, which makes things easier for him. So one cannot say to one's internal organs: 'We'll go to California and you'll lie on the most luxurious beach in the world. And my money is always on the writing desk you know by heart.' You always say 'one is fatally ill', if you are reluctant to acknowledge that the illness you have in mind is also inside *your* body and the only way to estrange yourself from it is to say that this illness is not your property. One, one, one.

You have got a lot of money – this time we can get rid of 'one' and you can invite those boys and girls whose company you are likely to enjoy to your place, even if your liver informs you that your death is just beyond the front door of your house. But you do not open this door, and if you do open it to let in another youth, you say to him, 'Come in quickly, otherwise death will sneak in. I know he has grown fat over the last month – death never goes on a diet, as far as I know. So many friends have died of Aids since last Easter.'

Death managed to sneak in through the back door while Warhol was not looking. He was looking either at his guests or at his pictures and death took advantage of his absent-mindedness, saying to himself, 'As usual Andy Warhol has his head in the clouds.' Death was mistaken: Warhol had his head in both his pictures and his guests' hearts and the clouds upon which death enlarged in his interior monologue had nothing to do with Warhol's state of mind. Be that as it may, he died, and Heidegger might have said about him, had he cared about pop art: 'He was born, he lived and he died – like Aristotle or any other philosopher of the past.' But before he died and went to the nearest cemetery, he had heard an excerpt from Pushkin's work dedicated to the plague – the clergyman's monologue:

*What godless feast is this, you godless madmen?
Your revelry and ribald songs insult
the silent gloom spread everywhere by death!*

'It's not a godless feast,' said Warhol to the clergyman. 'I believe in God and my mother can confirm this statement. In her youth, she prayed with me very often and another clergyman didn't wish to disturb me when I was kneeling and praying in front of the altar – the centrepiece of his church. He said to himself, "Why should I disturb Andy Warhol? He thinks a lot about sin and he purges his soul from sin, as far as I can judge. I look at his face and think that his sins are about to depart from both his soul and body." And the clergyman was right – I no longer feel any sin in my breast. I just feel my heart. And my heart is full of love because I can feel this love as well.'

DAVID HOCKNEY

When I look at David Hockney's early paintings, I get the feeling he was playing with his characters and life itself. Of course you can hold all these figures, ponds and windows in your hands, but you should not forget that your hands are not those of God Who leaves you if you are audacious enough to rely only on your own hands or on those of your parents, friends and relatives. *Christopher Isherwood and Don Bachardy*. They sit in front of a writing desk and look like puppets so that one wonders who is about to pull the strings, assuming there *are* some strings beyond the picture. There are eight books in front of these characters, but one gets the feeling the books are either empty or filled with childish drawings and comic strips. One is not likely to find the Sermon on the Mount in the books that Hockney painted to supply his characters with fun. Fill your head with fun – start reading!

In the 21st century Hockney painted a series of variations on Claude Lorrain's *Sermon on the Mount*. How to describe a painting he devoted his time to in the middle of the 20th century? (I am speaking about David Hockney.) In the pool, several ladies were floating on their backs, their arms and legs akimbo like starfish. In the 21st century both ladies and gentlemen disappeared from his pictures, being replaced by landscapes or by *The Sermon on the Mount*, not by *The Sermon on the Pond*. The listeners do not try to relax; they *listen* to the sermon which is about to alter the history we are chained to until kingdom come.

'I don't think there is a place in the natural world that we could think was ugly,' says David Hockney. 'It tends to be only man-made things that can be called ugly. I have never seen an ugly natural landscape.' And what about human bodies? They are also ugly unless they listen to the Sermon on the Mount and look beyond the Mount in question and also beyond the pools where some of them used to float on their backs. Time knows what to do with human beings – at least within the framework of a picture, of a sculpture. Hockney goes to the gallery where Lorrain's picture can be enjoyed and notices that it is 'a lot darker than I thought, and I think in your head you clean it a bit when you remember it'. Time knows better what to do with art, but Hockney does not seem to appreciate time's labours and wisdom. Neither do those who cleaned and restored the picture in 1959-60. All of a sudden, Hockney says to himself: 'We must stay one step ahead of our competitors.' And he asks himself the following question: 'What's the next step in the programme?' After much soul-searching, he embarks on a project of 'virtual' cleaning. Over three weeks, on his computer, he removes the blacks from an image of the picture, and renders the *Sermon* more legible, flouting conventions and traditions: one is not supposed to tamper with time and destiny. And they did all they could to remove human beings from Lorrain's *Sermon on the Mount*.

The canvas has indeed suffered, not only in terms of the typical pigment change that has affected over time most paintings by the artist, but also because of its exposure to extreme heat, in a fire at Fonthill in the 18th century. Time never strains for effect. On the day of the Big Bang, it set itself a series of goals to achieve by the end of the world. That is why time is waiting for the end of the

world that does not come, for all its efforts. One may ask what its goals are and in the long run one is bound to realise that the answer to this enigma lies on the surface of Lorrain's picture. As a matter of fact, time strives for a balance between this world and the other world, between pools and mountains, between time and eternity. The bodies one sees while looking at Lorrain's picture are spiritual or ethereal bodies, not the ones one stumbles upon in the streets and theatres. Spiritual bodies have one foot in the grave or in the Hereafter, beyond the Mount to which they flock to listen to the Sermon. They are sure to rise from the dead – even if they happen to die several times while walking along the corridor dubbed by the Indians 'metempsychosis'.

Hockney's early landscapes are toys you can fiddle with to your heart's content and they are breakable, so to speak: you hold them for a while, drop them and they smash to pieces on the stone floor. Actually the landscapes I have in mind are not early: he painted them at the end of the 20th century, at the age of 60. Of course if he manages to live to the ripe old age of 99, the landscapes in question can be regarded as a juvenile effort reminiscent of real toys and childish pranks. *The Road across the Wolds*, 1997. *Garrowby Hill*, 1998. First Yorkshire landscapes. You can safely hold them in your hands because they are as light as a feather; and if you drop a feather, it does not break, but a cat is sure to play with it for hours and hours. No one will ever play with Hockney's recent works among which there are *Yosemite I*, October 5th 2011 and *Yosemite II*, October 5th 2011.

These pictures are a corridor and you have to walk along this corridor as far as *Yosemite I* and *Yosemite II*, for only beyond them can you find the *real* pictures. You have to walk until you reach them and recognise their light and darkness, their depth and surface. You have to live on the surface of every picture and glide on it until you descend as far as the stars that are not part of the picture. Or you can just play with a ball shown in one of the films I recently saw and admired – a film on so-called savage tribes. The members of these tribes play with balls, balloons and the dead birds they wear on their heads: a lot of feathers and occasionally a wing, a beak. They may fly as far as the stars or the pictures I saw in Bilbao and in my room. ('David Hockney RA: A Bigger Picture'.) They are at one with birds and animals who speak to them in Yosemite and in the depth of nights, twilights and mornings. You have to be at one with Hockney's late pictures, otherwise you will just understand or admire them.

ARCHITECTURE

A TRANSLATION

I would not go so far as to maintain that whatever happens to us is akin to the rite of translation which is regarded by many as a rite, along with the task carried out by a commentator. Indeed we do nothing else as we let our senses bombard us with information the value of which mainly depends on analytical judgement. During our lifetime we just sift through a dead person's papers, reading some of them and throwing others into a wastepaper basket. This dead person is ourselves: our sensations, our memories, our thoughts. We die every moment not only because our body and mind constantly pay tribute to the second law of entropy, but also on account of the fleeting nature of time which prevents us from enjoying a sensation to the utmost—from gulping down the mind-body cocktail. Indeed, our mind is always late and so has to catch up with the body, even though some of us do not divide a human being into three substances: body, mind and soul. Moreover, some of us believe that body, mind and soul are interchangeable, for, as one scientist put it: 'If it wasn't for our body, our mind would be rather stupid.' So the equations 'body=mind' or even 'body=soul' create no stir in the contemporary world except in the hearts of religiously-minded people. (It would be logical to say a 'business-bodied individual'.) As a matter of fact, it is within our soul that we may savour the body-mind cocktail, judging from how a layperson listens to a piece of music. Unable to analyse it, this person lets music penetrate his or her body like a soft knife which, however, reaches one's heart in no time at all. The mind takes part in the ritual—it is a ritual, whatever the quality of today's performers—but, instead of catching up with the body, with the music, it exposes itself to the delicious intervention of the knife. There is only one knife which enables the mind and the body to interact *simultaneously*. Of course many philosophical theories—Leibniz's monads, Geulincx's theory of the 'two clocks', and so on—come to mind when considering this phenomenon, but I am not inclined to pursue this comment for the simple reason that even a professional musician yearns for no-comment, no-translation contact with music. Contact, not a comment, let alone a translation. Direct contact, like a knife.

The same knife—let us call it the 'art-knife'—gets entangled in the net of comments as it tries to make its way to our heart (or soul) by means of a poem, let alone a piece of prose which usually requires a lot of adjustments. Call them what you wish: translations, comments, creative impulses. Both commentators and translators need this impulse to come to terms with a work they are about to tackle in order to transfer it from one sphere into another. And both are blessed with insights which make them realise they are not *far* inferior to creative artists, to those gods in disguise. Moreover, their mission is nobler in a way, for they do not claim godly attributes and confine their creative impulse to the text they are dealing with, so that the sin of pride never besmirches their labours. Even Dante was subject to this particular sin; Horace and Pushkin also had a fair share of it. No translator, on the other hand, builds a monument to himself as he ploughs through the text submitted to his skill. He does not do so consciously, unless he *is* subject to the sin of pride. He is not sacred to himself. ('He was not

sacred to himself,' said Robert Frost about Shakespeare. But Shakespeare *was* sacred to himself.) Nabokov's widow suggested I should translate *Ada* into Russian. Daunted by the size of the problem, I said I might have a go at a shorter novel first. '*The Life of Sebastian Knight*, for instance.' She agreed. Once at home I asked myself the following question: 'How many poems of mine wouldn't see the light of day if I undertook this gargantuan commission?' I never saw Vera Evseevna again. I missed a golden opportunity to become the translator of someone else's works (of a great writer's works). I translate my own novels, essays and poems on a regular basis: from English into French, from French into English, from French into Russian, from Russian into English, and so on and so forth. But I get the feeling of translating myself into myself—one of my selves into another. I am not faced with a text—not as a translator at least, for I have commented upon a great many works: the essays printed in this book bear witness to this declaration.

Monique Chatenet has written many comments on the life at the French Court, on the Loire châteaux. In the course of her research she often makes translations from Italian or English into French. I appreciate her translations of my English novels very much. What follows is a text I translated for a lecture she was to give in Scotland. I don't understand the first thing about architecture. The way I can enjoy it reminds me of how Swann (or Proust) approached and 'analysed' music. When I read about architecture, I am first and foremost confronted with a text which has its own architecture where stones are replaced by words—by the descriptions of stones. And like Marcel—both the protagonist and author of *A la recherche du temps perdu*—I build my own imaginary cities or castles on the basis of what I read in a brochure or in a book written by a virtuoso art historian.

In the following text I was particularly inspired by these words: '—he applies the laws of symmetry not only to the façades but also to their plans, which estranges them decisively from "real" architecture. One might say that, for Du Cerceau, the symmetry of plans is more important than that of façades,' 'To make enough room for the bed, Du Cerceau does not hesitate to move chimneys sideways and sometimes even to fit in a skew door or partially obstruct a window' (I was charmed by an undercurrent of eroticism), 'He multiplies the number of roofs to such an extent that the house turns into a sort of conglomeration of pavilions'. That is what I feel in relation to the cathedral of St Basil the Blessed in Moscow: its numerous cupolas (so-called 'little onions') turn it into an impressive number of churches—into an ode to joy, if viewed in terms of music. Notes, notes, notes!

THE PAPER HOUSES OF JACQUES ANDROUET DU CERCEAU

Jacques Androuet du Cerceau's architectural career is rather peculiar. Though no construction can be attributed to him—not with certainty, anyway—he is an author of approximately 250 designs for houses. A hundred of them are printed in three pattern books—the *Petites habitations* (around 1547-

1550), and the *Livres d'architecture* of 1559 and 1582—, and about 150 pen-drawn in precious vellum albums¹.

Composing pattern books on houses—a brand-new idea in those days—was certainly inspired by Sebastiano Serlio whose three unpublished designs Du Cerceau shamelessly copied in his *Grands* and *Petits temples* (around 1545-1550). Serlio seems to have influenced him more ingeniously in one of his *Petites habitations*².

Devoted to '50 buildings to serve princes, great lords and *gens de moyen et petit état*', the 1559 *Livre d'architecture* takes up the main idea of Serlio's *Libro sesto* devoted to '*abitazioni di tutti i gradi degli huomini*', which remained in manuscript form at his death. And yet the two books are essentially different.

Serlio is a theorist, an author of an architectural treatise, where he strives to elaborate a rational typology of habitations. Du Cerceau, on the other hand, is utterly unaware of Vitruvian's theory and proposes to supply ideas—both enticing and realist—to the landlords anxious to reconstruct their abodes. Published at the end of a grand period of French chateaux reconstruction, the 50 buildings of the 1559 *Book* angle at a wide audience, whereas the 38 '*maisons des champs*' (country houses) that figure in the 1582 *Book* adroitly cater to Henry III's clientele of courtiers eager to have a second home on the outskirts of the capital at the time when the court eventually settled in Paris.

PATTERN HOUSES

What is the difference between a pattern house and a real one?

In the first place, Jacques Androuet du Cerceau's paper houses are not adjusted to a proper site. Devoid of any construction, their ground is flat with no bumps or zones exposed to flooding; yet water flows profusely there—a phenomenon that seldom occurs in reality. So it is the architect himself who imposes the only constraints on their architecture.

In the dedication of the 1582 *Book*, Du Cerceau spells out his ambitions: his buildings must correlate 'indoor conveniences' with 'outdoor symmetry'. It was in a way a common requirement of most French architects in those times—providing that not much attention was paid to symmetry.

Actually, when one examines these designs, one realises that Du Cerceau is much more demanding, for he applies the laws of symmetry not only to the façades but also to their plans, which

¹. For the works of Jacques Androuet du Cerceau, see Baron Heinrich von Geymüller, *Les Du Cerceau, leur vie et leur œuvre, d'après de nouvelles recherches*, Paris, J. Rouam, 1887, et W. H. Ward, *French Châteaux and Gardens in the XVIth Century. A series of reproductions of contemporary drawings hitherto unpublished by Jacques Androuet du Cerceau*, London, 1909; Jacques Androuet Du Cerceau, *Les plus excellents bastiments de France* ..., David Thomson (éd.), Paris, L'Aventurine, 1988; Françoise Boudon, "Les livres d'architecture de Jacques Androuet Du Cerceau", dans Jean Guillaume (dir.), *Les Traités d'architecture de la Renaissance*, Paris, Picard, 1988, p. 387-396 (Coll. De Architectura). A collective work on Jacques Androuet du Cerceau directed by Jean Guillaume will come out in 2008.

² Design E. See David Thomson, "France's earliest illustrated Printed architectural Pattern Book. Designs for living "à la française" of the 1540's", in Jean Guillaume (dir.), *Architecture et vie sociale. L'organisation intérieure des grandes demeures à la fin du Moyen Age et à la Renaissance*, Paris, Picard, 1994, p. 221-234 (coll. De Architectura)

estranges them decisively from 'real' architecture. One might say that, for Du Cerceau, the symmetry of plans is even more important than that of façades.

The same goes for Serlio whose influence is manifest here. And yet the ways both architects proceed are once again antinomical. For Serlio the theorist, symmetry of the plans and façades was an intangible *rule*—even a profession of faith—without which there is no 'good architecture'. On the other hand, Du Cerceau is first and foremost an illustrator of books and a specialist in perspective; to him there can be no rules in the Vitruvian sense of the word. What counts is the effect of a spectacular ensemble produced by a perfectly symmetrical, axially-oriented plan as it appears on a sheet of paper. That is why outbuildings, gardens and even the surrounding nature—whatever is located around his castles—must defer to this principle; on the other hand, as far as details go, the symmetry of some façades need not be up to scratch.

Of course the plans allow for exemptions—as far as the details go. But outside a few discreet borrowings from 'real' constructions such as the Wideville or Laréole châteaux where the irregularities are more pronounced, symmetry is applied with rigour, although such a procedure may infringe upon a number of usages. Du Cerceau, for example, often duplicates the main staircase or endeavours to counterbalance it by another space of the same dimensions.

After setting up the principle of symmetrical pattern, Du Cerceau pays utmost attention to the 'indoor conveniences', for his houses are not only delightful illustrations—a breeding ground for dreams. It is true that the author leads one up the garden path by putting a few 'strange buildings' amidst his houses. In his introduction to Design 20 of the 1582 *Book*, he explains this device as follows:

'Ce desseing est plus par curiosité que par esperance d'estre suyvi: mais sous ombre de cinq ou six bastimens estranges qui sont en ce volume, cela resveillera aucuns esprits à en composer d'autres sortes à leur plaisir' (This drawing is meant to nourish curiosity and not to awake a practical mind; but five or six buildings included in this volume may encourage a few people to create something along these lines—in accordance with their own whims).

Outside these exceptions, the designs generally concern dwelling places treated with meticulous care; thus the architect calculates the positions of main beams propping the ceilings, or those of beds which, in accordance with the French tradition, are placed near the fireplace. To make enough room for the bed, Du Cerceau does not hesitate to move chimneys sideways and sometimes even to fit in a skew door or partially obstruct a window. For him, a basic house consists of three elements: a *salle* (hall), one or two chief *appartements* featuring one *chambre* and a few annexes (*garde-robe*, *cabinet*, *privé*), and last but not least a system of circulation made up of staircases that lead to corridors and porticoes. Kitchens and service-rooms on a lower floor and secondary *appartements* higher up complete this lodging to make it into an autonomous dwelling. From these rather minimal ingredients, with intoxicating creative skill, Du Cerceau manages to invent dozens of varying buildings. His compositions being symmetrical, the choice of the central element is crucial.

In his ordinary designs, Du Cerceau tries in turn the circulation-system and the hall. When the circulation-system is in the centre, the hall happens to be pushed to one side. The rules of the game then incite the architect to counterbalance its long rectangular surface by a combination of rooms. All these possibilities may be envisaged: *salle commune* and kitchen, *antichambre* and *chambre*, *chambre* and *cabinet*

And yet Du Cerceau prefers to place the *salle* at the centre of his houses. The cross hall—an indispensable feature of Italian villas—was unknown in France. The first appear in the *Petites habitations* is just another borrowing from Serlio. The same goes for the transverse central hall, which is not more commonplace in Italy than in France, to tell the truth; Serlio introduces it into several designs. But a significant development of the central hall in the 1582 *Book* discloses no doubt yet another influence—that of Palladio's *Quattro libri* from which Du Cerceau copied several engravings; they appear in a manuscript preserved at the Pierpont Morgan Library.

Du Cerceau is fond of the central hall primarily because, along with other components, it conceals a number of combinatorial games that he plays systematically and with gusto. So he places the main staircase either in front of the hall or by its side. He is also in the habit of splitting it into two twin staircases, a portico or a corridor ensuring communication with the *chambres*. Better still, he manages to install the staircase(s) behind the *salle* thanks to a corridor built on the ground floor.

The same game goes on with the layout of *appartements* which are liable to take up all positions imaginable. Du Cerceau shoves the rooms forward, alongside their rear annexes, or unites them with the distributive system, creating a façade alignment; he can also add to them some staircases in order to emphasise the dimensions of pavilions or upset their pattern by singling garde-robes and cabinets out in distinct pavilions. But the *chambres* may also be thrust back, their annexes placed in front; this opens up a whole range of possibilities. The rooms may likewise be located on both sides of the hall, their *garde-robes* and cabinets indulging in a combinatorial game: in front, behind, in front and behind, on the sides. Besides, Du Cerceau uses the central *salle* in bi-axial symmetry plans—probably inherited from the château de Madrid whose outline is often recognisable—which enables him to duplicate the *appartements*. Their number can consequently increase from two to four and from four to eight.

When the designs expand, Du Cerceau feels duty-bound to introduce an element crucial to the life of *grands seigneurs*—the '*grand appartement*'. It is a suite of rooms that can be easily reached by the great staircase, made up of a *salle* followed by a *chambre* and its annexes. In this case, the *salle*, which is no longer a *pièce commune*, cannot be placed in the centre of the plan. Du Cerceau does not feel at ease with this slightly rigid disposition that he exploits mainly in the Book of 1559, hastening to duplicate the *grand appartement* so as to solve the problem of symmetry.

He is far more successful when he decides to have a go at yet another common feature of French architecture, the '*logis en forme de donjon*', which, all throughout his career, inspires him, resulting in a few designs of *belle originalité*.

THE GAME OF FORMS

There is no denying that plans are vital to the invention of designs, but it would be absurd to reduce the art of Jacques Androuet du Cerceau to their two dimensions. In the works of this representative of the French *manière*, plans and volumes are intrinsically bound. Following in the footsteps of his Chambord or Madrid forerunners, he conceives a dwelling place as a juxtaposition of distributive entities individualised under distinct roofs. But within the framework of this formal universe that he shares with others the artist displays his very personal style.

This is how the matter stands with his systematic implantation of buildings in the middle of a platform which, while isolating the house, allows it to dominate the surrounding space and favours the views of the landscape owing to the methodical use of the *rez-de-chaussée surélevé* (heightened ground floor)—the procedure that was to spread widely in the seventeenth century.

Even more characteristic is the way he spaces out, rather idiosyncratically, his constructions on this *platform* or outside it. The *cour* is heightened in relation to the *basse-cour*, and the house, often preceded by a terrace, also presents a considerably heightened ground floor. These features come into their own chiefly in the *maisons des champs* of 1582 and in several contemporary drawings, but even in the *Petites habitations* one can detect the premises of a formula that Mansart was to bring to perfection at Balleroy.

The second dominant feature of all these architectures is a propensity—Du Cerceau is well ahead of his time—to single built houses with a relatively low and thin central body, and more heightened or massive extremities made up of pavilions, simple or multiple—*pour donner beauté et monstre à l'edifice* (to endow the house with beauty and majesty). To accentuate this effect, the architect digs in semicircle the centres of the buildings. The idea might have been suggested by Serlio; in all likelihood, however, he borrowed it from Palladio, judging from the date at which this formula turns up. His son, Jacques II, took it up at the château of Grosbois. The New York book presents an original design of a very beautiful venue that effectively announces François Mansart's châteaux of Berny and Blois.

In his conception of pavilions, Du Cerceau also stands out with regard to unexpected effects he draws from their projection, either towards the courtyard or towards the moat. He multiplies the number of roofs to such an extent that the house turns into a sort of conglomeration of pavilions. But let there be no mistake about it: the roofs' layout does not come down to a mere translation of internal divisions that are characteristic of the French *manière*. Jacques Androuet plays with forms, artificially isolating *avant-corps*, hiding the staircase behind the façade or, on the contrary, bringing it out, covering by a longitudinal roofing a cross hall or unifying under the same roof half of a hall and two *chambres*, while the other half remains isolated from adjacent parts.

So, contrary to a prevalent opinion, Jacques Androuet du Cerceau is not a mere '*dessinateur d'architecture*'. He is an architect in the fullest sense of the term—a creator of forms, whose

extraordinary gift for invention is beyond doubt. Throughout Europe his paper houses were a source of inspiration for several generations of landlords and artists.

CITIES

MOSCOW

Wie eine Mutter, die das Neugeborene an ihre Brust legt, ohne es zu wecken, verführt das Leben lange Zeit mit der noch zarten Erinnerung an die Kindheit. Nichts kräftigte die meine inniger als der Blick in Höfe, von deren dunklen Loggien eine, die im Sommer von Markisen beschattet wurde, für mich die Wiege war, in die die Stadt den neuen Bürger legte.

Walter Benjamin, *Berliner Kindheit um Neunzehnhundert*

The city where one was born is a cradle, a receptacle of one's body. If asked whether I recall my cradle I would say 'no': my parents did not preserve it in the museum of my babyhood, whose exhibits are mainly photographs. Oddly enough, there is no photograph of my cradle in this museum. Actually I should speak of it in the past tense because I lost it forever when I left the Soviet Union in 1974, at the age of 26; there are more interesting museums in the world so I do not regret this sacrifice. What I do regret, however, is the way I treated Moscow during the last ten years of my Soviet life, when the illusory West was far more real than the streets I walked along in search of a book or a beautiful woman. I took no notice of those streets which were no more than my cradle where I cried, screamed and, generally speaking, made a nuisance of myself. In this respect I was not different from the babies who prosper in this world of ours as businessmen or politicians. Well, Moscow was my cradle where I cried, screamed, made a nuisance of myself and nourished the hope of becoming a famous writer. As a baby I was wiser: I had no hopes.

What did I recognise when I came back to Moscow after living exclusively in the West for more than fifteen years? A few shops and the pavements. Of course I recognised the skyscraper where I had lived for more than twenty years: I was born on the outskirts of Moscow, near a park and a lake. I still remember how my father showed me a magazine on the pages of which this masterpiece was described at length. A few photographs gave me an idea of what heights Stalin's genius could reach in the neighbourhood of our dilapidated rooms and I asked my father if someone would be allowed to live in a house like that. 'Would *you* like to live in it?' he asked. A few months later we moved into a flat overlooking Red Square and the Moscva River—a noisy flat chosen by my father for the sake of the view. For a few years I enjoyed the view, but gradually I came to prefer the peace and quiet of the opposite side that overlooked a hill and a church.

I am weary of explaining what Moscow looks like to people who are mostly interested in New York and know its back streets much better than the Kremlin or our university looming into view as you glide along the Moscva river in a pleasure boat. It towers over a hill so majestically one gets the feeling it is suspended in midair like an alien spacecraft. As far as I am concerned it *is* an alien spacecraft: my dream of becoming a university student did not come true. It is not only a building I am not allowed to enter; given its scientific bias, this Stalinist skyscraper is associated in my mind with

science-fiction novels I read in my youth. Actually I began to write one at the age of 11, but this dream did not come true either. On Stalin's orders a few skyscrapers were built in Moscow that was to emulate New York—the top of the world, as I thought after visiting the American Exhibition in 1957. There was a beautiful Chevrolet right by the entrance to the exhibition, its hood wide-open as if to entice a visitor into the intricacies of the engine (an introduction to labyrinths). I fell in love with the Chevrolet and revisited the exhibition only to see it once more, unmoved by the endless supply of free Coke one could drink while having to queue for two hours at least. I also was in love with a toy railway which totally eclipsed the one my father had given me on his return from East Germany; I played with it for the last time at the age of 21. Of course their toy was much bigger and featured a lot of tunnels that were conspicuous by their absence in my room whenever I watched my locomotive and three cars race along the rail network spanning the bed and the window.

'Up hill and down dale' is a key idiom one may chance upon in any essay dealing with the topography of Moscow. In my childhood I dealt with it on a daily basis as I climbed a hill on the top of which my school was perched. Leaving my bed at half-past seven—a farewell ritual of sorts—I listened to the 'morning exercises' imposed on Soviet citizens by the radio and, after taking my bath and eating milk porridge and fried eggs, I would embark upon my journey to the school. It was a journey akin to the one I depicted many years later when writing a commentary on Dante's *Commedia*: I climbed the Mountain of Purgatory on my way to the classroom where two or three beauties awaited me patiently. Wishful thinking on my part: no one awaited me in the classroom, not even the teachers who often singled me out as the best pupil—an example to follow. Anyway the school was my paradise where I discovered feminine beauty and enjoyed it to the utmost during the gym lessons.

What is left of this paradise? I revisited the school in 1991 and ate a sort of bun while looking out of the windows where the same trees saluted me by shaking their leaves—a cure for nostalgia. 'The gymnastics teacher died last year. You must have known him,' said an old woman after asking me why I was walking along the corridor. 'I knew him,' I said. 'He used to call me a "sack of shit".'

The school was razed down a few years ago; one day I climbed the same hill to find it was gone.

I do not remember Moscow, and yet some façades are chained to my memory to such a point that even if I become amnesiac I will not forget them. The Apraksin House, for instance; I would pass by it on my way to the music school. I was much more attracted by a shop where one could buy a caviar sandwich, a sturgeon sandwich, so I hardly paid attention to this house which is spectacular in architectural terms. And the Boulevard Ring where I used to walk existed only insofar as it provided exercise for my body and rest for my mind. And whatever flanked it on both sides was so superfluous that even now I remove these boulevards from the city where they are lodged as if in a cradle. Actually Moscow is associated in my mind with Russian dolls—*matryoshki*, as we call them. Sitting on one of the benches, I do justice to the second childhood where every self-respecting octogenarian is bound to find himself; I also pay a discreet homage to my mother. I would not mind dying in a Moscow park which might enable me to join my end to my beginning.

SAINT PETERSBURG

Petersburg is a distant city and you will never get close to it even if your parents decide you should be born within its bounds; in this respect it has a lot of affinities with the castle depicted by Kafka in his unfinished novel. In Soviet history books it was called the 'cradle of the Russian Revolution', but it will never become *your* cradle, for all your filial love and aesthetic worship. You can (and must) fall in love with its monuments and 'ordinary' buildings; there is such a thing as unrequited love. Petersburg is apathetic and therefore akin to Spinoza's God: it does not care for our misfortunes some of which may be caused by its tuberculosis-oriented climate. But tuberculosis is on the decline and Dostoevsky has already become Tolstoy—his peaceful half. Of course you risk being murdered, but on the whole Russia is a civilised country now. Old and modern consumptions are poles apart.

Let us focus our attention on the *old* Petersburg where Gogol and Dostoevsky go hand in hand and vanish into thin air as the wind starts to disport itself along the streets, around the Smolny Nunnery complex. In those days the city was called neither Petrograd nor Leningrad as if allergic to the artifice of which Kierkegaard and Pessoa made an abundant use to misguide a gullible reader—'no pseudonyms' was its motto. Was it? Sankt Petersburg. The Russians always shortened this pompous, beatific name: we just say 'Petersburg' as if unwilling to sanctify it. Why should we sanctify a city 'built on bones'? (Peter the Great sacrificed a lot for the sake of his architectural dream.) Even in its childhood the city sounded different from what it was as if to defy anyone who wished to appropriate it in some way or other. The Tsars were unable to control both its climate and the revolutionists whose only *raison d'être* was to assassinate them; poets and writers would perish from the bullets fired by the figments of their own imagination or from the impact of perilous, lofty, *distant* ideals. (Gogol belongs to the second category of suicides.) And those who survived could not embrace the city—a Russian bear hug—which kept them at bay as if to signify its desire to remain alone. If personified, Petersburg might shake your hand, but it would on no account take you into its confidence; and it would not listen to your tales of woe or your Arabian nights.

Petersburg lives mostly in books where it comes into its own, defying the stony presence of its counterparts which are prepared to embrace you on condition that your schedule is generous enough to allow you to loiter in their streets, in their cafés. 'The city was laid out in straight streets, wider than those of the old Russian cities. The first houses were one-storey wooden structures: one such building—the first dwelling built close to the fortress for Peter—is preserved as a contemporary museum.' I do not recall the building in question; yet my father, who was born in Petersburg, showed me around his native city many times, anxious to eliminate Moscow—'a huge village'—from my heart. So, for many years, my heart was in Petersburg: in the Winter Palace, in the Neva, in the Vorontsov Palace, in the Stroganov Palace, in Catherine's Palace, with its park and pavilion—in Tsarkoye Selo. But I had a heart transplant a few years ago. Now I am attached to Moscow where I was born, and my birth counts more than my aesthetic convictions. Of course I like St Petersburg more

than Moscow. (I am ready to sanctify this city in spite of the revolutionists.) But Moscow is a place where I can die without toil and trouble as if learning a foreign language with the help of Assimil—English without toil, Spanish without trouble. After all, the Hereafter is a foreign language.

PARIS

I wonder if I can see Paris through my own eyes which are so accustomed to its squares and bridges that I actually do not see anything. My body, on the other hand, deals with my 'city of adoption' on its own terms, feeling and inhaling it as I walk along the galleries lauded by Walter Benjamin in his unfinished book. Sometimes one has an urge to sing in Paris—not only in the rain, mind you—but walking around it consumes one's energy so much that one's silence rejoins the silence of its monuments and museums. Oddly enough, its houses are always silent as if nobody had ever inhabited them.

Last night I heard this silence; or rather, I *saw* it through my friends' eyes. They admired Paris as they walked around it after a concert we had been reluctant to attend. (A concert devoted to Shostakovich and his colleagues.) In comparison with *that* music, the silence of Paris was overwhelming, breathtaking, *eyestaking*. And I did not know whether the eyes I resorted to on this occasion were my own eyes or someone else's. There were many eyes strewn around Paris—a Salvador Dali picture. One can *look* at silence.

Petersburg is also silent, but Paris *speaks* to you as well—in many foreign languages.

VENICE

Dying in Venice would be tedious, inconvenient and somewhat tautological: the city has been dying for more than two centuries. I, for one, would not like to be buried alive even if I had only a few days to live—Nora says something to this effect. Ibsen's heroine speaks neither of Venice nor of Moscow, but she measures her life out as she looks at her watch: 'Twenty-four and seven...thirty-one hours to live.' *A Doll's House*. Venice is a dolls' house or a museum of palaces that look like dolls, untouched as they are by the Industrial Revolution. Nothing conveys to one the idea of what the world has come to in the course of the twentieth century except for tourists and souvenirs. I drank a few wonderful bottles in Venice; and I played in a theatre that burnt down a few months afterwards. Venice is dying; so am I. Burning the candle at both ends; burning the midnight oil. 'I must stand on my own feet if I'm to get to know myself and the world outside,' says Nora. The world lies beyond these idioms: 'to burn the candle at both ends,' 'to burn the midnight oil'. (And I stand on my own head.) The world lies beyond Venice where everything burns *à petit feu*, as the French put it. Small fire, slow fire. 'To burn always with this hard, gemlike flame, to maintain this ecstasy, is success in life' (Walter Pater, *Studies in the History of the Renaissance*). *Ich bin ein Venezianer*.

Actually it is more appropriate to dwell on water when writing about Venice.

A DOCUMENTARY ON KYOTO

(Gardens, temples and cityscapes.)

There are cities we may know like the back of our hand because their streets follow a geometrical pattern.

(Map of St Petersburg.)

Let us have a look at the map of St Petersburg, which seems to suggest that no tourist will ever get lost in the capital built on Peter the Great's orders. He wanted to make things easier for his subjects and also for foreigners who were likely to visit Russia, attracted by her riches and savage beauty. And even if you happen to get lost in St Petersburg, its geometry will find you rather quickly: the city is bound to look for you. Actually neither St Petersburg nor New York, which was built in accordance with the same principle, can leave you alone. Kyoto does leave you alone.

I'd like to leave this place
And go to a city
Which doesn't look like anything
I've known so far.

But all cities look alike:
They all have old streets
And old inhabitants.
A two-month-old street
Looks old. And children
Have death in their eyes.

I'd like to go to a city
That doesn't look like a city.

I wrote this poem a long time after my first visit to Kyoto, but no other city fits in with the image conveyed by the last verses; no other city I have been to so far looks *otherwise*—not like a city. So I must have thought of Kyoto as I wrote this poem. Frankly speaking, I don't remember what I thought of at the time. What's more, I don't remember Kyoto whenever I try and revisit it in my mind. I make an effort which does bring me back to some gardens, some temples, but I'm not sure they belong to Kyoto and not to another Japanese city or landscape. It is so easy to remember St Petersburg; a book can assist your memory if you happen to forget a detail, a nuance. No book, no illustrated guide will ever help you remember Kyoto. What counts, however, is the way you *try* to remember it.

My last trip to Kyoto once more demonstrated the shifting, unsteady, almost fluid nature of Japanese gardens that depend on seasons, on cherry-blossom, on maples. The appearance of a new colour confounds our memory and makes us forget the recent past. Everything seems to remind us of memory lapses, of how days and years sink into oblivion. Yet we are unlikely to forget Zen gardens because they are situated beyond memory, feelings and everyday life.

(Visit to the Silver Pavilion.)

In the course of that trip I once again visited the Silver Pavilion. I did not recognise it at first. Only the truncated cone in the Buddhist part of the garden conjured up a host of memories. The Silver Pavilion is an emblem of Kyoto and sometimes I am under the impression that the whole city radiates from it. A wrong impression—there is no centre in Kyoto, properly speaking. In a way, every garden is a centre in its own right; every garden, every temple, every alley, every cascade. Let us say that the Silver Pavilion is one of my favourite areas in Kyoto. But even the time I devote to this monument—or rather the time it devotes to me—doesn't help my memory whenever I try to remember it on my own. A poem might assist my memory or a woman I met in Tokyo; a woman to whom I dedicated and offered this poem:

Your winter is the Silver Pavilion.
Your autumn and spring are beyond
Kyoto.

I speak of
Death, regret and loss.
You're beyond them.

Your dead leaves are
Alive.

I won't lose
Your dawn, your
Twilight.

Actually neither this poem nor feminine beauty are beyond Kyoto.

(Gardens, temples and cityscapes.)

Here is a famous poem by Sôkan:

If someone asks,
 'What's happened to Sôkan?'
 Say,
 'He's gone to the next world
 On some business.'

Nothing is beyond Kyoto; even the great Beyond is not beyond it.

So far I have come to Japan to play concerts and conduct orchestras. Why not leave everything and go to the city that doesn't look like a city? No distractions can touch the man who is alone both in his body and mind.

Once again I went to Kyoto.
 Once again I realised
 We don't miss the things
 We love most.

They live with us.
 (Within us, outside us.)
 Why should we miss them?

I've always lived in Kyoto,
 In one of its gardens,
 In all of them.
 I've always prayed
 In one of its temples—
 My Christian prayer.

No one can fail to be struck
 By the poetry of Kyoto.
 I'm not struck by it.
 I'm writing this poetry.

I'm trying to write it:
 Kyoto will overlook
 My imperfections.

BORDEAUX, BEAUNE

For several years I was a member of a wine-lovers club. We would meet once a month in various restaurants, tasting mostly French red wines which are the lifeblood of the oenological world. One tasting was devoted, however, to white Burgundies, on which occasion our president made a speech, saying among other things: ‘We love red wines because they tell us a lot about the Earth; white wines, on the other hand, belong to the kingdom of Heaven.’ In every joke there is a particle of truth, as the Russians say. (In every joke there is a particle of joke, say Russian jokers.) And I don’t think our president was in a joking mood that night: he was always deadly serious when speaking about wine, let alone tasting it. Nor did he ever indulge in *misplaced* poetical or religious outburst, making bombastic and ill-grounded statements. Actually religion and poetry are never out of place in a discussion centred upon wine. Plotinus speaks about a happy forgetfulness of the Soul that is bent on reaching the Supreme. According to him, the good soul ‘is forgetful. It flees multiplicity; it seeks to escape the unbounded by drawing all to unity, for only thus is it free from entanglement, light-footed, self-conducted.’ A nice description of how a good wine lover should concentrate on the glass of wine he is holding in his hand. And on the mouthful of wine swirling around his palate. During the wine-ritual, a good wine lover might also get the impression of standing outside his own body (the so-called experience of ecstasy):

Many times it has happened: Lifted out of the body into myself; becoming external to all other things and self-enclosed; beholding a marvellous beauty; then, more than ever, assured of community with the loftiest order; enacting the noblest life, acquiring identity with the divine; stationing within It by having attained that activity; poised above whatsoever within the Intellectual is less than the Supreme –

Enneads, IV.8.1, McKenna’s translation

And then comes the moment of ‘descent from intellection to reasoning’. (Bergson also speaks about this descent in *Les deux sources de la morale et de la religion*.) At that particular moment a good wine lover might indulge in a poetical or mystical discourse on the experience he has undergone during his communion with wine. He might quote the Song of Songs or use a few wine terms such as: *full-bodied, well-structured, fleshy, flabby, chewy, weary, decadent*, etc. I like comparing wines to composers, poets and painters. In my essay on Brahms’ late piano pieces I mentioned, for instance, the Trotanoy 1961 that I had drunk with my friends in the late eighties. Chopin reminds me of Guigal’s *La Mouline* and sometimes of his *Landonne*, Mozart of Lafite – of the old-style Lafite. Bach and James Joyce are Latour 1926 or 1928. Dante and Beethoven are Mouton Rothschild 1929 or 1945. Schubert is Petrus 1947. After drinking a Palmer 1928 I usually read a few pages of Proust’s *A la recherche du*

temps perdu. (There are still four bottles of this gorgeous wine in my cellar.) Many Italian painters remind me of white Burgundies – on account of their affinity with Heaven perhaps. And old Flemish portraitists seem to have been influenced and inspired by red Burgundy, almost imbued with it, given the opulence and ‘fragrance’ of their colours which impart a lively, hedonistic touch, diluting the gloom and austerity of the ecclesiastical and princely models. I am even tempted to use the term ‘chewy’ when defining their sumptuous vestments, so contrary to the spirit of St Francis.

There are feminine and masculine wines. An old-style Château Margaux (1959, 1953, 1945, 1900) is a feminine wine par excellence. Poetry is feminine in essence – at least Dante and Goethe thought so – and consequently a lot of poems can be compared to this wine. In *Eugene Onegin*, Pushkin compares champagne (Ay) to a mistress:

*...glittering, volatile, vivacious,
and wayward, and shallow.
But you, Bordeaux, are like a friend
who is, in grief and in calamity,
at all times, everywhere, a comrade,
ready to render us a service
or share our quiet leisure.*

Eugene Onegin, *ch.IV*, Nabokov's translation.

In his commentary on these verses, Nabokov quotes a French poet, Ducis, who describes Bordeaux along the same lines: ‘*Calme et vieux, c'est le vin des sages.*’ The wine of sages and philosophers (and mystics). What is more, it agrees with old people in general and is often recommended as a kind of homeopathic remedy. (*Consommez avec modération.*) Burgundy is, on the other hand, a beautiful woman in her early forties, whose seductive powers have been enhanced through a patiently acquired knowledge of human nature. (Not to be recommended as a homeopathic remedy.)

White wine is Heaven, red wine the Earth. There is much more sediment in a bottle of old red wine, as if the Earth were materially – not only metaphorically – present in it. Besides, the sediment one finds in a bottle of white wine has something unearthly about it, something ethereal. Red wines are faster affected by oxygen. White wines seem less capricious – even more distant sometimes, for all their charm and enchantment; they are often associated with cool, more or less unemotional people. (The cool-headed, Machiavellian protagonist of Alain Resnais' *Providence* drinks white wine throughout the film.) In my mind they are also associated with Buddhists and, generally speaking, with adepts of those religious and philosophical trends that advocate detachment and the quest for nirvana in all its shapes and forms. Red wine unveils the mysteries of the Earth, her richness and heterogeneous character; and also her everyday life. Carried away by red wine's warmth and aromas, we can even ascend to Heaven – a short visit only; for we are bound to come back to Earth again,

enacting the process described by Plotinus and Bergson. White wine predisposes us to the contemplation of Heaven – from afar. In a way, white wine is synonymous with meditation.

What I have said so far concerns mainly old wines. The president of our club used to say that no true, authentic wine was made after 1961, which was the last great year for Claret. (And 1959 was the last great year for *all* French wines.) The hero of my longest novel enlarges upon this pessimistic outlook:

They all smell of vanilla. New oak barrels. They all smell and taste alike. Commercial products. Nice, charming, precise, glossy, fruity. No passion, no metaphysics. Before 1961 wines were metaphysical. Not just a pleasant drink like Coke or Fanta. Orchestras were metaphysical too. Not suitable for supermarkets. And novels also smell of vanilla nowadays. Charming, nice little stories. For children. New world order. Everything smells of vanilla. Non-local connections. Commercialism. The shoddy culture of mass commercialism. "Light" is the key word of our epoch.'

In other words, modern wines are no wines at all. Here is how the well-known joke could be re-worked: 'The ignoramus says 'the bottle is full'. The wine lover says 'the bottle is empty'.

Today, winemakers filter their products, reducing the presence of the Earth (and Heaven) to metaphors and memories. Will our grandchildren ever taste real wine? Will they ever visit Heaven? Will they ever probe into the mystery of the Earth? Will they ever meditate on Time? Will they ever be granted a material, tangible experience of poetry and music?

A glass of old wine tells us more about the universe than the library of Alexandria.

